Teen Project to Change the World

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Teen Project to Change the World

by animeloverhomura

Summary

Lan Sizhui, Lan Jingyi, Jin Ling, and Ouyang Zizhen listened attentively as Wei Wuxian explained his newest invention: a way to send memories to the past. Satisfied that he dealt with all possible paradoxes and running on -2 hours of sleep, he didn't make note of his sons' frankly *concerning* expressions.

"We could change everything!" they shouted simultaneously.

For better or worse, only time will tell.

Notes

Beta Read by tintin!

- Translation into Português brasileiro available: Projeto Adolescente para Mudar o Mundo by yoellyo
- Translation into Français available: Teen Project to Change the World [FR] by Riviere_detoiles
- Translation into Русский available: Проект Подростков Изменит Мир by Hatalilia

Four Radishes Learn About Time Travel

Lan Sizhui winced as Lan Jingyi opened the door, hearing the hinges squeak deafeningly in the otherwise-silent night. Head disciple or not, causing a ruckus so close to curfew was just *asking* for Lan Qiren to find them.

Jin Ling seemed to have similar thoughts, and (with a fear that had never been completely erased even after becoming sect leader) quickly pushed Ouyang Zizhen inside while Sizhui ushered Jingyi in. Luckily, it seemed everyone was too far to notice them.

Or, in the case of Wei Wuxian, too *distracted*.

“Xian-gege?” Lan Sizhui asked, peeking around the wall his senior disciple was hiding behind only to find enormous stacks of scrolls, notes, and books blocking his sight.

“A-Yuan? Is that you?” a voice asked from behind the mountain. “Come in, come in! I’ve got something to show you!”

Exchanging a skeptical glance with Jin Ling, Lan Sizhui navigated his way through the man-made canyon and finally found his target buried knee deep in papers.

“Wei Wuxian!” Jin Ling bustled forward, paying no mind to the precariously placed books he was knocking over. “Hanguang-jun ordered us to make sure you didn’t stay up all night working while he’s gone! This can wait until tomorrow!”

“In a minute~” Wei Wuxian complained, not even pausing in his rushed flurry of notes. “If I stop now I won’t remember my train of thought in the morning!”

“But Xian-gege-”

“What are you working on anyways?” Lan Jingyi asked, peering over and trying to make sense of the rushed scribbles Wei Wuxian was pouring out.

“Are you interested? Maybe you can help me out.” Wei Wuxian suggested, turning to them with a mischievous look (which was much less scary when combined with the gargantuan dark circles under his eyes).

“If you’ve stayed up several nights in a row for this I doubt *we’d* be much help,” Jin Ling scoffed, but settled down regardless.

Soon all four boys were seated in a semi circle around their teacher, tired but captivated by the promise of an interesting lesson. Not only was Wei Wuxian the best teacher they’d ever had, more often than not he was teaching them something no one had ever seen before.

Though, considering Wei Wuxian created nearly *every* advancement the cultivation world had in the last two decades, maybe that wasn’t surprising.

Wei Wuxian observed his captivated audience, then swung his arms open for a dramatic reveal.

“I’m mastering time travel!”

The juniors stared, blinked, and sat in befuddled silence.

“...What?” Jingyi finally asked.

“Time travel! Traveling through time! I found some notes in Jin Guangyao’s library on a book I’d made on the subject, and I think I’m really on to something!”

The juniors slowly nodded in understanding, contradicting the blank looks in their eyes. Surely, they must have misheard?

“Like… through time?” Ouyang Zizhen checked. “As in, you could walk around in the past and see your past self?”

“Ah… not exactly. See, transporting matter through time would take a whole lot more energy than we’re actually capable of. If every cultivator in the world sacrificed all their spiritual energy to send things back, we… might be able to transfer a flower petal.”

“Then what’s the point!” Jin Ling demanded.

“The point, my young disciple, is that we wouldn’t have to send back someone. We could send… some*thing*.”

“...You just said we could barely send a petal.”

“No, no, no. Think of it like this, if we send back matter, it wouldn’t really change that much. We’d just be duplicating something and probably wouldn’t cause any significant changes. If we send back *memories*, however…”

Trailing off and allowing his students to fill in the blanks, Wei Wuxian turned back to his writing and added a few more points.

“Wait, but then what will happen to us?” Jingyi asked, looking left and right as if the embodiment of time would jump out and attack him.

“No need to worry, I already tested it. I sent back a message to Lan Zhan, but when I talked to *my* Lan Zhan he had no memory of it. I did a bit more testing, and realized that there was still a Lan Zhan who remembered the message I gave them and…” he trailed off, noticing the lost expressions on his student’s faces. They blinked at him a few times, still not understanding what he had discovered.

“...And that means…?”

“Basically, this method of time travel works off something called multiverse theory. Any memories I send back create a new timeline that serves as a parallel world, and thus there’s

no risk of a paradox wiping us all out of existence regardless of how we use it. It's all perfectly safe!"

"Wait, you were messing with something that could have *wiped us out of existence*?!" Jin Ling interrupted.

"I just told you that isn't a concern."

"But you didn't know that when you *started*, did you?"

"Well…"

Instantly he was met with four identical, disapproving looks.

"I promise I was very careful!"

"I'm not sure you know the meaning of that word, Xian-gege," Lan Sizhui informed him without once losing his smile. Wei Wuxian pouted. It wasn't fair; his little radish was becoming more and more terrifying every day! He missed the little three year old he could burry in holes!

Interrupting his silent mourning, Ouyang Zizhen asked, "Wait, if you already know all that, then what are you still working on?"

"Something I'll need your help to test! So far I've seen it work mostly like empathy, involving first-person views and a one-on-one experience. It's just wasteful to use energy to create a new pack of memories for every person, so I'm trying to make it so that people can simultaneously watch the same thing and even interact with each other *while* they watch. I think, so long as I have more than one memory of the event, they'll combine to create a 3D simulation of whatever the memory is. Will you guys help me test a few things?"

Shining with excitement and interest, all four teenagers nodded enthusiastically.

"Of course!" they shouted.

"Tomorrow," Sizhui added, reminding them all of why they had come in the first place.

Laughing at the sudden looks of disappointment on the other three, Wei Wuxian nodded easily and began packing up, sending the teenagers on ahead.

Minds still consumed by the possibilities Wei WuXian had revealed, the group dragged their feet on their way back, trying to prolong their journey and indignant at being sent away when they were just starting to get excited. Jin Ling and Ouyang Zizhen knew breaking sect rules would get him blacklisted from further diplomatic invitations (not playdates, regardless of what Wei Ying said), but were too preoccupied to care.

"Can you believe it? Time travel?" Ouyang Zizhen whispered, looking over his shoulder in case Lan Qiren was patrolling nearby.

"I can," Jingyi declared proudly. "If anyone can figure it out, it's senior Wei."

Jin Ling nodded distractedly, then muttered “Imagine what we could change with that.”

“What do you mean? Xian-gege told us it wouldn’t change anything for us. We wouldn't be able to cheat on tests or anything.”

“Right, but… maybe then there’d be at least one universe where my parents are alive.”

All four suddenly stopped mid-step, and Jin Ling blushed when he realized what he had just said. He was practically an adult (and a Sect leader on top of that)! He shouldn’t still be caught up in daydreams of his parents.

“I mean, I just think Wei Wuxian isn’t valuing what he could do enough.”

“No, you’re right,” Lan Sizhui murmured, a contemplative expression on his face. “If we could do this, maybe we’d be able to make a world where people actually *listened* instead of just assuming things about Xian-gege. He wouldn’t have to die, and Hanguang-jun wouldn’t have had to spend years in seclusion.”

“Nie Mingjue wouldn’t have been killed-”

“And Lan Xichen wouldn’t be in seclusion now after the betrayal of his sworn brother!”

Jin Ling nodded, his enthusiasm rising again.

“And Uncle’s parents might not have been killed during the Sunshot campaign!”

The teenagers turned to each other, no longer bothering to keep their voices down despite the late hour.

“Sect Leader Jiang and Senior Wei wouldn’t misunderstand each other!”

“Senior Wei wouldn’t have lost his core!”

“Hanguang-jun and Senior Wei could have gotten together sooner!”

“Wen Ning wouldn’t have to die either!”

“We could change everything!” they shouted simultaneously.

One week later — which, according to Wei Wuxian, would have only taken two days if he’d been allowed to make a couple all-nighters! — and the prototype was done. Wei Wuxian had designed it into a red, crystalline orb which would accept memories from whoever touched it and read the user's intentions to figure out the time period it was sending them back to. The quartet of teenage troublemakers (or 3 troublemakers plus Sizhui) had their opportunity quickly approaching with Hanguang-jun’s impending return (signaling a night where Wei Wuxian would be otherwise occupied).

Their operation would commence at dusk.

“Shouldn’t we figure out what memories to send back first?” Sizhui asked them on the night before the Second Jade’s return. “I mean, I’d rather just use the night he’s back to send everything along. It’ll be difficult if we need to figure that out first.”

“Well, we should definitely include my memories of Jin Guangyao’s death since everything was revealed right before then.”

“I guess we could include a history class of learning about the sunshot campaign?” Zizhen suggested uncertainly.

“Right, exactly. The main problem is that we weren’t there for most of it! Should we ask Hanguang-jun and senior Wei for their memories?”

Sizhui frowned, then shook his head.

“I don’t think I’d like to force them to remember those things. It’d be more accurate, but… I don’t think I can do that to them.”

The others nodded in reluctant agreement, scowling in frustration. Lan Jingyi sat down on the grass, beckoning one of the nearby rabbits over to himself. A soft, light brown one crept over and nuzzled into his lap, relaxing as Jingyi ran a finger through its fur.

“Wait, that’s it!” he shouted, startling the bunny into jumping off him.

It ran directly over to Sizhui, who asked, “What’s it?”

“They weren’t the only ones there!”

Jin Ling looked over sceptically. “I don’t think the bunnies can transmit memories.”

"And Sect Leader Jiang will probably kill us if we ask him."

“No, no. Remember what Senior Wei said? It’s like empathy. If we combine the memories of a bunch of different ghosts, we’ll be able to get a view of everything that happened between them. Besides, Senior Wei is basically their master, so maybe they’ll even be willing to put the memories together for us!”

As he continued to speak, his friend’s faces quickly brightened in realization. Jingyi was right! If they did that, they wouldn’t even need Wei Ying’s memories. All they had to do was ask the spirits for help.

Immediately, Lan Sizhui rushed out of the cloud recesses and pulled out his guqin, playing inquiry with as wide a range as he could. Although no spirits could exist inside the Lan clan’s protective barrier, there was a strong chance the spirits could either see from the outside, or had been present when they were still alive. As sobering as that was, perhaps an alternate version of themselves would survive with the information offered.

And, most interestingly, Wei Wuxian used music to order the spirits around. The commands were transmitted through sound, yes, but the intention transferred telepathically. They might have even greater insight into Wei Wuxian’s mind than ~~his~~ the kids had.

A second later, a spirit responded.

“They think they can do it!” Sizhui reported, brimming with happiness. This way, they’d be able to get a truly complete version of the story to all the people who need it.

“Who should we send it to?” Ouyang Zizhen asked nervously.

“My parents and grandparents, obviously,” Jin Ling declared, though he wasn’t as sure about his paternal grandparents given the rumors about Jin Guangshan.

“The Jiangs too, for both your uncles.” Sizhui added. “And the Lans.”

“Nie Huaisang and Mingjue will need to know too,” Lan Jingyi added. “Maybe we should just send it to the main-line of the great clans back then. Senior Wei said it was based off intentions, right? We'll just 'intend' to send it to the most important figures in the most famous clans.”

The quartet nodded in excitement, continuing to conspire with each other towards their shared goal of creating a world without the stupid, stupid misunderstandings people kept having about Wei Wuxian.

However, in their haste, they overlooked two important facts: First, Wei Wuxian was never officially adopted by the Jiangs, and therefore would not be included. Second, in the time period they were aiming for, there were *five* great families.

After Careful Consideration, He Decided to Panic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The blood-red glow of resentful energy filled the back of the Cloud Recesses, before finally fading into the black of night. In a desolated training ground, four teenagers had finished transporting the spirits' memories into the past using a device created by the one and only Yiling Patriarch.

"...Do you think it worked?"

"Of course! Senior Wei's inventions never fail!"

"But what if they somehow break out before they're done watching?" Lan Sizhui asked, glancing nervously at the orb before them. "They'll miss the information about Jin Guangyao and Nie Huaisang's abilities."

"Don't worry about it!" Lan Jingyi laughed, clapping Sizhui on the back. "This was made by the greatest cultivator ever. No one's made even close to the impact his inventions have, even with the 13 year vacation he took. Who could possibly break through something created by *Wei Wuxian*?"

"I bet I can break through this," declared Wei Wuxian as he looked down at his messily thrown-together notes. This was not the Wei Wuxian who had created the time travel talisman, but rather one nearly twenty years younger, living in the parallel dimension the four teenagers created with the talisman.

Five hours ago, a truly unprecedented event occurred: the main families of all five of the great clans had collapsed simultaneously, sent into a coma for no identifiable reason. From the Jiang clan, Jiang Fengmian, Yu Ziyuan, Jiang Cheng, and Jiang Yanli; from the Jin clan, Jin Guangshan, Madam Jin, and Jin Zixuan; from the Nie clan, Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang; from the Lan clan, Lan Qiren, Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji. The Wen clan tried to hide the information pertaining to them, but word soon got out that Wen Ruohan, Wen Chao, Wen Xu, and Wen Qing had all fallen unconscious at the same time as the other leaders.

In every clan except Jiang and Nie (who retained their head disciples), all the sect's leaders were taken out, leaving the cultivation world in temporary pandemonium. Luckily, the collapse happened right before Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian left for six months to the cloud recesses, and Wei Wuxian was able to take charge of both the sect and his family's health.

Things were falling apart at the lotus pier, but at least it was worse everywhere else.

The Lan elders had taken control of their sect and were the main force working to contact the other great clans. That said, every elder had grown used to using either Lan Qiren or the Twin Jades to relay their orders, and were fumbling as they tried to find a new spokesperson.

The Nie sect, despite having its head disciple, wasn't doing any better. Said disciple had gotten injured in a night hunt the day before, and was now on bed rest. Luckily, most people in the Nie clan were independent enough to come to their own decisions.

The Wen sect had done a complete lockdown on Nightless City, having lost both their leaders and their most trusted doctor to the incident. No further information had gotten out.

The Jin sect had been overrun by various half-brothers and cousins of Jin Zixuan, each creating a faction vying for greater control during the temporary lapse in power. They hadn't come to blows quite yet, but Wei Wuxian wasn't confident that would last for much longer.

Meanwhile, the Jiang sect happily cooperated under Wei Wuxian's instruction, easily allowing their head disciple to manage the situation. Wei Ying had a reputation of playing around and relaxing in frivolous entertainment which hadn't been available when he was just a poor orphan. He could have tried to gain more authority in the sect, but had never had any motivation to lead.

That wasn't true now.

Wei Wuxian had taken to the leadership suddenly thrust upon him like a fish to water, using his confidence and charisma to keep the sect from falling apart. Some of the older disciples had objected to his authority, but even *combined* he wasn't a fight they could win.

It hadn't taken long for Wei Wuxian to identify the spell attacking them as a product of both spiritual energy and resentful energy, seemingly operating under a master rather than the chaotic mess most fierce corpses and resentful ghosts had. If he could just find a way to bend it to his will instead, he might be able to break everyone out or, at the very least, find a way to contact them and make sure they're still alive.

Wei Wuxian had sent his findings over to the other sects, but none of them seemed interested in (or unified enough to try) helping him test his theory.

(It was a good thing Yu Ziyuan was among those asleep. She would have strangled him if she knew he was going to try manipulating resentful energy, and Yanli would have been disappointed. But, with them both asleep, he was running out of options.)

If only he could figure out why this was happening.

"Where are we?" Nie Huaisang squeaked, turning to his brother. Nie Mingjue looked around, but couldn't see anything except his brother in the darkness.

"Huaisang? Is that you?" a voice asked from Nie Mingjue's left, and he quickly recognized it as the Jiang sect's heir.

"It's me!" Huaisang responded. "When did you get here?"

"Just now!"

"Keep your voice down," Yu Ziyuan growled. "We don't know what's going on."

“How many people are here?” Lan Xichen asked from behind Nie Mingjue, nearly making him jump in surprise. It seemed their spiritual senses were dulled as well.

Several shouts came from every direction, until they were silenced with a low growl.

“*Enough*.”

Nie Mingjue clenched his fists, glaring in the direction of the voice who ordered his father’s death. It seemed Wen Ruohan present as well.

Nie Huaisang squeaked again.

Under Wen Ruohan’s growled orders, they soon determined that there were 16 people, all with blood lineage or marriage linking them to the five most famous sects. Lan Qiren tried using a flame talisman to create light, but it was as if their golden cores had been sealed, and no spiritual power came to them.

Nie Mingjue had originally thought it was a plot by the Wen clan, but they seemed to be just as stuck as everyone else. Yu Ziyuan initially hissed to her husband that it was Wei Wuxian’s fault, but no one bothered discussing that idea. Madam Jin accused her husband of sleeping with a God’s servant, and he was now cowering near the Wens to escape her wrath. Nie Mingjue was seriously considering trying to knock himself out when light abruptly filled his eyes and he saw where they were.

“Is this… the cloud recesses?” Jin Guangshan asked, looking around at the open pavilion surrounded by a thin layer of cloudy mist. On the grass, sixteen chairs were set down for them in a circle.

“Hello there,” a voice said to them, and in the center of the circle of chairs a boy dressed in the robes and headband of a member of the Lan Clan flickered into existence.

Lan Qiren frowned, not recognizing him. Nie Mingjue growled in annoyance.

“Who are-”

“This is a prerecorded message,” the boy said. “I’ll try to answer as many of your questions as I can.”

A Jin disciple to the boy’s left appeared next, along with two other boys. The Jin boy turned to them, allowing them to see several of Jin Guangshan’s features on him.

Honestly, how many illegitimate children did the man have? Madam Jin looked to be seriously considering murder for the third time that day.

“My name in Jin Ling,” the boy introduced himself, then gestured to the boy who spoke first. “That’s Lan Sizhui, and the people behind him are Ouyang Zizhen and Lan Jingyi.”

The boy who had smirked at them when “Lan Jingyi” was introduced stepped forward next.

“I understand if you’re suspicious, but I can assure you that we have your best interests in mind. You may not believe this, but we’re from about twenty years in the future.”

He paused dramatically, as if waiting for them to react with gasps and applause.

“Who are they trying to fool?” Yu Ziyuan demanded, annoyed that they were being made to sit around and listen to utter nonsense. Nie Mingjue scowled and continued looking around for the spirit causing the mass-hallucination.

“Maybe we should just get on with it,” Ouyang Zizhen whispered, leaning in closer to his friend.

“Just a little longer. If there’s a standing ovation, we’ll need to wait for them to finish,” Lan Jingyi hissed back.

“We’re just trying to prepare them, not entertain them.”

“Lan Jingyi just say your lines! I’m not doing another rehearsal!” Jin Ling demanded.

Thankfully, before they could delve into a petty argument and waste everyone’s time further, Lan Sizhui cleared his throat and took over his friend’s part.

“I understand if you’re skeptical, but please listen. In the future, numerous events happen that shake the cultivation world to its core. We’re trying to prevent this in your timeline by educating you all on what mistakes were made in our world, and I can assure you each and every one of your lives was made worse by not having this information. We used a modified version of empathy on numerous spirits to create a 3D model of everything we want to show you. You won’t be able to physically interact with each other or the scenes you see, but you’ll be able to talk to each other whenever you want.”

Curious at the last comment, several people tried grabbing whoever was closest to them, only to pass through as if they were both made of air. Nie Mingjue relaxed slightly, knowing that even if he wasn’t able to kill Wen Ruohan right now, at least his brother wasn’t in danger.

“We’ll be showing you things in the hope that you’ll react differently than your counterparts in our world did, mainly in terms of how they treated one person,” Sizhui continued, pausing there to allow his words to sink in.

“Now who’s being dramatic?” Jingyi muttered, and Jin Ling kicked his shin.

“To us, this person is known by his official title as The Yiling Patriarch. To you, his name is Wei Wuxian.”

“*What*?” Jiang Cheng demanded, despite knowing the boys couldn’t respond. He turned to his father, and the Jiang sect leader looked to teens with an additional layer of caution added on to his already displeased expression. Wen Chao scoffed, muttering something about wasting time on an inconsequential child, and, although she didn’t say it, Wen Qing seemed to be feeling much the same.

Yu Ziyuan scowled at the boy being brought up, mentally berating him for, as she expected, being the cause of all her trouble. Jiang Fengmian's disapproving gaze did nothing to temper her rage.

"The memories will be shown in segments so as to not overwhelm you. In the meantime, your bodies will be put to sleep and spiritual pressure will be flowed in, allowing your inedia and defensive cultivation to temporarily become even stronger. I can personally assure you that your bodies will be safe; please focus on what we present to you."

"Not that you have much choice," Jin Ling added. Ouyang Zizhen stepped on his foot, silencing him.

"The memories will begin in two minutes."

The teenagers disappeared as their explanation ended, and the cultivators moved around the chairs to form groups divided by sect. Nie Mingjue noticed instantly that they were the smallest percentage of the population, with the Jin and Lan clans following shortly after with their groups of three. The Lans seemed to be discussing why their Clan head wasn't present, turning their gazes to the influential but distantly-related Wen Qing as evidence.

Bloodline wasn't the only factor. Whoever those boys were, they were connected to the cultivation world. Perhaps demons, malicious ghosts, or, less likely, minor gods who were prayed to by cultivators. It didn't explain the odd strategy being used to affect them, but at least they had *some* information.

"Da-ge," Nie Huaisang whined, walking closer and reaching out, only to pass through with the no-touch limitation imposed on them.

"Calm down Huaisang," Nie Mingjue hissed, motioning for his trembling brother to step even closer.

"Do-do you think they're telling the truth? That we're about to see the future?"

"Of course not, don't be stupid. But we can't get out of here while our golden cores are sealed, so we don't have much choice except to watch for now."

Being reminded of that last fact scared Nie Huaisang even further, and he seemed to curl in on himself in fear. Still trembling, his gaze turned to his friend Jiang Cheng.

"What do you think?" Huaisang asked. "About Wei Wuxian. I mean… what do you think his Yiling Patriarch title means? I-why him? Why are we being shown him when they could just as easily make it about any of us?"

"You know him better than me," Nie Mingjue said. "Does he have any connection with Yiling?"

"Well, he lived there for a little while after his parents died, but I'm not sure why he'd be called that."

Nie Mingjue glared at the empty spot their captors had stood in, hating his own helplessness. If he could just get his brother out of this mess-

But there was no point in worrying about things that weren't possible. All he could do was work to impact what was happening, not what already happened. And right now….

"I suppose our only choice is to wait and find out."

"I told you that boy would bring nothing but trouble!" Yu Ziyuan growled, but Jiang Fengmian only looked down with a troubled expression.

"Mother, please. They even said he was just misunderstood by a lot of people!"

"And you're just going to *believe* they're from the future?" she asked with a single raised eyebrow, and Jiang Cheng sank in on himself.

"We can't be sure of anything, including whether this is actually about Wei Ying," Jiang Fengmian corrected. "We should hold our judgement until we have more information."

"Oh, *of course* you'll take his side in this. I sure he could *murder A-li* and you'd write it off!"

"Mother!" Jiang Cheng nearly shouted, astounded by her proclamation.

"Mother, please, enough. We don't know what's going on." Yanli spoke, ending the conversation. To her side, Jin Zixuan watched her with a slightly surprised gaze, not having expected her to speak up. Before Jiang Fengmian could add anything, the cloud recesses pavilion shifted into pure white.

"It's starting," Wen Qing observed calmly.

"Wen Clan ran amok, and people suffered," Lan Sizhui's voice read aloud. "Righteous Clans launched the Sunshot campaign to oppose the Wen."

Nie Mingjue frowned at the mention of his sect's enemies, but — despite his sons perking up at the words — Wen Ruohan had clearly decided to ignore the information given in favor of watching reactions. Fair enough; the only beneficial thing about watching the fiction would be gaining insight into the other members of the audience.

"Wei Wuxian, the Yiling Patriarch, contributed heavily during the campaign."

Several gazes turned to the Jiangs, interested in how the head disciple they raised would play a part. It was truly unusual for a spirit to make up a story about someone not present.

"However, due to his demonic path and great power, some feared him, and had him set up. He was thusly despised by the public, his home destroyed by his beloved shidi, and he died miserably."

Jiang Cheng flinched at the final words, and Nie Huaisang immediately lifted a hand to his face, holding in a gasp and hiding his stunned expression. Despised by the public? Died

Miserably? That couldn't be further from the Wei Ying they knew.

Did the beings who created the hallucination not know anything about him? Perhaps they simply picked a person the majority were familiar with?

"Demonic path?" Wen Xu wondered.

"If anything could trap all of us here, it would be someone who had access to that power," Lan Xichen observed calmly. "Is the ghost or demon using Wei Wuxian as a vehicle for conveying what happened to them?"

Lan Wangji hummed in consideration.

"The 20th year of the reign of Xuanzheng. The year of Gongchen."

Crows squawked and the moon shined overhead, and those furthest to the back were suddenly rushed through as men wrapped in shadow passed by them.

"It seems we really can't touch them," Lan Qiren observed with distaste, no doubt displeased with the mention of demonic cultivation. Nie Huaisang jumped every time he was passed through by a shadowy figure, but Jin Zixuan seemed fairly interested in the realistic vision before them.

Even without walking, the watching cultivators were brought along as a small regiment made its way through a bamboo forest, carrying lanterns bearing the words "Wen Clan." Then, suddenly, the men in front stopped, their eyes widening in fear as the sound of a flute creeped through the woods.

"What's that?" Jin Guangshan demanded as Lan Wangji tried to close his hand around a sword he didn't have. Even knowing they couldn't be touched, their instincts screamed at them to move.

Resentful energy assaulted their senses like a tidal wave.

Hundreds of crows took flight at once, circling around a figure who stood in a distant tree. His long hair swayed freely in the wind behind him, but his appearance was masked in shadow under the moon's glow.

The music continued, and its effects were soon obvious. The corpses which had been laid around the small army suddenly twitched, then moved in earnest as they stood.

"Controlling — *creating* — fierce corpses?" Jin Guangshan asked, lifting a single eyebrow and trying to hide the fear in his eyes. "My, how far the Jiang clan has fallen, to have their head disciple associate with such a vile form of cultivation."

Yu Ziyuan glared at the man, hissing, "Don't pretend to believe their story just when it's convenient."

The hauntingly beautiful music continued as the corpses turned towards the mortal army.

“The ghost flute, Chenqing?!” a man revealed, shaking as he spoke.

Their view of the situation changed until they were directly in front of the man, allowing the moonlight to illuminate a portion of his handsome features.

Jiang Cheng’s eyes widened in horror.

“Is that-”

“It couldn’t be-”

“That’s the Yiling Patriarch Wei Wuxian!”

“Wei Wuxian?” Jiang Cheng asked, recognizing his shixiong immediately. Jiang Yanli took a step back, falling down onto the chair behind her. She clasped her shaking hands together, and willed them to stop.

Even knowing it wasn’t real, that it was just a vision, she couldn’t stop the fear that crept through her bones. The man was so, so similar to her A-Xian.

Except, instead of childish joy, light, and charisma, there was only a dangerous, cold hate.

Lively skin was deathly pale; bright silver eyes had become deep gray; his warm, teasing smiles were now frigid, malicious smirks. The boy they loved had been ripped to shreds in this fictitious future.

“That… does look like an older version of him,” Jiang Fengmian admitted at last, refusing to add more.

With a crackle of red energy, the nearly-unrecognizable man’s eyes glowed with crimson light. In an instant, the Wen-robed corpses attacked, surging forward in an enormous wave toward the now-outmatched army.

The Wens were easily devoured.

Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes, taking in the massacre before him. It was true that he was the strongest cultivator alive, capable of defeating anyone in one-on-one combat. Even if several of the strongest cultivators were to team up, it would be difficult to say who would win. A single show of his power could force an army of weak cultivators to their knees.

But the scene before him was beyond even *his* wildest imagination.

Each cultivator killed joined the army of the undead. Friend against friend; brother against brother; every fallen soldier fell to the influence of Wei Wuxian’s music. The corpses could continue fighting even as their limbs were chopped off and their heads were crushed to dust, but whenever the same happened to one of the Wen cultivators, the army of corpses had a new recruit.

No one had ever mastered resentful energy. Some thought it *couldn’t* be mastered, being too wild and dangerous for a cultivator to ever use.

But if what he saw before him had even the slightest bit of truth….

Perhaps this would be worth his time after all.

“The 25th year of the reign of Xuanzheng: the year of Yiyou.”

A cup fell, spilling onto the table below it.

“Yiling Patriarch Wei Wuxian is dead!”

Jiang Cheng and Jiang Fengmian flinched away, and even Yu Ziyuan frowned at the tone. It was fake — it *had* to be — but it was hard to remember that when the scenes before them were so realistic.

“Really? Who killed him?”

“Who else? His old friend Jiang Cheng, leader of the Jiang Clan.”

“No.” Jiang Cheng muttered breathlessly. “No. No, no, no, no, no-that’s a lie! It’s wrong, and lying and I *wouldn’t*-”

“A-Cheng,” Yanli whispered, turning to him. “Don’t worry, we know you’d never do that. I don’t know why the spirit is trying to make us think you would, but we know you better than it does.”

Jiang Fengmian stepped closer, trying to offer a comforting shoulder, only to pass through his son’s body as if he wasn’t there. He frowned and dropped his hand.

“Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, Jin Clan of Lanling, Lan Clan of Gusu, and Nie Clan of Qinghe have all taken the lead, and burned the Burial Mounds to the ground.”

Wen Ruohan calmly noted the lack of his clan in the list.

“Burial Mounds?” Lan Xichen asked. “But it’s suicide to go there.”

“Mn,” Lan Wangji agreed, and glanced around the room. Four of the great clans had united to take down just one person? What on earth had Wei Wuxian done in this supposed timeline?

“I heard, since he cultivated the dark path, his powers backfired during the battle and he was torn to a fine powder by his own ghost soldiers. If so, serves him right. The ghost soldiers he had were like mad dogs, biting everyone that they came across. In the end, they turned their fangs on him!”

Jiang Yanli scowled at the cruel comparison.

“Huh? But the Yiling Patriarch and the four Clans were allies during the Sunshot Campaign, right?”

“You call that being allies? The Jiangs raised him like their own, but almost all of them were killed because of him!”

“I told you,” Yu Ziyuan hissed, but even her words lacked their usual bite. Wei Wuxian killed nearly all of the Jiang clan? Why? How? She might not like the boy, but even she had never expected that.

Jiang Fengmian, on the other hand, stood stock still as he listened to the villagers speak. It had been odd, he noticed, how they had described Wei Wuxian. An “ally” of the Yungmeng Jiang sect. Not head disciple; not son; not student; *ally*. How could the spirit think he would become so isolated? What had Wei Ying done?

(No, not him. Not the real Wuxian. It *couldn’t* be.)

“What an ungrateful bastard.”

“I heard that he has another evil weapon. The Stygian Tiger Seal!”

At the revelation of the unfamiliar name, the 3D memory shifted into a far away red ball of energy collapsing in on itself into an explosion.

“Yes, don’t forget that he has that. Or how he killed three thousand cultivators overnight.”

“Five thousand if I’m not mistaken.”

Wen Chao huffed. “Foolish peasants. To believe such a thing.” Not even his father could kill five thousand in such a short time. Civilians always exaggerated.

“He destroyed the Seal before he died. At least he did one good thing.”

Jiang Cheng growled, wanting to protest the phrasing, but finding he couldn’t speak after the revelation about his clan’s fate. He knew it was fake, but-

“They say he has powers beyond imagination. What if he steals someone’s body and comes back?”

“Heh. Various clans spent months trying to summon him, but to no avail. It seems the Yiling Patriarch has truly left nothing behind.”

A sigh.

“Back then, Wei Wuxian was also a prominent figure from an established Clan.”

“He also helped destroy the Wens. He made a name for himself at a young age. But how did it end up like this….”

“Destroy the Wens?” Wen Chao repeated. “Preposterous. This segment is entirely fictitious Father! There’s no need to listen to such slander.”

“Quiet,” Wen Ruohan growled, no longer interested in his son’s empty pandering. It wasn’t as though they could do anything to escape, so those words were useless.

What would he have to do to get a *capable* heir?

“You’re sure he can’t be brought back?”

“Aside from himself, who else would be capable of that?”

In the next instant, the world turned misty, and the memories momentarily halted.

“Perhaps this is one of the breaks they brought up earlier?” Lan Xichen suggested, and his brother made a short sound of acknowledgement.

Nie Mingjue watched the Wens for a moment longer, before turning to Huaisang.

“That was your friend?”

“I-um, it seemed to be? But he hasn’t-he would never use… I don’t know why he’s a demonic cultivator. He’s great at spiritual cultivation, so there shouldn’t be any-I mean….”

Nie Huaisang stuttered off, and his gaze turned to the Jiang heir, kneeling on the ground beside his parents.

“I told you he would be trouble!” Yu Ziyuan hissed. “This whole mess is probably because of him! Think of the shame he’s thrust upon our clan! We would have been better off leaving him in the streets.”

“But Mother, he didn’t actually do-”

“You must have heard them,” she interrupted, looking again at her husband. “The great ‘Yiling Patriarch.’ Only he would find a mess like this entertaining-”

“We don’t know everything. *Calm down*,” Jiang Fengmian spoke, raising his voice at last. “All we can do right now is continue watching.”

“Mother, arguing won’t solve anything right now,” Yanli explained. “Please, sit.”

Once again, Jin Zixuan found her calm and mature handling of the situation at ends with the weak and average impression he had of his fiance. He had thought, when faced with a figure as imposing as the Jiang matriarch, she would cower away and remain silent, but instead….

Perhaps getting to know her wouldn’t be so bad.

“Mo Village, 13 years later. Mo Xuanyu.”

They were brought to a dark room, and, in the center, was a lone youth using his finger to sketch symbols on the ground.

Jin Zixuan frowned at the disgusting state of the room. Jiang Cheng barely bit back a laugh when he saw the peacock’s reaction.

“With my blood, drawn by my hand, I sacrifice my body to you. My soul shall disappear. Humbly I await you, Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian!”

“What? Resurrecting someone is impossible!” Madam Jin declared, wondering why the scene they were shown was venturing so far from reality. Surely the spirit would at least want them to believe it was real?

Wind howled, and a donkey outside whined at the disturbance, but, in the center of the array, resentful energy gathered to a level few cultivators had felt before. In the fluttering pages of the nearby book, the words “Written by Wei Wuxian” were visible.

The array finished glowing, and Mo Xuanyu collapsed onto the ground.

Time passed quickly as the spirits' memories zoomed ahead to the following morning, when the boy before them finally blinked his eyes open.

“Where am I?” Mo Xuanyu asked, tilting his head in confusion.

For a moment, Lan Wangji thought he might have failed the procedure. After all, demonic cultivation was extremely volatile and dangerous; given that Wei Wuxian hadn’t appeared from thin air, it was possible the failed attempt had taken memories in exchange.

Then, he took a closer look at the boy sitting up.

The body was the same, but — even considering the short time he had to observe Mo Xuanyu — there was obviously something different about the aura the newcomer gave off. It was peaceful, content, confident, inviting….

Almost… cute.

An apple rolled towards maybe-Mo Xuanyu’s feet, and from the side, the voice of a child called out.

“Madman. Madman!”

Maybe-Mo Xuanyu rubbed his eyes as a large man lumbered in, chasing the children away.

“What do you think you’re doing?” A rude voice interrupted. “You sleep in my house and eat my food. I took some of your magic items, so what? And you snitched on me?”

“You must be out of your mind,” another man’s voice added. “You’ve got balls!”

“Don’t think you’re so great because you father’s a Clan leader. You’re just a bastard! A bastard who’s been kicked out like a dog.”

Many people frowned in consideration, trying to theorize who the mentioned father could be.

Madam Jin frowned at her husband, feeling certain she knew the most likely option.

With those final words, the unknown man applied a kick to Mo Xuanyu's side, ignoring how the boy was already laying down. With a final, raspy growl, the fat man grabbed Mo Xuanyu's hair and pulled him up so they were sitting face to face.

"Mo Xuanyu, listen carefully. My Mom is the leader of Mo village. She didn't recognize your Mom as her sister, and we are not family!"

Nie Mingjue scowled, grumbling "spoiled brat" under his breath. Lan Xichen glanced over disapprovingly, but made no outward objection to the comment.

Mo Xuanyu was thrown to the side, and he finally turned over to see his own makeup-covered face in the water. When he stared down at his reflection, he gasped in shock, eyes widening in disbelief.

"A self-sacrificial summoning ritual," he whispered. "And this blood. How miserable must he have been to do this to himself?"

The use of "he" confirmed it. The man before them was no longer the boy named Mo Xuanyu.

Instead, it was quite likely that it was Wei Wuxian. Or at least the version of Wei Wuxian being depicted in the spirit's artificial hallucination.

He lifted his arm up, pulling back his sleeve to reveal numerous cut marks made on it.

"He was summoning a heinous spirit? But it couldn't have been me… it must have been some lunatic."

His laugh was cut off as he was hit from behind again by the fat young master.

"Your mother is just a servant girl. You too are a servant!"

Only Yanli's hand near his arm kept Jiang Cheng from running over and futilely trying to attack the young master before them. Despite her actions, her gaze held only contempt for the cruel young master, knowing just how close his words were to some of the things which had been whispered about Wei Wuxian when he first came to the Yunmeng Jiang sect.

They knew it wasn't real, but-

"We have important guests today, don't let him embarrass us." The young master ordered to the servant beside him. A quick bow showed respect to the young master, before he turned to Wei Wuxian and began to hiss out insult after insult.

"Stupid lunatic. Stop playing dead! Get to work."

'*Playing dead?*' Wei Wuxian repeated internally. '*I've been dead for many years. It's not an act.*'

They were hearing his thoughts, several people realized.

"...Perhaps the power of the spirits who made this allowed them greater insight," Jiang Fengmian suggested, noting the deep glower Yu Ziyuan and Lan Qiren adopted at his reference to demonic cultivation. That, at the very least, was better than the amused fascination on both Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan's expressions.

Getting up into a kneeling position, Wei Wuxian continued his thought process.

"Spirits summoned through this ritual must fulfill the summoner's wishes. If not, the spell will render them unable to be revived. Mo Xuanyu, since you've summoned me, you should have told me what it is you want. Shall I humiliate them? Beat them down? Kill them all?"

For a moment, everyone who personally knew Wei Wuxian stopped breathing. It was true that there was genuine competence and skill behind his playful demeanor, but there was never this. Never a calm, desensitized reaction to the suggestion of mass murder, whether on innocents or criminals.

Obviously, the spirits didn't know the first thing about Wei Wuxian.

Standing up, Wei Wuxian laughed for a moment. Then, when the young master turned to face him, kicked him to the ground with a satisfying thump.

Not even Jiang Yanli could resist snickering at that.

"Do you want to die? How dare you?" the servant demonded. "I'm about to give you the beating of a lifetime!"

With an entirely-too-cheerful giggle, Wei Wuxian finally stood upright so he was looking down on the people seated before him.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" he asked, playfully.

The young master spluttered half-threats, but, after only being met with a deepened smirk, quickly ran away. His servant followed like a dog barking at his master's heels.

Wei Wuxian giggled at the scene, then climbed on a donkey's back to chase after them. When his attempts at ordering the animal around proved fruitless, he grabbed a nearby apple and used it as bait for the donkey to chase after.

Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang relaxed slightly and blinked in confusion at the instantly-altered demeanor. Despite the words just before, the boy they saw now was certainly similar to the Jiang head disciple they remembered. Could the spirit know more than they realized?

Lan Wangji was perplexed and intrigued by the shameless, carefree joy in the supposedly terrifying cultivator. He had never seen anyone act so playfully.

Their view switched to a different spirit's memory, bringing them to the center of town where the local civilians discussed the arrival of cultivators.

"Demon hunters are really coming?"

“Of course. Zombies have been seen in the back hills. Many have died. The demon hunters are coming for them. I hear they’re from a prestigious Clan.”

Jin Guangshan leaned forward in his seat, hoping his clan would get a chance to be in the spotlight.

“Look out!” was shouted from behind shortly before the young master from before began barreling through the street, knocking over tables as he went.

One cut of alcohol thrown into the air was caught by Wei Wuxian mid flight, and he greedily drank it down.

Lan Wangji frowned at the destruction they caused.

“Isn’t that the crazy elder son of the Mo family?” someone asked.

“The abuse he suffered drove him mad,” a woman confirmed. “The Mos are cruel. I pity him!”

Frowns marred the faces of Lan Xichen, Jiang Fengmian, and Jiang Yanli. Even with their near-unrivaled positions, they were always prone to sympathy.

In the next second, they were inside a building. While not as fancy as many of the palaces sect leaders owned, it was obviously fairly well off.

“I hear disciples of Lan Clan are great heroes,” an elderly woman said. “And here you are. Every one of you is so handsome.”

Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen perked up at the announcement, and even Lan Wangji refocused his eyes for a more thorough analysis.

“So high spirited, so bright, so brave. The cream of the crop!” she continued, layering on the praise as thickly as she possibly could.

The moment the Lan sect disciples came into view, nearly everyone did a double take.

“Those are some of the ones who trapped us here!” an indigent Wen Chao announced. At this, the trio of Lans took an even more speculative look at their representatives.

“Mrs. Mo, you’ve told us the zombie epidemic is a recent occurrence?” the one who had introduced himself as Lan Sizhui asked. He was the epitome of calm grace, and, regardless of what he ended up doing later, even Lan Qiren couldn’t complain at what was before them.

“Yes, some have even invaded the village,” the woman continued. “And lately demon hunters have come around, talking about a night-hunt.”

Lan Sizhui nodded once. “Cultivators enjoy traveling and demon hunting. They often appear at night. Thus, the name.”

“Oh, I see,” she continued, unable to pick up the approaching heavy breathing a cultivator's enhanced senses allowed them to notice. “Actually, my son has always dreamed of hunting demons. He’s very refined and intelligent. I think he would make a great cultivator. Pity there are no opportunities-”

A second later, young master Mo broke open the doors, cries of “Mom!” still on his lips.

“That stupid Mo Xuanyu bullied me because he knows some magic,” the man continued, collapsing into his mother’s arms like a child despite having no problems being on the opposite end of the spectrum. “He must be punished for this!”

'Childish hypocrite,' Jiang Yanli’s eyes seemed to say. Jiang Cheng’s mouth spoke the thought aloud, growling in indigent rage which overwhelmed his amusement at the shameful display.

Yu Ziyuan turned a disapproving glare on her children, but Nie Mingjue approved. There was very little he hated more than having to cater to those sorts of people while working; he wondered how the Lan clan always worked up the energy to do it.

“He-he hit you?” she demanded, checking her son over. “Are you hurt? Please forgive me!”

His whimpers continued, but the Madam quickly turned to the cultivators and covered her mouth to prevent her lips from being read.

“Ziyuan, hold it together,” she whispered.

Shouts from outside proved the servants were trying to prevent someone from entering, but their use proved negatable when, shortly after, a poorly running Wei Wuxian outran the two servants chasing after him and entered the main hall, cackling gleefully as he went.

Nie Huaisang, Jin Zixuan, and Jiang Yanli were trying to muffle their laughter at the ridiculous act, but many of the adults did not look upon it as kindly.

“He’s trying to humiliate them,” Lan Xichen observed, placing a hand on his uncle's shoulder in an attempt to calm the man down, only to have it pass right through thanks to the no-touching rule the area maintained.

Lan Qiren was still displeased by the utter lack of shame on display, but conceded to his nephew’s point.

“I suppose that’s better than jumping right to killing them all, demonic cultivator or not.”

As backhanded as the complement was, Jiang Cheng was comforted by the hope that perhaps his shixiong wasn’t quite as far gone as he had initially appeared to be.

Wen Ruohan found it amusing that even Lan Qiren couldn’t remember what they saw was only a spirit’s illusion. Seeing it so realistically before them made even the illogical events seems possible.

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian tripped on a raised edge in the door, flailing around and crashing towards the ground.

"Watch out!" Lan Jingyi called out, grabbing his arm and stopping his descent.

'*A cloud pattern?*' Wei Wuxian thought, gazing at the headband on Lan Jingyi. '*He must be from the Lan clan of Gusu. Hm, what a coincidence.*'

Wei Wuxian laughed and excitedly leaned over, startling Jingyi. "Are you the one that's hiding my things?" he asked, exaggeratedly.

Nie Huaisang snickered at the show his friend put on for them, pleased that Wei Wuxian's nearly legendary enthusiasm hadn't been lost even in the fake vision. Both Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli also seemed to find the performance amusing, though their fear of their mother kept them from being too obvious.

On the side, Lan Wangji watched with fascination. He could understand the logic behind humiliating the family, but found the boys actions so different — so *shameless* — that he remained befuddled nonetheless. It was truly astounding that anyone could be so full of life and humor and confidence and everything unacceptable in the Cloud Recesses.

His smile was infectious.

"Somebody!" The house's matriarch called. "Get this lunatic out of here!"

Wei Wuxian shook his head and climbed onto a nearby pillar, shouting that he wouldn't leave. The servant tried to pry him off with both physical force and threats, but nothing seemed to work.

Finally Wei Wuxian turned a teasing gaze over, smirking like his greatest joke was finally about to reveal itself.

"I'm willing to leave if he gives me my things back!"

"Nonsense! When did I take your things?"

"Right, right. You didn't "take" them. You stole them! And you did it in the middle of the night! You disgrace!" Wei Wuxian shouted back, still clinging to the pillar.

Enraged by the boy's words, the young master hefted up a table and threw it, leaving his servant and cousin to dodge just in the nick of time.

"Murderer! He wants to kill me!" Wei Wuxian cried out as he ran and hid behind the young masters of the Lan sect. The two looked at each other, silently communicating their complete bewilderment.

The young master lunged towards Wei Wuxian, but Lan Sizhui caught his hand, stopping it from making contact. Even as big as the Mo's young master was, no non-cultivator could ever hope of defeating one in a contest of strength and skill.

“Please,” Lan Sizhui began. “Friend, we can talk.”

“Hm,” Lan Qiren hummed, watching his student calmly deal with the situation.

“Huh, he kinda takes after you, doesn’t he Xichen,” Nie Mingjue asked, focusing in on the smile. Though there were undoubtedly differences between them. The attitude, while friendly, had a greater emphasis on calming people down rather than being silently encouraging. It was more like someone took a mini Lan Wangji, and added a little happiness into his life.

Young Master Mo pulled his hand away from Sizhui, but his mother quickly moved in, dragging her son away and apologizing to the cultivators.

“I’m sorry, my son is just upset about being falsely accused of theft. As for Mo Xuanyu, he has some mental problems. He’s always spouting nonsense. Ignore him.”

Jiang Cheng growled at the accusation, even if she wasn’t technically talking about his shixiong when she said that.

Wei Wuxian gave a laughing scoff at those words.

“Who says it’s nonsense? Try stealing from me again. I swear, I’ll cut off his arm!”

“Mom! Are you going to let him bully me?”

“Shut it!” The Madam growled, but turned when Sizhui interrupted.

“Your family issues don’t involve me. The sun is close to setting-”

Lan Wangji looked closer, noticing his own mannerisms in the boy. Perhaps he ended up being a teacher or mentor to Lan Sizhui.

“- Our priority is summoning spirits and eliminating zombies.”

“Summoning spirits?” several people demanded, speaking simultaneously with Wei Wuxian’s thoughts.

“Please make sure all the villagers close their windows and doors tonight, and avoid the backyard. Do not break any of the seals.”

As he spoke, the crowd was brought outside to watch a seal be set up. Wen Ruohan stared at the unrecognizable talisman with interest.

“Has anyone seen something like this before?” Madam Jin asked with interest.

“I’m afraid not,” Lan Xichen responded. “And I don’t believe there are any records of such a thing. Perhaps the spirit doesn’t have a great understanding of modern cultivation practices.”

Wen Chao, meanwhile, seemed to not understand the significance of the invention and rolled his eyes in disgust. This was wasting his time.

All the while, Wen Ruohan studied the symbol drawn and committed it to memory. It was similar to the spirit-repelling talismans they already had, but would still have taken quite a bit of work to develop. If it was even remotely real, whoever invented them was truly brilliant.

He wanted them.

In the backyard, Wei Wuxian washed his makeup-covered face in a small stream. Setting his hands down, he observed the face Mo Xuanyu left him with intrigue.

“Ho. I’m not looking too bad. Why do you always look like a corpse? Although, looking like a lunatic is alright. What should a lunatic look like?” Trying out several different angles to watch his reflection, Wei Wuxian began stretching and squeezing his face into different shapes.

Jiang Cheng would have joined Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisung in laughing if he wasn’t so caught up in the shock of seeing the uncovered expression. Mo Xuanyu was shorter than Wei Wuxian had been, and there were traces of Jin in his features, but he otherwise looked nearly identical to Wei Wuxian — even down to the nearly-silver eyes. If he changed Mo Xuanyu’s hairstyle from the odd bun, they could pass as brothers.

Though he hadn’t seemed similar when they saw his body with Mo Xuanyu’s soul. Perhaps it was Wei Wuxian’s smile and personality that made them look identical.

Losing his laughter, Wei Wuxian pulled forward his left arm to observe the numerous cuts.

“But this forbidden ritual should have been lost. Where did Mo Xuanyu learn it? And why did he choose to summon me? Although I have a bad reputation, I did no evil nor took any revenge. Am I that fierce of a spirit?”

That was true. The ritual had apparently been written by Wei Wuxian, but if he was as infamous as he seemed to be, there should have been no reason for a destroyed, failed cultivator to have access to his notes. How had he found them?

Illogical things like this and the demonic cultivator’s proclaimed innocence were helpful; if they didn’t pay attention to them, they might get lost in the realistic scenery and forget it was a spirit’s illusion.

Calmly, Wei Wuxian began walking back to his hut, before suddenly halting mid-step. Large black flags coated in red energy had been lain out through the courtyard.

“Oh, the blackwind flag? All the clans wanted to kill me, yet they use my inventions all the same," Wei Wuxian observed.

“What?” Jiang Cheng shouted, and even Lan Wangji felt his eyes widen in surprise. Wei Wuxian had not only created an entirely new branch of cultivation, but had also invented things used thirteen years later?

He knew Wei Wuxian was brilliant, but-

Right. It was fake. It had to be.

Jin Guangshan looked at the flag with interest. He knew it wasn't real, but if it was….

How much money would Wei Wuxian have gotten from the invention? Judging by his reputation as the Yiling Patriarch, it must have been quite a substantial sum. The boy wasn't present now, but would he be able to replicate it once they got out? There must be a reason he was the subject of the vision.

Wen Chao turned his head and laughed. "If someone like that idiot made those flags, it can't have been too hard! He was, what, twenty one when he died? It seems the Lan Clan has fallen quite a-"

He cut off, seeing his father's narrowed eyes turn on him with disapproval. Wen Xu followed along, copying Wen Ruohan without entirely disagreeing with his brother.

Wen Qing held back a sigh, disgusted by the people she was related to.

'*The flags use living Qi as bait,*" Wei Wuxian thought to himself. '*Looks like those Lan disciples plan to use themselves to lure the zombies and spirits here in order to take them out.*'

"Leave," a voice commanded, and the watchers turned to see Lan Jingyi staring down at Wei Wuxian. "You shouldn't be here."

However, rather than running off, Wei Wuxian jumped forward and snatched one of the flags, pulling it down with him.

Lan Qiren scowled further at the disorderly behavior.

"Freeze! You're not supposed to take that!" Jingyi shouted in vain.

Wei Wuxian turned to face him, then whined "No, I'm not returning it!"

"No? I'll beat you up!"

"No! I want it!"

Lan Qiren knew it was unbecoming of a Lan disciple to threaten a civilian in such a manner, but he couldn't help internally sympathizing with the boy. Wei Wuxian disobeyed every common curtesy known to mankind.

"Jingyi, forget about it. Just get it back politely," Lan Sizhui advised, grabbing his friend's arm before a fight broke out.

"Sizhui, I didn't hit him! And look! He's messed up our flag array!"

Laying on the ground, Wei Wuxian, gleefully observed the flag he had stolen.

'*Correct strokes, complete spell, no mistakes in use,*' he analyzed.

Wen Ruohan lifted an eyebrow, not having expected such a stark disconnect between the exterior act and the boy's internal capabilities.

"Young Master Mo, it's getting dark. We'll capture the walking corpses soon. Please go back to your room before night falls," Sizhui requested.

'*Due to the insufficient experience of the drawer, this will only attract evil beings from within twenty-five hundred meters-*'

"Only?" Nie Huaisang asked.

'*Still, it can work.*'

"This flag," he spoke, then flung it onto Sizhui. "It's just a flag, what's the big deal? I can draw a lot better."

"What a lunatic!" Jingyi hissed as Wei Wuxian ran outside the pavilion. Sizhui's disapproving gaze stalled further comments, but the boy's eyes continued to scream insults at the supposedly-insane Mo Xuanyu. Sizhui directed them into replacing the flag and finishing the array.

'*Well organized and well cultured. That boy is going to be quite a celebrated hero someday. I wonder who in a place as dull as the Lan clan can bring out someone like him.*'

Lan Xichen laughed slightly at the backhanded compliment, knowing his uncle was internally screaming over how such a promising young man was somehow involved in the spirit which trapped them there.

Wei Wuxian stretched and walked off, not noticing that, some ways behind him, the official young master watched with an enraged expression.

“Lunatic,” he hissed. “Tonight you’ll die.”

Jiang Fengmian frowned at the words and tone, disliking his helplessness both now and during whatever happened to turn the world against his best friend’s son.

Later, in the ashy dusk of night, voices rang out in frenzied shouts.

“Get in and drag him out!”

“Report to the magistrate!”

“Don’t bother! Beat him to death!”

Inside the building the men had encircled, Wei Wuxian dozed lightly from his seated position.

“What did he do this time?” Jiang Cheng grumbled with a half-laugh, broken up with nerves from the merciless and undeserved words shouted by the men.

(But could Jiang Cheng really say they were undeserved? He didn't know Wei Wuxian — not anymore.)

(No, not him. It was fake. It was fake.)

Waking up slowly, Wei Wuxian rubbed his eyes and turned his gaze toward the intruders, wondering "What? Could it be that the flag array went wrong?"

Jiang Cheng relaxed slightly at his shixiong's ignorance, but Yu Ziyuan maintained her glare. The brat was always causing trouble somewhere, whether he meant to or not.

The door slammed open with a bang and the perpetrators who kicked it open barged in.

"Drag the lunatic to the hall! Let him pay with his life!"

Wei Wuxian only blinked, not bothering to resist as people who had clearly stated their intention to kill him dragged him away.

"What I invented can be fatal if not used properly, but the young man drew it right," he thought to himself.

Nie Huaisang knew that group of men would have no chance of killing a cultivator — especially one as terrifying as the adult version of his friend was reputed to be — but he couldn't help reaching to clutch his brother's sleeve to fend off his nerves.

His hand passed right through, of course, but seeing Nie Mingjue turn his powerful gaze to him calmed Huaisang down a little.

In the east yard, a large crowd gathered around a body which lay unmoving on the ground. Upon closer inspection, it proved to be the corpse of the village's young master, sucked empty by malevolent spirits.

Clutching his head tightly, the boy's mother sobbed uncontrollably.

Jiang Cheng looked away, suddenly feeling awkward. He might have hated them for how they had treated Wei Wuxian, but he couldn't *imagine* losing a member of his family so suddenly.

Yanli looked down, wiping away tears and sending a silent prayer to the family even knowing they were being shown the future. Jin Zixuan lifted his hand, trying to comfort her, but remembered the no-touch rule and quickly put his hand down before someone noticed, cheeks flushing in embarrassment.

Wei Wuxian was brought before them, and the Madam turned a hateful glare towards her nephew. For, where her son's arm should be, there was only an empty stump.

"Try stealing from me again!" Wei Wuxian had shouted only hours before. "I swear, I'll cut off his arm!"

"But he-he wouldn't actually-" Jiang Cheng protested, but found himself unable to continue.

“That man is no longer the boy you once knew,” Lan Qiren lectured, and Jiang Cheng looked away in shame. “If he was willing to turn to — to *create* — demonic cultivation, there’s no telling what his limits are. Especially now, with the binding contract his summoning created.”

“Not that he had many limits to begin with,” Yu Ziyuan muttered, ignoring Jiang Fengmian’s disapproving glare.

Wen Ruohan chuckled, “If any of this is true.”

All three flinched slightly, realizing that, despite their earlier confident claims, they had indeed forgotten that this was just a spirit’s illusion. Wen Ruohan found their reactions extremely amusing.

“It was you!” the Madam shouted. “You killed him!”

Taking staggering steps closer to Wei Wuxian, the Madam’s resentment and rage built up to dangerous levels.

“How could you, you wretched bastard! He-he was just a child…. Why couldn’t you die, you bastard?” she shouted, running forward intending to choke the boy who shook his head and declared his innocence.

The Madam jerked to a stop, someone preventing her attack while shouting at her.

“Let go of me!” she hissed at them. “I’ll avenge my son! Let go of me!”

“Avenge him? I didn’t kill him,” Wei Wuxian declared.

Jiang Yanli wanted to relax, but knew full well how skilled her brother could be at lying when he wanted to.

“You-What did you say?”

“Madam Mo, your son’s flesh and blood have been sucked dry,” Lan Sizhui explained. “It must have been evil spirits.”

“This lunatic killed him!” the Madam declared again despite evidence to the contrary. “You all heard him today. You heard him threatening my son, saying that he would cut off his arm. I… I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!”

Wei Wuxian paused, thought for a moment, then panicked.

“Don’t kill me!” he begged, arms flailing.

Nie Mingjue huffed a laugh at the over-exaggerated reaction, though Lan Qiren disapproved of the improper conduct occurring before them.

“Help me!” he shouted, running towards Lan Jingyi for protection. On his way, he clumsily tripped over the young master’s body, flinging his outer robes open.

Lan Sizhui gasped, recognizing the talisman hidden in the young master's robes. It was one of the spirit attraction flags they had set up earlier.

"A blackwind flag," Lan Sizhui declared.

"Idiot boy," Yu Ziyuan hissed, and no one wanted to ask if she was referring to Wei Wuxian's act or the stupid young master Mo.

"Though, if the flag is really powerful enough to cause something like this, it's certainly worth noting," Lan Xichen pointed out. Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan looked closer, briefly considering how much productivity would be increased by having access to such an invention.

If the flag was real, it would change the entire cultivation world.

"What?" the Madam asked. "Why is that here? Why would that be on him?"

In the back, Wei Wuxian sat back onto the railing, relaxing as the young disciples began examining the clues he laid out for them.

"Well, at least he knows how to step out of the spotlight when he has to," Madam Jin observed, her tone tinged with approval. Jin Zixuan's cheeks flushed as he looked away, but Jin Guangshan easily ignored her.

"Mrs. Mo, I believe I know how your son died," Lan Sizhui declared calmly. "This is used to summon ghosts and evil spirits. Your son carried this flag, and, in doing so, he made himself a target. The ghosts this flag summoned killed your son."

Lan Qiren gazed with approval at the boy's conduct, and Lan Xichen smiled at Lan Wangji, silently conveying his overwhelming satisfaction with the future of their sect.

"Mn," Lan Wangji responded. As they learned more and more, it was difficult to remember this was only a vision.

"Nonsense! It's just a worthless piece of fabric!" the Madam declared through her tears, ripping it up. "How could it… how could it…."

She cut off, only able to sob out her son's name in her crushing sorrow. Wei Wuxian watched the scene with a surprisingly solemn expression.

"Perhaps he isn't as changed as we feared," Lan Xichen suggested, hoping to ease the worry in the Jiangs and Nie Huaisang. "He was apparently 'set up.' We should get more information before we make any serious decisions about what actions we'll take."

"Mn."

"Careful, that hope is skirting on the edge of naivety," Wen Qing responded sharply. If the Jiang family thought this Wei Wuxian could possibly be the one they knew, it was possible this wasn't completely a spirit-made delusion. However, there was no reason to be so

willingly ignorant about the gravity of the demonic cultivation Wei Wuxian had apparently invented.

Wen Chao jumped, his boredom at the story had allowed his mind to drift away until Wen Qing stern reproach startled him. When Wen Ruohan glared at him, and he paled to a pasty white. His father might not be able to do anything while they were trapped in the simulation, but long-learned fear was difficult to ignore.

The Wen sect leader silently wished he had an heir who leaned closer to the competent side of the scale, and wondered how either of his sons — one useless, and one lacking in ambition beyond following his orders — could be considered to have his blood.

Looking down at his left arm, Wei Wuxian's eyes widened in realization.

"Only two wounds left," he observed. "Three wounds refer to three lives. Mo Ziyuan got himself killed by stealing the flag, but the flag was created by me. In a sense it was me who killed him."

"A bit of a lax definition of responsibility for a ritual," Lan Qiren said, frowning.

"I'm not surprised if *that* boy made it," Yu Ziyuan scorned, ignoring how unprecedented such an inventions was. Jiang Fengmian sat back thoughtfully. Thinking about the careless, lazy genius Wei Wuxian was made it seem almost *possible* for Lan Sizhui's explanation to be true.

They knew it was idiotic to believe this was actually the future, but some part of him couldn't help but think that if anyone could do it, it would be him. Against her wishes, Madam Yu felt the same.

That only made her scowl more ferocious.

"You worthless fools!" the Madam screached. "Talking about cultivation and demons! You can't even protect a child. What good are you to me?"

Jin Guangshan huffed in disgust. "Cultivators aren't there to *serve* you."

The statement wasn't technically correct, but the sentiment was close enough that no one objected to it.

"It's all because of your stupid flag, that my son is now dead!" she continued, shaking Lan Sizhui's collar. "You should pay with your lives!"

Sizhui clenched his fists, but both junior cultivators were careful to not respond violently to the distraught civilian before them.

"You famous Lan courtesy isn't very useful *now*, is it?" the now-focusing Wen Chao asked with a smirk. "And to think all the non-cultivators commend your clan's righteousness! It seems all they mean is that it's easy even for the powerless to push you down!"

All three Lans felt their expressions darken at the tone, but knew better than to respond. A discomforting parallel between the watching Lans and the juniors in the simulation formed.

Wei Wuxian huffed, watching the hysterical mother order the cultivators to bring her son back.

“All these years, and Lan Clan still hasn’t changed. Why bother being so polite. Hilarious!”

Lan Qiren barely resisted growling at the words, already having been mocked by Wen Chao.

Getting off the rail he sat on, Wei Wuxian approached Lan Sizhui and Madam Mo, shouting “For shame!”

“Hm?” Lan Wangji asked his brother, wondering what the Jiang’s former head disciple was doing.

Lan Xichen tilted his head uncertainly, hoping the demonic cultivator wouldn’t do anything to the to-be juniors of their sect.

“A child? How old was your son? He was at least 17, right? But he still wouldn’t listen. They said again and again to not break any of the seals. Your son snuck out at night. Is that my fault? It’s his fault!”

Lan Xichen relaxed, grateful the Yiling Patriarch didn’t seem inclined to attack his sect’s disciples. He was slightly surprised Wei Wuxian was willing to turn the Madam’s anger onto himself to help them, but was grateful nonetheless. Lan Qiren felt similarly, but made an effort not to show it.

“And why did my son have a Blackwind flag on him?” the Madam demanded. “It was you! It must have been! You killed Ziyuan, you little bastard. You snuck that flag into his pocket! It must have been you!”

Several cultivators turned, feeling a presence coming from behind them.

There was the sound of motion in the grass, and the servant who had helped Young Master Mo attack Wei Wuxian earlier turned toward the noise.

He tried to scream, but the noise was cut off as the being disguised in shadow attacked.

“What was that?” Nie Mingjue asked with a shout, but apparently none of the spirits whose memories created the simulation had been able to see it, so the image was fairly blurry. Even with their senses enhanced by cultivation, no one could tell what it had been.

“You, give my son back, you filthy bastard!” the Madam shouted, this time grabbing Wei Wuxian’s collar. “You’re just as repulsive as your mother, you-”

“Be quiet,” Wei Wuxian ordered, paying the Madam little mind and instead focusing on the malicious power gathering before them.

Offended by the command, the Madam continued, “What? Who do you think you are, giving me orders?!”

But, following Wei Wuxian's line of sight, the watching cultivators realized there were more important issues than one woman's pride. Behind the gathered servants, a figure moved with sudden jerks of speed and power, erratically mimicking the movement of a human.

A fierce ghost.

"Oh, no," Jiang Yanli whispered, and Nie Huaisang watched the scene with growing worry.

With a crazed groan, the corpse jumped over the watching servants to attack Madam Mo and Wei Wuxian. Having seen the corpse already, it was child's play for Wei Wuxian to push the Madam and himself out of the way.

The corpse landed in a broken position, but, feeling no pain, quickly righted itself without hesitation, seemingly being led by its left arm.

Lan Wangji frowned as he watched, trying to determine the reason for the corpse's odd movement.

"Run!" the servants screamed, fleeing the scene. The body turned toward Wei Wuxian, who watched the dangerous monster with an amused smile.

The creature attacked, but Wei Wuxian dodged instantly, easily maneuvering his way around the attacks with the skill expected of the head disciple of a major sect.

"Help me!" Wei Wuxian cried, keeping up his defenseless act.

"He obviously knows the footwork taught by the Lotus Pier," Lan Qiren observed. "Though I hope those screams aren't common practice there."

Jiang Fengmian smiled in calm amusement, and Jiang Cheng blushed at the implied reproach. On the other hand, Lan Xichen frowned, feeling like the stressful situation didn't excuse the near-blatant disrespect his Uncle exhibited. With Sect Leader Jiang's easy acceptance, however, pointing the rudeness out would only spark conflict, so he remained silent.

The simulation followed Wei Wuxian as he ran behind a row of shrubs, crying for help as he went. In an instant, an arm reached through the shrubs, but Wei Wuxian dodged the corpse easily.

Behind his back, two fingers glowed an unnatural red.

Wen Ruohan smirked in anticipation.

Before any action was necessary, however, a gleaming silver blade attacked the corpse. Lan Sizhui floated through the air elegantly, re-summoning his sword for combat.

The ensuing battle easily displayed Sizhui's combat prowess and skill as he defended against the corpses attacks. The moment he got an opening, he slapped a talisman on the corpse's head, freezing it momentarily.

Resentful energy poured out of the corpse, until it finally collapsed as the talisman burned away.

“Not bad,” Nie Mingjue commented, excited by the prospect of getting to watch a fight.

Lan Xichen beamed, proud of the disciples despite never having met them.

“Flesh and blood… all completely drained. It seems….”

“Yes, exactly the same as Mo Ziyuan.”

Wind continued to blow, snuffing out lights all throughout the courtyard.

“Ghosts…. It’s true,” Madam Mo spoke, trembling with fear as she backed up.

“Mrs. Mo, stay there!” Lan Jingyi ordered as Sizhui prepared three additional talismans. Hitting their mark, the three talismans created a protective array above the center of the courtyard.

“A ghost repelling barrier?” Wei Wuxian observed. “Impressive for someone this young.”

If excessive displays of emotion weren’t forbidden and unbecoming, Lan Qiren would have preened.

“It was set up before, but it wasn’t damaged,” Lan Jingyi noticed. “Maybe, it wasn’t a fierce ghost?”

“Eh? How are they so sure?” Nie Huaisang asked. Even his brother had no answer.

Lan Sizhui nodded. “Yes, one victim in seven days, it could be an unsuppressed fierce ghost. It’s the standard set by the Yiling Patriarch."

Every watcher immediately turned to look at the simulation of Wei Wuxian, who lounged comfortably against the wall as he observed the juniors' deduction.

“A new, standardized system still used 13 years after his death,” Lan Xichen summarized to his uncle. Lan Qiren wanted to write off the accomplishment, but no one could deny how many of Wei Wuxian’s inventions had been appropriate for the everyday assignments cultivators had.

He might be an uncouth monster who fell into madness, but it seemed unquestionable that he was, at the very least, a mad genius.

That, or the vision was just nonsense the spirit who trapped them enjoyed.

“But this thing has killed three people in a row,” Sizhui continued. “It’s far more ferocious than a fierce ghost.”

“This is tricky. What should we do?” Jingyi asked.

“Send the signal.”

“Even if we send the signal now, if there’s no one nearby to back us up, then we….”

“It’s our only option. As members of the Lan Clan, we can’t let these people die. Even if we’re to die, we must wait for backup.”

“Exemplary students,” Jiang Fengmian acknowledged, bowing slightly to the twin jades and Lan Qiren. Lan Xichen smiled and all three bowed back, pleased that, even with two wars supposedly occurring, the Lan Clan had not fallen short. Lan Qiren hoped that meant the Gusu Lan sect was not heavily involved in the conflict.

The signal was shot into the air, and the firework exploded into the sect’s symbol.

“Huh? Is my luck that bad?” Wei Wuxian asked. “What if my old friends show up….”

“He has friends in the Lan Clan?” Jin Guangshan asked, wondering how the Jiang sect’s head disciple had come to know them.

“Not as far as I know,” Jiang Fengmian answered. “But, given that this occurred right as they were about to leave for Gusu, I assume they haven’t met yet in our world.”

Lan Wangji stared at Wei Wuxian curiously, trying to guess who the man was talking about.

“Jingyi, let’s look around again.”

“Okay.”

Wei Wuxian huffed, “Forget it, let’s just be quick. Before I fulfill the summoner’s wishes, I can’t leave even if I want to.”

However, when he lifted his arm to look at the marks, he jolted back in surprise.

“The two wounds are gone?”

Jiang Yanli squeaked in worry.

“Wait, Mo Ziyuan and that servant have been killed. Why did the deepest cut also disappear? Unless… Mrs. Mo… has already died? And the thing that has possessed her….”

The Madam’s corpse’s eyes blinked open.

Nie Huaisang turned toward his brother, desperate for comfort.

“What now?” he asked. “Will those kids be okay?”

Nie Huaisang, Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji, and Jin Zixuan were probably younger than the two Lan juniors before them, but the knowledge that they were older in that time made the disciples appear to be children regardless.

“Depends on how much Wei Wuxian is willing to interfere. There’s no way to disguise a cultivator's involvement, so if he wants to keep his identity hidden the kids’ll be on their own.”

“Wei Wuxian wouldn’t do that!” Jiang Cheng protested, but Jin Zixuan disagreed.

“It’s pretty obvious that he’ll be killed if he’s found. He could pretend to be just adequate, but I’m not sure whatever’s attacking can be stopped without his full power.”

Lan Xichen frowned, feeling a wave of concern for the young disciples he would one day have.

Inspecting the servant’s body, Lan Jingyi felt along until he noticed the suspiciously missing limb.

“Left arm! The servant lost his left arm, too!”

“Hold on. Just now he used the left arm to attack.”

Behind the boys, the Madam’s corpse stood up, groaning as resentful energy filled her body.

“I knew it,” Wei Wuxian muttered, then, watching the two attack, continued, murmuring “Those two are pretty good at this.”

Then, he messed up his hair further, bringing tears to his eyes.

“Ah! Don’t leave me alone! I’m scared!”

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng hissed despite knowing he couldn’t interfere, burying his head in his hands in embarrassment.

Jiang Yanli laughed at the silly act, and Lan Wangji surprised himself with the pleasure he felt witnessing Wei Wuxian’s obvious, carefree enjoyment in life as he played around with people's reactions. Wangji's expression remained unchanged from its stern disapproval, but when Lan Xichen looked over he noticed the change in his brother’s mood.

“Entertained?” he whispered.

“Ridiculous,” Wangji responded.

Xichen laughed.

“Forgive us,” Lan Sizhui requested as he and Jingyi circled around the Madam and pinned her to the ground. She groaned slowly, sounding every bit as inhuman as she was.

Wei Wuxian quickly crouched in front of her, giggling.

“Wow! You got her!” he said as he reached a hand forward and began playfully shaking her hair. “Let’s see you try to beat me again!”

With a sudden movement, the corpse’s mouth snapped at him.

“Oh my goodness, she’s moving! Help!” he screamed, running away as the two baby Lans sighed in disapproval.

Nie Huaisang snorted, and his brother frowned. Nie Mingjue knew his brother was close to Wei Wuxian — proving the boy had *some* redeemable qualities — but he couldn’t accept anyone who chose to cultivate with resentful energy. Why was he so obsessed with power that he couldn’t simply put the hard work in to cultivating normally? It wasn’t as if he wasn’t talented enough.

The boy he saw in the simulation before him was plenty charismatic, but that didn’t excuse choosing to cultivate with the demonic path. Nothing did.

Lan Sizhui pulled out a talisman, but, right as he activated it, the corpse beneath them reacted as the arm forced itself out of their hold and attacked Sizhui.

With a quick turn, Wei Wuxian back kicked Jingyi forward, putting him between the corpse’s extended arm and Lan Sizhui.

“What is he doing!” Lan Qiren demanded, raising his voice above the standard the Cloud Recesses kept to. Wen Ruohan smirked in amusement at the reaction.

However, rather than damaging Jingyi, the corpse’s hand made contact with his robes. With a golden glow, the protective enchantments were activated and the arm was surrounded by a blue, spiritual fire. The corpse reared back as it was encompassed in the light.

Lan Qiren very pointedly made no further comments. Jiang Cheng wanted to demand an apology on behalf of his shixiong, but had enough respect for the elder’s position to remain silent. Besides, with Yu Ziyuan present, there was no way he would get away with making a scene.

“You lunatic! Why did you kick me?” Jingyi demanded. “You almost got me burnt.”

“It wasn’t me!”

“The spell on the clothes works,” Lan Sizhui reported. Lan Jingyi turned away from Wei Wuxian, and both moved to put their new knowledge to the test, using their robe’s spell and their blades to create an attack against the being they faced.

It wasn’t enough.

With a terrifying pulse of resentful energy, the corpse broke the seal, leaving the Lan juniors with few other options.

“She broke out?” Wei Wuxian calmly observed.

“What do you think he’ll do?” Jiang Cheng asked his sister, subconsciously turning to her for guidance like he had when he was young. The layer of calm indifference in the face of such a battle was widening the divide between the boy he knew and the demonic cultivator before him.

As the gap grew larger, it transformed into a terrifying abyss of possibilities.

She tried to send a reassuring smile towards her brother, but could only bring herself to say “I’m sure A-Xian will think of something!”

“Will he?” Wen Qing countered, not faltering even under the glare Jiang Cheng sent her way. “If he uses power beyond what the disgraced Mo Xuanyu holds, he’ll likely have to face questioning. I doubt he’d risk execution for a couple of strangers.”

Jiang Cheng continued to glare, but a glance back from his mother kept him silent.

However, instead of attacking with righteous cultivation, Wei Wuxian calmly walked towards the abandoned corpses lying on the ground. Picking it up by the collar, Wei Wuxian leaned close to whisper in his ear.

“Still sleeping?” he asked, his eyes flashing red.

Numerous cultivators jumped at that, and even Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes at the echoed tone.

With the groan of a fierce corpse, the body stood up.

“Oh, A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli whispered, heartbroken.

Another corpse followed soon after, and the two turned to face the one the junior cultivators were fighting.

“Nice and powerful. Good,” Wei Wuxian spoke calmly, showing none of the insanity he had been playing up earlier in the day. “Do you see that left arm on your Mom?”

The corpses focused in on the arm that was engaging in combat with the two juniors, holding them off easily.

Once again, Wei Wuxian’s eyes sparked with red light.

“Go get it.”

The two corpses blasted towards the Madam, instantly fighting her with far more power than they should have had as new fierce corpses. They worked together, focusing only on attacking the arm — on following Wei Wuxian’s order to strike.

“Demonic power!” Lan Qiren hissed.

Jin Guangshan shivered at the unprecedented ability being shown before him, while Wen Ruohan trembled with excitement. Most everyone else was too shocked by what they saw

before them to form a full opinion on the power; they could only watch in awe.

“Just three words? A few seconds and a few words, and-and he could take on a huge number of disciples.”

“And he’s trying to stay hidden now! What if he was willing to show his power?”

“Wait, is there anything we can do to stop him from attacking if he wants to? What-what about the Lan silencing spell? That’d work, right?”

Lan Xichen frowned in consideration, then shook his head. “It seemed like that was using sounds coupled with intent, rather than words, specifically. Remember the flute from the first event we saw? I have no doubt that, for something of this level, simply clapping his hands would work just as well. And that’s assuming he hasn’t already found a counter, given what we know he’s invented.”

Lan Wangji nodded once in agreement.

Wen Chao sneered at the analysis, asking “Well, then, how do *you* propose we deal with him?”

“You don’t need to ‘deal with him!’ He’s my-”

“Enough,” Madam Yu hissed, not wanting her son to attract Wen Ruohan’s attention over the boy of all things. She had always known Wei Wuxian would be the end of them. At least her son’s future self had finally wisened up to that fact and went to kill Wei Wuxian.

“He has already fallen low enough to create this art,” Lan Qiren agreed. “There’s no saving him now. Nothing could possibly excuse using this power.”

Wen Qing couldn’t help but notice that none of them were remembering their shared agreement that this was simply a spirit-made illusion. It was so realistic and similar to what the Jiangs knew of Wei Wuxian that that excuse was falling apart before their eyes.

“Zombie fight?” Lan Jingyi gasped in shock. “Never seen this before.”

“How did those corpses suddenly come alive?” Lan Sizhui asked, then turned a speculative glance at Wei Wuxian hiding behind a pillar. ‘*Could it be… but it’s not him*.’

“Eh? We can hear other people’s thoughts too? Not just Wei Wuxian’s?” Nie Huaisang asked, torn between being glad his friend was safe and worried about what they would hear.

Jiang Fengmian hummed, answering, "We don’t have enough information. It’s entirely possible whatever was used to create this amplified the spirit’s powers or somehow connected to the time each event was taking place at. According to this, it seems like dozens of new inventions were created in just twenty years. It’s possible that a more powerful form of inquiry was created too.”

“It does no good to speculate,” Lan Qiren argued. “It’s demonic cultivation. This nefarious power should not be looked into.”

Jiang Cheng's protest at the phrasing died under his mother's gaze.

With a bone-shattering crash, both corpses Wei Wuxian summoned were thrown to the side and collapsed as they rammed against the walls.

'*Not even with two fresh corpses? What on earth is that arm?*' Wei Wuxian wondered. '*If no backup arrives, those two boys will be in trouble. Should I use those corpses again? If I do… I could be exposed.*'

Once again, those who knew Wei Wuxian as a boy were torn: saving the juniors was important, but those who knew Wei Wuxian personally didn't think it was worth his life.

The arm ran forward, lunging on the juniors, and Wei Wuxian prepared to act.

~🎵~

As the note rang through the air, earth shattered beneath the corpse's feet. The guqin's music continued, and the watchers followed the direction of the sound, tracing it back to the player.

Before them, the Second Jade of Lan stood calmly in the moonlight.

Even Wei Wuxian could only watch him in shock.

"Wangji," Lan Xichen whispered breathlessly, staring at a version of his younger brother who was now his senior. Despite barely changing physically, the long-held grief in the future Lan Wangji's expression made him appear far older than the boy Xichen knew. Even those who weren't able to read his brother's expressions could tell the man before them was different from one standing beside them.

The Jiangs had started being convinced of its authenticity by Wei Wuxian. Recognizing his brother's unique tells in the man were persuading Lan Xichen of the same.

"Hanguang-jun!" the boys shouted with relief.

"Hanguang-jun?" Jin Zixuan repeated, turning to the Lans for clarification.

Qiren frowned at the screen.

"I've never heard that title before."

"Nor have I."

"Mn."

To have earned a title like "Lightbearer" on top of his title as the Second Jade of Lan? Something must have happened in the years between them and the simulation. Could Lan Wangji have been more involved in the wars with the Wens and Yiling Patriarch than Lan Xichen hoped? Their clan was meant to exemplify righteousness, but there was a layer of grief in his brother that momentarily outweighed their civic duty in Lan Xichen's mind.

The music continued as the scene before them disappeared, bringing them back to the Cloud Recesses' garden they had been standing in during the junior quartet's explanation.

This time just Ouyang Zizhen stood before them, clearing his throat before saying "We'll give you all a short time to talk about what you've seen, and start the next segment in about five minutes."

"Okay, end scene!" was said by Jingyi, whose voice rang out despite the boy himself not appearing in the vision.

"I don't think we need to say that. The spirits will figure out what part to stop the memory at when they put everything together," Sizhui reminded calmly.

"But why can't we help out?!"

"You've been annoying them with your constant orders, idiot," Jin Ling responded. "At some point they're just going to start messing with you."

"Oh, like you can talk!"

"Enough," Sizhui commanded, making Ouyang Zizhen (the only person they could see) giggle.

For several seconds, silence permeated the grounds.

"So, what do we think?" Nie Mingjue asked.

"Pardon?"

"The Jiangs and Lans are the only ones who saw people whose behavior they would recognize," he elaborated. "So? Do you think what that Sizhui kid said was true?"

At the beginning, the adults had all been certain the vision was completely fake. However, over time, it seemed as if the Jiangs and Lan clan had been steadily won over by the familiar behavior.

Seeing that the Jiang clan was hesitant to speak, Lan Xichen answered first.

"I think it's certainly evidence *in favor* of it being real. My brother has various minute details in his expressions that I recognized in the little time we saw him. I understand the doubt, but this whole situation is unprecedented. Unless someone else knows my brother well enough to replicate those quirks, it doesn't seem impossible that this is, in some way, a connection to the future. Wangji?"

"Mn. I saw nothing that could disprove the explanation we were given."

"What about the lies they said about Wei Wuxian?!" Jiang Cheng interrupted. "We can't just believe that he would use — would create — demonic cultivation! And-and even if he was willing to, there's no way he would be able to create all the inventions they said he did. It's obviously lying!"

“And what do the adults think?” Wen Ruohan asked smoothly. Jiang Cheng flushed at his words being so easily written off, but he couldn’t argue with the Chief Cultivator.

Jiang Fengmian paused, then carefully answered “The ability to invent is not what surprised me. He is YunmengJiang’s head disciple, and often gets in trouble for more creative and radical ideas being used for fun. I think it’s possible he would be able to invent spirit attraction flags if an older version of the boy I know truly put his mind to it. As for the rest…”

“It’s certainly possible,” Madam Yu interrupted. “Nearly destroying YunmengJiang, creating demonic cultivation, I always told you he would bring shame upon us. And now look at what’s happened.”

“My Lady,” Jiang Fengmian reproached, but said nothing more. He understood that whatever would be revealed through this would likely reflect poorly on everyone involved. It was simply to be expected of a complete breach in privacy like the one they were being shown, and he could not fault her for her anger. However, like always, she was directing her anger on the wrong person.

“Are we then going to treat it like this is the future — a future — until we see something that proves otherwise? We don’t need to make decisions on how to act for a while, but continuing to think of it like just a hallucination could lead to us missing something important.” Madam Jin interjected, dragging attention away from her childhood friend’s controversial words.

“How could it be?” Wen Xu interrupted. “You can’t really expect us to believe the QishanWen sect could be destroyed, do you?”

With those words, the opening narration which had been forgotten was suddenly recalled.

“I can at least believe the part where they said the Wens ‘ran amok’ and ‘people suffered’ because of them!”

“Da-ge!” Nie Huaisang squeaked as Wen Ruohan turned a blazing gaze toward them.

Everyone braced themselves for an explosion, but Wen Ruohan only hummed in consideration. It had been all but stated that the reason the so-called Sunshot Campaign was successful was because of the actions taken by the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian. If someone had truly succeeded in creating demonic cultivation, then it was not impossible for that to have changed the outcome of the war.

And, now that he knew it was possible, he could make sure it would never happen again.

“I agree with assuming what we’re shown is the future,” he finally said. “A better question is what we plan to do with the information we’re being given. You yourselves agreed we can’t confirm whether this is really true. So, how will we respond? ”

“Well obviously the demonic cultivator can’t be allowed to live!” Jin Guangshan began, but cut off when Jiang Fengmian turned a sharp glare towards him. For someone who never picked fights with anyone, he could be truly terrifying when provoked.

“You can’t do that!” Jiang Cheng added, bowing quickly after remembering he was speaking to the Jin sect leader. “With all due respect, he hasn’t done anything yet! You can’t punish him for something he *might* do or no one would ever be able to do anything!”

“Even though he supposedly destroyed your sect?” Jin Guangshan countered.

“I apologise for interrupting, Sect Leader Jin,” Jiang Yanli began, stepping forward. “But my brother deserves to be given the same chance as everyone else. I have faith that he would not act without a reason, so, if we aren’t interested in attacking the Wens over what we see, and the Wens aren’t interested in attacking us, we have no reason to go after A-Xian.”

Jin Zixuan watched in shock, surprised by the courage such a simple, meek girl would show to defend her younger brother. After thinking for a minute, he spoke as well.

“I agree, Father.”

Surprised at the side his son took, Jin Guangshan stepped back. Wei Wuxian hadn’t developed his power yet, so he would be far easier to take out so long as the Jiang sect didn’t back him. However, they all knew they couldn’t attack the Wen sect when they got out without facing enormous casualties, and, with the knowledge that they lost, the Wen sect would most likely hesitate to attack them.

“I see,” Lan Xichen spoke. “Then may I assume we are in agreement to not punish anyone over what we see, but rather to take steps to prevent the tragedies from happening?”

“It would be best to simply make sure Wei Wuxian doesn’t need to invent demonic cultivation,” Lan Qiren agreed. Lan Wangji remained silent, still thinking over the grief he saw hidden in his older self and wondering what had caused it to form.

“The Nie sect also agrees,” Nie Mingjue responded reluctantly, wanting an excuse to go against the man who killed his father, but not willing to kill Huaisang’s friend over a questionably-proven possibility. His brother gave him a blinding smile, and Nie Mingjue knew he had made the right decision.

“Jiang also agrees,” Jiang Fengmian spoke, ignoring his wife’s scowl.

“Wen will allow this.”

“...Jin will also agree,” Jin Guangshan said at last.

All there was left to do was wait and watch.

The simulation started again.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case it wasn't clear, this is going to be a combination of the book/manhua and the donghua because I just want to include my favorite part in both! Have a great day! :)

Stupid, Stupid Kids

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Da-shixiong!” a preteen shouted, sprinting across the lotus pier as fast as his little legs could carry him. Following shortly behind, his younger sister carried in her arms a package larger than her torso.

Fifteen year old Wei Wuxian smiled at them, reaching down to take the box from the sister.

“A-Lu, A-Yue, how’d it go?” he asked cheerilly. The two eleven year olds were his shidi and shimei, and had volunteered to help him with his investigation.

“No worries,” A-Yue informed him, nearly bouncing in excitement when he ruffled her hair. “The Nie sect’s head disciple had everything put together already.”

“I signed off the delivery,” A-Lu informed him, beaming and waiting impatiently for his turn to get his hair ruffled. He relaxed into head disciple's hand as Wei Wuxian complied, but backed away when the smile became a teasing smirk.

“Did you? But last *I* heard the Nie sect was full of monsters!”

“I was never scared!”

“Really? But I seem to remember *someone* hiding behind my legs last time Nie Mingjue came to visit even though he promised to help me out. Does that sound familiar to you, A-Yue?”

The girl nodded.

“I didn’t!” A-Lu confidently denied.

“...You did, A-Lu,” his sister refuted. A-Lu turned to A-Yue, eyes glistening with unparalleled betrayal. A-Yue simply blinked back, seemingly not understanding what his expression was caused by. A-Lu watched her for several seconds, then turned to Wei Wuxian.

“I want a new sister.”

“But if you don’t have A-Yue, how am I going to know when you’re lying to me?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“I wasn’t lying!”

“Yes you were,” A-Yue added with a smile. Her brother glared, the freckles dotting his cheeks disappeared under the enraged flush.

“I wasn’t!”

“Of course, of course, I’m sorry,” Wei Wuxian allowed. “You were both very brave, weren’t you?”

The two siblings looked at each other sceptically, then nodded at Wei Wuxian, accepting the truce.

Eager to get the topic away from his shameful past, A-Lu quickly asked “What is the package for? Did the Nie sect send over candy?”

“Tragically, no,” Wei Wuxian bemoaned. “It’s just some boring old scrolls I asked for. It’s about the effects of resentful energy on the mind. The thing affecting Uncle Jiang and his family uses resentful energy, and I want to try and confirm it isn’t hurting them before I do anything to it.”

“Welcome back, Wei-shixiong!” several voices called, bowing low. Wei Wuxian waved them off with a laugh, hiding his discomfort behind a smile.

That bow was from student to sect leader. It had started out as a joke — “Hello ladies and gentlemen, I’m your substitute Sect Leader today. Bow down before me!” — but, as the hours went on, the disciples started doing it less for irony’s sake and more as a serious reaction.

Instead of looking for a cure, they were adapting to a new normal.

That only increased his determination to succeed. He was a disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang sect; it was his job to do the impossible.

A guard he had stationed bowed at him as he entered the building where the Jiang family was being treated. Inside, their most trusted medical professionals were hard at working making sure everything was stable. Wei Wuxian privately mourned that Wen Qing was also knocked out by this; she would have been the best person to ask for a second opinion on his theories.

Setting the scrolls down on a nearby table, Wei Wuxian quickly looked over the quartet with worry. Like before, their conditions appeared to be perfectly stable, and, if not for the resentful energy clinging to their bodies, they would simply look asleep.

Messing with resentful energy to solve the mystery was risky. First he should improve upon a talisman so that he could figure out what the different pieces of the spell were, but he would need to study the Nie texts on resentful energy before that. Not only would it be dangerous to do anything more than joke about it, no sects would allow him to treat their clan leaders until he was an expert.

It didn't help that he was using the adult disciples to run the sect, so his only helpers were children. A-Lu and A-Yue were the most responsible eleven year olds (too young for real responsibility, but old enough for simple tasks), but, as great as they were, Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but feel somewhat understaffed.

(It would be much easier if the Lan elders were willing to lend a hand, but they were too busy arguing amongst themselves to be of any help.)

(Wei Wuxian was almost glad he never made it to the Cloud Recesses. He wouldn't have lasted a week.)

~🎵~

Lan Wangji's music began again, and Madam Mo covered her ears, curling in on herself in pain. The beautiful sounds were loaded with spiritual power, easily trapping the corpse where she stood.

Wei Wuxian continued to stare, frozen in shock. Resentful energy curled around his fingers as he paused in the commands he had been giving.

'*Why is he here?*' Wei Wuxian thought.

"Eh? You know each other?" Nie Huaisang whispered to the teenage Lan Wangji standing near him. The two made eye contact for a moment, before Lan Wangji shook his head.

"We have not met."

"I assume they met during the so-called Sunshot Campaign," Lan Xichen continued, knowing the words his brother was trying to convey. Wei Wuxian was going to come to the Cloud Recesses for the exchange, but Lan Xichen knew his brother's icy aura prevented him from ever getting close to his fellow students. The war was by far the most likely explanation.

Turning quickly, Wei Wuxian sped away from the Lan's second young master while Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi approached their Hanguang-jun, bowing in deep gratitude.

Wei Wuxian ran back to the shack he had woken up in, relaxing slightly when he saw that the donkey was still present. He paused to remove all evidence of the summoning ritual Mo Xuanyu had done, then turned to glance back at the direction he came from.

"I need to get out of here."

Jiang Cheng frowned.

Based on the reactions of the two junior Lans, it seemed likely that Lan Wangji had grown up to be even more respected and righteous than he was already reputed to be. For Wei Wuxian's initial reaction to be running….

What exactly did this future-cultivation-world *do* to demonic cultivators?

The scenery around them shifted into a bright sky above an empty plains, speeding through the passage of time in an instant. Wei Wuxian and several other travelers stood gathered around a well, temporarily resting in the shade of a lone tree.

"Hey, boss, make due with this straw and hit the road!" Wei Wuxian ordered his donkey, who turned away in disgust at the food being offered to him.

Jiang Cheng's eyes ventured toward Jin Zixuan, and he had to turn away to contain his laughter. If the other boy got offended at being called a peacock, he was sure to explode at being compared to a donkey.

(A haughty, prideful, unhelpful donkey, but still.)

Nie Mingjue rolled his eyes at the "terrifying demonic cultivator" arguing with an animal, but privately noted how no one was scared of Wei Wuxian anymore. They had all backed up in fear when they saw his power against the arm, but his easy charm had won them over yet again.

Though, if there was one person Nie Mingjue would really rather *didn't* remember Wei Wuxian's power, it was Wen Ruohan. By the look in the his eyes, he doubted that would happen any time soon.

"Why is the compass not working when we're almost at the foot of the mountain?" one of the waiting travelers bemoaned.

"Compass? Are they lost?"

"Quite an elaborate design for a compass," Jiang Fengmian observed, noticing the complex carvings on the bottom. It seemed like the kind of meaningless intricacies he would expect of the Jins or monarchs, rather than poor travelers.

"Compass?" Wei Wuxian repeated, surprise dancing across his eyes before settling into understanding. "Rogue cultivators on a night hunt?"

"Huh?" Nie Huaisang asked, tilting his head in childish confusion. Internally, his mind rapidly sped through different reasons why his friend would have come to that conclusion.

Perhaps that compass design had become common for cultivators. Rogue cultivators weren't overly wealthy, but they could usually live more comfortably than the poorer farmers. It could be a symbol of status signifying them as cultivators, or a symbol connecting them to a sect. At this point, anything was possible; the future seemed radically different from the world he knew now.

"Is your compass broken?" a young man asked as Wei Wuxian approached the tree they stood under. "It's only 5,000 meters from Dafan mountain. We have to set off now."

Wei Wuxian sighed, sitting down so he could lean on the tree.

'*I wonder if I'll be able to recruit some great ghosts at Dafan mountain,*' he thought, rubbing his eyes tiredly, only to jerk back awake as his shoulder was tapped.

"Here you are," a young woman offered, holding an apple out to him.

Nie Huaisang jumped as the donkey let out a terrifying noise and tried to steal the apple. Unable to help himself, Jin Zixuan snorted at the action, and received terrifying glares from both Nie Mingjue and Jiang Cheng, while Nie Huaisang looked away silently.

Lan Wangji barely resisted sighing at the needless conflict; his brother's amusement at his concealed annoyance wasn't helping either.

Wei Wuxian frowned at the donkey, continuing to hold the apple in the air.

"Hey, this is for me!" he protested harshly.

The donkey frowned, its eyes widening and glistening with tears in the most adorable puppy eyes it could form.

Several people wanted to coo at the image.

Wei Wuxian stared at the donkey, then looked at the apple, then back at him, suddenly recalling the apple he threw to get the donkey to move initially.

His face morphed into a terrifying smirk.

"Oh no," Jiang Cheng sighed.

"Lil' Apple, let's go!" he cried out, holding the apple in front of the hyper-focused donkey like bait on a fishing rod.

Nie Mingjue snorted, and Lan Xichen heard a few snickers from the people around him. In fact, even Wen Qing and Lan Wangji were cracking slight smiles, charmed by Wei Wuxian's joy. It was much easier to trust someone when you got to hear all the thoughts in their head.

Suddenly, it occurred to him how much of a breach of privacy this was. He could only hope it stuck to public activities rather than more intimate ones, especially with Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan watching for any weaknesses they could exploit.

Wei Wuxian huffed a laugh as he and the donkey sped through the forest. "Good boy, that was fast. And they say dogs are a man's best friend. You're the apple of my eye, buddy! Let's go!"

"Oh, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli laughed as well, glad that her little brother's creativity and humor hadn't been destroyed over the years. And, once again, the comment about dogs proved that whoever put this together knew far more than they should about Wei Wuxian.

Soon Wei Wuxian reached a small town at the foot of Dafan mountain. In it, the same group of rouge cultivators all stood, gathered around their compass in confusion.

"All the Compasses of Evil indicate no abnormalities. I don't think there's a soul-eating beast here," one rouge cultivator reported.

"...The compasses of what?" Jiang Cheng asked and turned to Huaisang, who only shook his head in equal confusion. It seemed there was more to the compass than the simple identifier Huaisang had initially theorized there to be. He wondered when it was created.

"Don't be so hasty," his friend reminded him. "The compasses just point out a rough direction. They can't be fully trusted."

“What? Think about who invented the compass of evil! I’ve never heard of anything that could disrupt some of his work!”

“I know it was the Yiling Patriarch, but he couldn’t make everything perfect, could he?!”

There was silence as the watchers tried to connect “the Yiling Patriarch” title they had only just learned about to a face.

Then-

“Wait… he means *Wei Wuxian*?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“...Apparently,” Lan Xichen confirmed, thoroughly befuddled by yet another world-changing invention being attributed to the Jiang Sect’s head disciple.

“Hah, he probably just used his power to steal the credit from others,” Wen Chao scoffed.

A “like you always do?” was on the tip of Jiang Cheng’s tongue, but was held back by his mother’s gaze. Airing their personal grievances was one thing, but Yu Ziyuan wouldn’t allow her son to be stupid enough to attract Wen Ruohan’s gaze unnecessarily.

The men growled back, “I never said that you shouldn’t doubt or that everything he made was perfect! Calm down!”

“I’m perfectly calm! I’m just saying Wei Ying can make mistakes!”

“Oh shut up!”

A brawl broke out, and the passing Wei Wuxian looked over at the fight, blinking in confusion.

While the people around him laughed at the passing Wei Ying’s ignorance of his role in the fight around him, Wen Ruohan’s mind was consumed by other matters. The only mention of his clan, the strongest clan of the time, was in reference to what Wei Wuxian’s role was in their fall. They were both considered monsters who were defeated over a decade ago, so what was the difference?

Was it simply that Wei Wuxian was more recent?

No, it was more than that. Even in the everyday tasks of a cultivator, he had been mentioned numerous times, and the Wens hadn’t been talked about once.

After the Wens had decimated the four remaining great sects, Wei Wuxian had tried to finish the job. His (disappointing, *useless*) sons were technically his heirs, but Wei Wuxian was the true successor to his legacy as the world’s most dangerous cultivator.

And yet, he was remembered differently.

The Wens were a piece of ancient history; Wei Wuxian was the monster parents told their children about to make them behave. Even though Wen Ruohan had cultivated to the peak of what was possible, even though he had gotten the nearly-forgotten technique of the Core Melting Hand-

Or perhaps that was it. He had nearly destroyed the cultivation world, but Wei Wuxian had *created*.

Wen Ruohan had perfected every known technique, and the Lans and Nie and even Wen Zhuliu had unique abilities passed down through generations that set them apart from other cultivators. However, none of them had ever *created* anything. Wei Wuxian had invented talismans and flags and the compass of evil and the entire *field* of demonic cultivation all in the few short years he had been alive. All by himself, he had become powerful enough for the world to unite against him.

Something to consider going forward.

“Hm?” Wei Wuxian murmured, noticing a woman before him gazing blankly at Dafan mountain.

Her gaze looked tired, and she stood so, so still that, for a moment, she almost seemed to be a corpse. Soon, she relaxed, closed her eyes, and drooped down.

Then *shrieked* with laughter.

Wen Chao would forever deny squealing in freight.

With a crazed expression, the woman gleefully began dancing through the busy street, paying no mind to the people walking around her.

“A-Yan!” an elderly woman called with worry, approaching the girl.

Even when she was tightly grasped from behind, “A-Yan” stared dully at the sky. Her smile remained as unchanged as Jin Guangshan’s unsavory habits.

“A-Yan! Let’s go back. Let’s go back!” the woman continued to beg as Wei Wuxian observed silently. Then, suddenly, A-Yan threw the woman to the ground, chuckling to herself as she began to dance once again.

Yu Ziyuan frowned at the scene, not showing a trace of confusion on her face despite her internal bewilderment. It was entirely possible the girl was simply crazy, but, with every world-shattering revelation this simulation had shown them, she feared the answer was not so simple.

If the trend persisted, Wei Wuxian was most likely responsible for this too. To be able to create demonic cultivation, drive people to insanity, resurrect the dead, and, apparently, force the watchers into the simulation they were stuck in was beyond even *her* wildest fears.

How much had the brat changed in the world her children would one-day live in? Worry gnawed at her mind.

Turning to a nearby merchant, Wei Wuxian asked "Mister, can you tell me what happened to that girl?"

"What? Are you here to catch those creatures as well?"

"No, no, I'm… a storyteller. I'm gathering folk tales."

Another easy, casual lie. Jiang Fengmian knew his best friend's son was capable of them when causing mischief, but he had not forgotten the way Wei Wuxian ran from Lan Wangji's older self. He had faith in the boy, especially considering the opening narration proclaiming him to have been "set up." He trusted the young man he had raised to always do the right thing.

But he still couldn't be sure how much of what he saw was true. No matter what his wife thought, he wouldn't put their children's lives at risk. He believed in Wei Wuxian — trusted their A-Ying — but refused to show blind faith.

"On our Dafan mountain here, there's an old burial mound," the merchant explained. "A few months back there was a dark and stormy night. When the next day came, people found that a few coffins had been brought to the surface. They, along with the corpses inside them, had been burnt coal-black by the lightning. The townspeople were more anxious than ever. After a few rounds of prayer, they restored the burial grounds and thought that everything was over. We never would have guessed the townspeople would start to lose their souls."

"Lose their souls?" Wei Wuxian repeated.

Every watching cultivator remained silent as they analyzed the information, their minds working to sort out the cause instinctively even though there was nothing they could do.

"The first was a sluggard, a poor wretch. Loafing around and doing nothing. On the night of the landslide, he happened to be stuck in the mountain. He was lucky enough to come back safely. The strange thing, though, was that just a few days after he came back, he suddenly got himself a bride, and arranged their marriage with great fanfare, telling people he was settling down and going to start working. On their wedding night, he got himself as drunk as he could. After he collapsed onto the bed, he never got up again. He was all ice-cold and dreary eyed. After lying there for a couple of days, eating and drinking nothing, he finally entered the ground. His poor bride was widowed just after being married.

"The second girl was A-Yan, the girl from blacksmith Zheng's. Her husband was killed by wolves when he was hunting on the mountain. After she learned of this, the exact same thing happened. It's hard to believe, but afterwards her soul-loss cured on its own. However, she'd gone crazy as well, always dancing for others to watch.

"The third was A-Yan's father, blacksmith Zheng…. By now, there's been seven consecutive victims."

Wei Wuxian looked down solemnly, quietly thinking the matter over with the severity it deserved.

Jiang Cheng blinked in surprise. He knew Wei Wuxian could be serious when he had to be — jokes or not, he was the Yungmeng Jiang sect's head disciple for a reason — but it was still odd to see it happen so easily. He knew everyone had to grow up, but part of him had expected "Xianxian is three" to always be true.

Somehow, Wei Wuxian's maturity felt more like something was stolen than gained.

Continuing his ride into the mountains, Wei Wuxian contemplated what he heard.

'*The evil thing has devoured seven souls. No wonder many families are gathered here. It's probably an advanced soul-eating fiend. If this night hunt's prey is this extraordinary, it's only natural for the compass of evil to go awry.*'

Wei Wuxian trotted off, not noticing a nearby group of rogue cultivators who stood nearby. They were grumbling amongst themselves, one hanging injured over another's shoulder.

"Did the leader of such a big sect really need to fight over a soul-consuming spirit with us?"

"What can we do? If you're going to offend a sect, the last one you should offend is the Jiang sect. If you're going to offend a person, the last person you should offend is Jiang Cheng."

"...Huh? Jiang Cheng asked.

"A-Cheng?" Jiang Yanli repeated in disbelief. It was true her brother could get prickly and temperamental, but it was never *serious*. He joked around at being annoyed with Wei Wuxian and his other shixiong, but he certainly didn't have a reputation for being vicious.

Jiang Fengmian quietly wondered if his son had grown into a man like his mother.

He hoped that Jiang Cheng's life was at least happier.

The rogue cultivators sighed.

"The only thing we can do is feel sorry for ourselves, huh?"

The watcher's were then brought along with Wei Wuxian, following him deeper into the forest. After traveling for a distance, he suddenly jerked to attention.

Along the forest floor, thin strings and talismans — traps — were just barely visible to a trained eye.

His eyes widened as he pulled Little Apple to a stop with a whispered "Oh no." Unfortunately, he had already gotten too close, and had to jump off the donkey to avoid the trap.

Jin Zixuan frowned in annoyance at Jiang Yanli's worried expression. Honestly, who would be stupid enough to place traps in such a public area? At least Wei Wuxian was skilled enough to avoid it; he didn't want to imagine what her expression would have been like otherwise.

"A spirit net?" Wei Wuxian observed with a chuckle, getting up. "I never thought I'd see one of those in such a remote area. What kind of rich people go night hunting here?"

Unable to resist, Nie Huaisang and Jiang Cheng looked over at the Jin family, and Jin Zixuan flushed in annoyance at the silence accusation standing up straighter. Jiang Cheng thought the response suited a peacock, but knew saying so would turn his already-annoyed mother's displeasure on him.

Little Apple neighed in terror, but all Wei Wuxian did was pick up the apple which had fallen and took a bite.

"Apple, don't get mad at me," he lectured with amusement. "It's a spirit net, so I don't have anything capable of saving you."

He was about to continue, but, suddenly cut off, hearing a scream for help.

"Is anyone there?!"

"Help us!"

"People?" Jiang Yanli asked, growing concerned.

And, indeed, they were. Up high, both male and female voices were crying for mercy from where they were stuck in the nets. Wei Wuxian frowned and was about to take action, but, hearing the approach of another person, quickly backed off.

In the treetops, a boy wearing the golden uniform of the Jins crouched down on a branch to observe what he had caught in his net.

"What? A donkey?" the boy demanded. From his spot hidden behind a tree, Wei Wuxian chuckled at the boy's outrage. "I set more than 400 spirit nets, but I haven't been able to catch one ghost! I just find you idiots every single time!"

Jin Guangshan reevaluated the boy carefully, knowing that, even for the Jin clan, that was an expensive purchase. The unnamed boy must be quite high up in terms of standing.

(He hoped it wasn't another one of his illegitimate sons. No-touching or not, he wasn't sure he would be able to survive his wife's fury.)

The kid tsked, grumbling to himself about the lack of spirits, and allowing the watchers to get their first full view of the boy.

"Hey! That brat!" Nie Mingjue pointed out, recognizing him as the Jin in the quartet of boys who were their "spokespeople from the future."

Lan Xichen wondered how Jin Ling became friends with Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi. Perhaps the Lan Clan did another cultural exchange? If so, it was likely Lan Qiren would forbid another cultural exchange for quite some time; his uncle was not pleased with the mess they were stuck in.

Jiang Cheng turned, about to whisper to Wei Wuxian about the hilarity of a mini-peacock, when he remembered Wei Wuxian wasn't there. Scowling, he glared down at the ground as if it was responsible for the simulation's creators deciding Wei Wuxian wasn't a member of the Jiang clan.

(He knew, in reality, it was more his mother's fault than anything. But he also knew better than to argue about it with her, as she was usually right on such matters.)

(Right?)

"Jin Clan of Lanling. A rich guy indeed," Wei Wuxian thought. "In one day I've bumped into both the Lans and Jins. I've got the best luck."

Little Apple cried from where it was hung. Similarly, the people trapped there shouted out again.

"Please, Young Master! Do us a small favor and let us down!"

Jin Ling glared, "You guys should just stay here! I don't want you messing around and getting in my way again."

Jin Zixuan frowned, disliking the fact that the first appearance of his sect was in the form of such a heartless boy.

However, having dropped his guard, Wei Wuxian had relaxed, and made a small sound.

"Who's there?"

Nie Huaisang gulped in nervousness at the tense situation. He moved closer to his brother until he was standing *inside* Nie Mingjue's chest, the no-touch rule allowing them to be even more intimate than they could in the real world. A fond, amused sigh left his brother's lips at his action, but he allowed Huaisang to stay.

Wei Wuxian slipped out of range just before Jin Ling spun around to find him. The boy had an arrow docked and poised to shoot in an instant, but his target was nowhere to be found.

A snap of a branch came from behind him, and in an instant Jin Ling launched an arrow towards the sound.

It pierced an apple to a tree.

Jiang Cheng snickered, pleased to see his shixiong get one over the annoying rich kid. The expression the peacock was making as time went on was extremely amusing.

Though, he had to admit the kid was a bit cute with how easily annoyed he got. He would never repeat it to anyone, but he knew his sister was drawing comparisons between the kid's personality and his own.

Once again, Wei Wuxian paused, observed the situation, and decided panicking was the best course of action.

"Ah! Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" he took a shuddering breath, then pointed at the boy indignantly. "First you capture my donkey, and now you wanna kill me? You're so cruel!"

"Huh? It's you," Jin Ling noticed, before huffing in disapproval. "What? You lost your memory after you were driven away? You don't even recognize our coat of arms?"

"Lost memory?"

"Oh. He's speaking to Mo Xuanyu…. Uh oh."

While the others worried about whether Wei Wuxian's act would hold up, Madam Jin focused all her energy on remaining silent.

If Jin Ling knew Mo Xuanyu, and described it as "our" coat of arms, then there was really only one possibility for the boy's "Great Sect Leader" father could be.

'*Do not say anything,*' she thought to herself. '*Do not make a scene. Destroy him all you want once you're back, but Wen Ruohan is here and that parasite will simply hide behind him. You need to be here for Zixuan right now. Do not say anything. Do not say anything.*'

"A Jin? Hm... a nice face. A pity the boy was so untalented," Jin Guangshan muttered.

Madam Jin felt something within her *snap*.

"You don't even *care*?!"

"Er, now dear-"

"*First* you go around putting your paws off anything with legs, and *now* the only thing that matters to you is their appearance?! You're not even *remotely* ashamed of your actions!"

She reached forward, as if to dig her hand into his heart, only to pass through as if they were both tricks of the light. Her own powerless — in terms of both stopping him *and* getting revenge — only infuriated her further. She glared with the wrath of a million stars, and simmered with rage as she allowed Yu Ziyuan to stand with her. They moved back to their seats as one.

The Jiang Matriarch would have thrown her chair at the Jin sect leader — potential war or not — but had realized fairly early on that they could only sit on the chairs, not move them. Nevertheless, her and Madam Jin's combined glares would burn a hole straight through the Jin leader's back.

Wen Ruohan found the whole thing highly amusing.

Jin Zixuan backed away in embarrassment, not even paying attention to the simulation's Wei Wuxian realizing the same thing his mother did (and narrating to himself over how his father died during sex). The whole situation would reflect badly on the Jin sect, but, if he was being realistic, it was unlikely any sect would escape shame by the end.

Jiang Cheng looked over and, beside Wen Ruohan's amused expression and Wen Qing's disgusted one, noticed Wen Chao's mocking scorn. The look infuriated him, especially since it seemed to be directed more towards Jin Zixuan than the parents.

He stood next to the Jin heir, who looked toward him with a startled expression.

"Hey, what are you muttering about over there?" Jin Ling demanded, having heard Wei Wuxian's murmurs.

Wei Wuxian ignored him, continuing "At the first siege of burial mounds, Jiang Cheng ranked first, and Jin Guangshan must have been second. How hilarious that I've got his bastard son's body now. What a mess…."

Several people laughed at Wei Wuxian's tired reaction to the situation, but Jiang Cheng was distracted. He had "ranked first" at the siege. He had sent the greatest number of people to the battle to kill Wei Wuxian.

He didn't like the image that provoked.

Jin Ling huffed, muttering "Crazy guy." He turned to leave.

"Hey, don't leave! Let my donkey down first!"

"Get away from me! It's bad enough having to see you. Lunatic."

Jiang Cheng growled at the repeated insult, even if it was technically against Mo Xuanyu.

"Hey, don't forget I'm your senior. Is that how you treat your seniors? I guess your mother didn't teach you any manners."

At these words, the boy started. Then, with clenched firsts, unsheathed his sword and began to attack.

"What did you say?" he demanded, swinging in a beautiful arc that Wei Wuxian easily ducked under. Rather than displaying the boy's ineptitude, his flawless technique instead showed Wei Ying's skill.

Madam Jin frowned at her husband. The poor Jin Ling boy must have a complicated family history if he was another bastard son of her husband's. The riches and exemplary sword technique seemed to imply he was another child of theirs, but she couldn't imagine sleeping with her whore of a husband again.

Jin Ling continued to vigorously take the offensive, but Wei Wuxian got out of the way each time, not even bothering to defend or attack the boy. He leapt and twisted and spun out of range, playing with the boy and showing a style far more unorthodox than YunMeng Jiang's more traditional moves.

For a moment, Jiang Cheng was overwhelmed by a sense of nostalgia. It had only been an hour or so since he was with his Wei Wuxian, but with everything that had been shown, his shixiong's effortless, almost *mocking* fighting style felt like it was a decade ago.

He supposed, to the Wei Ying before him, it actually was.

"Hm. Not bad," Wei Wuxian acknowledged, pausing. Jing Ling attacked again, not noticing how Wei Wuxian yanked a leaf off a nearby branch.

As Jing Ling lunged forward, Wei Wuxian spun into a side-step, surging power into the leaf and twisting to plant it on the young Jin's back.

"Down you go!" he ordered, as red light sparked.

Lan Qiren unconsciously took a step back, wary of the resentful energy.

The leaf fizzled, changing form until its shape vaguely resembled a human, and crackled with red electricity. Soon, resentful energy burst out of it and congregated above as if drawn in by a black hole. The formed orb then bulged, expanding into the form of an enormous man.

Jin Ling was crushed under it.

"Was that… a ghost?" Lan Xichen wondered aloud.

Nie Mingjue gave a huffed half-laugh, then responded, "It… seemed to be."

None of them had any real idea what the power of demonic cultivation entailed. After all, it had been nothing but a theory until this future-Wei Wuxian invented it; the only clues they had were its ties to death and resurrection. However, the more they saw, the more it appeared to be a widely varied branch of cultivation.

Lan Qiren's fear peaked, knowing that anyone who got their hands on the style would be capable of causing near-unprecedented destruction. He could not allow Wei Wuxian to create it.

Some ways away, Jin Zixuan winced, feeling compassion for Jin Ling and knowing he would have probably reacted the exact same way in that situation. With the knowledge of how young the boy was, it made him feel like he was looking over a younger sibling (though he admittedly didn't have much experience with those; his mom wanted to eviscerate any who came near them).

Soon the dust cleared, and they could see Jin Ling flat against the ground, the summoned ghost nowhere in sight. The boy groaned, trying to get up.

“Huh?”

Despite the lack of any visible object pressing him down, Jin Ling could not rise. He soon collapsed from the strain, instead turning to glare at the approaching figure.

Wei Wuxian giggled, kicking the dropped sword into his hand with the ease of a seasoned fighter.

“Heh. That’s a really nice sword! But it looks so familiar.”

Jin Guangshan took a closer look at the blade when he heard those words, before his eyes widened in realization.

“Wait, that’s mine!” his son realized.

Deciding that train of thought was unimportant, Wei Wuxian instead tossed the sword, allowing it to spin through the air as it cut down Little Apple and the rogue cultivators.

“Mo Xuanyu, are you insane?” Jin Ling shouted. “Studying demonic cultivation? Let me up! Lunatic! You damn gay! When I tell my uncle about this, you’ll be a dead man!”

“Uncle? Why don’t you tell your Dad?”

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli quietly reproached, forgetting for a moment that the Wei Ying before her wasn’t real. Although Wei Wuxian was undoubtedly a genius, he always had a bit of trouble picking up certain social cues. Despite knowing when someone was annoyed, the more specific details usually escaped him.

And, even if the Jin boy had been fairly rude, there was no malicious intent in it. If anything, it reminded her of a mix of her brother’s anger and her fiance’s confidence. It was almost… cute.

“Who’s your uncle?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“I’m his uncle. Any last words?” a voice answered as a man stepped into the clearing, brushing a branch out of his way. At the voice, Wei Wuxian startled momentarily, turning to it with shock.

“Is that-”

“*A-Cheng*?” Yanli gasped out.

A sharp intake of breath. Wei Wuxian was trembling, his eyes so wide it looked like they’d fall out of their sockets. In them, pain, horror, shock, and fear were clearly etched in.

Jiang Cheng froze, suddenly remembering the first conversation the simulation showed.

“Really? Who killed him?”

"Who else? His old friend Jiang Cheng, leader of the Jiang Clan."

Like Wen Chao, he hadn't put much stock into what the civilians said. Wei Wuxian being capable of — much less *willing* to — kill 3,000 cultivators in *one night* was impossible. So, surely, their supposed falling out was also greatly embellished and exaggerated.

He knew his feelings towards Wei Wuxian were complicated (never skilled enough for Mom, never carefree enough for Dad), but, regardless of blood, they were still *brothers*.

Surely, nothing could tear them apart.

(But none of that explained the haunted look in Wei Wuxian's gaze as he saw his brother for the first time in thirteen years.)

A sigh, and the older Jiang Cheng stepped fully into their view.

"Jin Ling, I didn't come out on this hunt to watch you humiliate yourself. Get up now."

Jiang Cheng stepped forward until he was right in front of his older self, gazing intently at the man he would supposedly become. Behind him, the rest of his family followed, walking unsteadily — as if in a trance.

The first thing Jiang Cheng noticed was how much ~~cooler~~ more mature he looked. His unaging body, like Lan Wangji's, still seemed to develop into an older appearance.

The second thing he noticed was how *angry* he seemed. Shadows had formed under his older-self's eyes, and the anger towards his nephew, while still affectionate, lacked the teasing nature it had when he argued with Wei Wuxian. His nephew….

"Wait, that's *A-Jie's* son?!" he shouted, turning to the still-incapacitated Jin Ling.

"He couldn't be! A-Xuan's only fif-" Madam Jin cut off, suddenly remembering what they were being shown. Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji might have looked slightly older, but they had to be truly observed for those differences to be apparent. If anything, it seemed more like an alternate reality of some sort. It hadn't really sunk in for any of them that this was the *future*.

"...My son?" Jin Zixuan breathed out, staring at the boy.

Confliction poured over him, nearly suffocating him in a hundred different emotions. First, there was anger. He hadn't escaped; he hadn't gotten out. He was forced into a loveless, arranged marriage like his parents to a girl he didn't even know.

Then, there was guilt. From what he had seen watching the simulation with her, there seemed to be far more to Jiang Yanli than the plain, talentless wallflower he had seen before.

And then came frustration, as he realized he didn't know how he felt about his arranged marriage anymore.

Madam Jin, who had been watching to stop her son if he lost his temper in front of the Jiangs, noticed his internal conflict. Good; perhaps her son was finally learning of Yanli's virtues. She would castrate him alive if she thought he would become like her husband.

Finally, the stare down between the two once-brothers ended, and Wei Wuxian silently began to pull the leaf talisman he had created towards himself with resentful energy.

Purple lightning grabbed hold of it, pulling it into Jiang Cheng's grasp. He observed it for a moment, before clenching his fists and frying it with electricity.

Yu Ziyuan looked on in approval.

Jiang Fengmian wanted to feel the same way — he was certainly pleased his son had grown so powerful — but the anger in the older Jiang Cheng's expression clouded his joy.

"Psycho! I'll break your legs!" Jin Ling shouted.

"Break his legs?" Jiang Cheng asked. "Haven't I told you? When dealing with those without honor, just kill them and feed them to your dog."

Jiang Cheng *flinched*.

Yanli bit her lip, torn between frowning at the man threatening her brother with something he was terrified of, and crying at how much rage was buried in her other brother.

How could this have happened?

Jin Ling grabbed his sword, lunging forward like an arrow and attacking Wei Wuxian. Rather than playfully dancing around, as he did before, Wei Wuxian blinked in shock at the boy.

'*This kid is…*'

A blade cut between them.

Nie Huaisang squeaked, and both Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan jumped slightly, lacking the experience the adults had to avoid reacting. Lan Wangji kept still only out of his monstrous diligence, and Jiang Yanli sucked in a breath, having been caught off-guard.

Meanwhile, Lan Qiren observed the attacking blade in shock, recognizing it immediately.

Both Jin Ling and Wei Wuxian had been knocked back by the blade's enormous energy. As Wei Wuxian tried to steady himself, his foot caught on a rock and he fell over.

Jiang Cheng remained still, but observed the blade with surprise.

"It's… Bichen?"

"It's what?" the younger Jiang Cheng asked, not recognizing a sword named "Dustless."

Lan Xichen paused, then carefully answered, “It’s my brother’s blade.”

The resulting glare Madam Yu sent the Second Jade was greeted with an emotionless bow of apology.

The blade began to shake, before picking up off the ground and returning to the so-called Hanguang-jun. White robes swayed as he stepped out of the forest’s shadows to stand directly before the fallen Wei Wuxian.

Wei Ying looked up, making eye contact with the imposing figure blocking off the moonlight.

Several people looked between the Lan Wangji and the older Hanguang-jun, blinking in confusion at both the eerie similarities and minute differences.

Wei Wuxian’s expression hadn’t lost its stunned look, and, if anything, transitioned closer to horror when he realized who was before him.

“Hanguang-jun.”

If Wei Wuxian had been scared enough of Lan Wangji to run away from the Mo compound, then they couldn’t have had a good relationship. Lan Qiren was privately proud of his nephew for doing so much to resist the evil that he’d be instantly recognizable. Lan Wangji would never be tempted by demonic cultivation.

Wei Wuxian finally stood up, watching cautiously as Lan Wangji walked closer and closer, eventually forcing him to move out of the way so the man could approach Jiang Wanyin.

Jiang Cheng frowned at the rude disregard, consciously ignoring the part of him which cheerfully reminded that older-him was about to do something much worse.

“Second master Lan. You live up to your reputation to appear wherever chaos is. I never imagined you’d show up in such a remote place.”

“If Sect Leader Jiang can be here, why can’t we?” a Lan junior demanded.

“Elders are speaking. Stop interrupting,” Jiang Cheng responded thoughtlessly. “The Lan Clan sees you as a model for all cultivators. Is this how you teach your disciples?”

Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui stepped behind Lan Wangji, and Lan Sizhui bowed to Wei Wuxian.

The Jiang siblings smiled at the respect. With both Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng’s older selves present, it felt like very few people were granting their brother the honor he deserved. Even though the boy wouldn’t have been born yet, Jiang Cheng almost regretted not making it to Gusu Lan for the exchange; he wanted to see what kind of place would raise such an exemplary kid.

“Mr. Jin,” Lan Sizhui greeted. “Night hunts have always been fair game, but casting spirit nets around Dafan Mountain makes things difficult for other clan’s disciples. That’s against the rules, right?”

Jin Ling huffed, “They were stupid enough to get caught. What can I do about that?”

Jiang Cheng scowled at the mini-peacock who had obviously gotten far more from his father than his mother. As if instinctively knowing what he was thinking, Jiang Yanli sent a disapproving glance over, making him look away. He knew he shouldn’t judge Jin Ling (who the older him obviously loved) in just a few seconds, but it was difficult when the boy he didn’t know was pitted against his shixiong. How could someone Jiang Yanli raised be so annoying?

It was probably the peacock’s fault.

“Sect Leader Jiang! Sect Leader Jiang!” a voice called out as a Jiang disciple stepped into the clearing. “Sect Leader.. Jiang.”

“What’s the matter?”

Jiang Fengmian nearly did a double-take at hearing his son respond to his title. The simulation might be 20 years in the future, but that still felt far too soon for his son to have to take up so much responsibility.

The disciple hesitated, “Well… it’s….”

“Speak. What is it?”

“Just now, a blue flying sword destroyed the nets you set for the young lord.”

“How many?”

“All of them.”

Jiang Cheng’s eyes momentarily widened in surprise.

Trees rustled as the wind began picking up, tension between the gathered cultivators growing uncomfortably high. In an instant, the grounds seemed to be devoured by the shadow of a cloud.

Jiang Cheng brought his hands together, playing with Zidian slightly. Cracks of purple lightning began to spark around him as he continued to make eye contact with the cultivators across from him.

Yu Ziyuan’s blinked in surprise, finally realizing the identity of the ring her son was carrying. An instant later, pride filled her at the power she knew he contained. Perhaps she wouldn’t need to worry so much about leaving the Jiang sect to him after all. He could obviously handle it.

In addition, the terrified eep Wen Chao tried to cover up as a cough made the whole situation worthwhile.

'*Damn it, things are getting ugly,*' Wei Wuxian thought.

Jin Ling reached for his blade.

"Behave!" Jiang Cheng ordered, seemingly snapping out of it. "Did I say to draw your sword?"

Jin Ling huffed again, crossing his arms in annoyance but obeying without question.

"Sect Leader Jiang," Lan Sizhui spoke up again. "We will reimburse you for the nets we destroyed."

"No need," Jiang Cheng responded, then turned to Jin Ling. "Why are you still standing there? Are you waiting for prey to walk into your blade? If you can't capture something presentable tonight, don't bother coming back!"

Madam Jin's eyes had widened at the ultimatum, but Jiang Yanli just giggled. Her brother always made threats he didn't mean, and, from her son's unfrightened reaction, it was obvious he knew his uncle well.

"Thank you for taking care of my son, A-Cheng," she whispered.

"Well, I haven't *yet*."

"Still."

Jiang Cheng blushed, turning away.

The older Jiang Cheng then walked off without further fanfare. Lan Wangji remained upright and silent despite the slight disrespect, not showing a trace of emotion on his face.

Jin Guangshan paused briefly, looking between the older versions before him and the younger Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng standing with him. Based on their body language, it was obvious the two hadn't met yet, despite their clear familiarity in the future. Some of it could be explained away by the ascension to sect leader and sect leader's brother, but it seemed almost… *personal*.

Adult Jiang Cheng's anger had always been obvious, but the numerous digs and mentions of Lan Wangji's reputation were going even further than that. Had something happened between them?

Perhaps, if he kept watching, he'd find something he could use.

"You two keep looking," Lan Wangji instructed. "Don't push yourselves too hard."

"Yes, Master Hanguang-jun," the two responded, bowing before running off.

Lan Qiren smiled, pleased to see the well-earned respect his nephew had from the younger disciples. In addition, the final words of warning were far more emotionally-upfront than the boy he knew today was capable of. It seemed the Lan Clan had escaped the worst of the conflict.

Lan Xichen, on the other hand, had the exact opposite impression. It was hidden well, but the bittersweet, nostalgic, commemorative, and mourning air around his brother was so deeply ingrained that all his other emotions were suffocated under it. He made a mental note to watch carefully.

Nie Huaisang was mostly impressed, but his awe manifested as nervousness before the unbreachable wall even the younger Lan Wangji had around himself. It almost made the Nie heir wish Wei Wuxian was there; only *he* was shameless enough to get past people as cold as this!

Now, only Wei Wuxian was left with Lan Wangji. The latter moved to leave, but paused and nodded to Wei Wuxian with respect. Startled, Wei Ying hurried to bow in response but continued gazing after the departing cultivator even after.

“Back then he was strongly against my cultivation method. He was desperate to catch me. Why is he so polite now?” Wei Wuxian wondered.

Many people mentally catalogued the information, finally having an explanation for why Wei Wuxian had run off the night before. The Jiangs were grateful Wei Wuxian wasn’t being chased down, but Lan Qiren was confused. He was proud that his nephew had chased and tried to hunt down the demonic cultivator, but didn’t understand why there would be a change in behavior.

Their only choice was to keep watching.

Lan Sizhui abruptly approached Wei Wuxian, having run back once he realized what he forgot.

Bowing, he said, “Thank you for your help at Mo Village.”

Wei Wuxian laughed.

Silently, Lan Xichen tried to hide his pride for the disciple who would one-day be his. It was impossible for anyone else to tell from his expression, but Lan Xichen knew his brother felt the same way.

“Why are you still standing there?!” a voice demanded. The watching cultivators glanced over to see Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling form, facing each other with enraged expressions.

“You-”

“Young master Jin,” Lan Sizhui interrupted, trying to diffuse the situation. “I-”

“I’ll check this area. Don’t follow me!”

Jin Ling's grip trembled with rage as he grasped his sword tightly.

Wei Wuxian gazed towards him with a distraught expression, the wind rustling the leaves and his hair. In an instant, the scene around them changed, and, amidst a pure white background, the people shifted. While the sword Jin Ling held stayed the same, it was no longer him holding it.

Instead, an adult man grasped it firmly, allowing an infant to play with the hilt. Holding him up, the final person there stared down with a peaceful smile.

"A-Jie?" Jiang Cheng asked in shock.

She blushed and looked at the baby in her older-self's arms with awe, but Jin Zixuan was frozen in shock. He saw an older version of himself — longer hair, different clothes, but so unmistakably *him* that the Jiang and Lan's certainty in the simulation finally made sense — standing with a family. *His* family.

And they looked... happy.

The older Jin Zixuan pulled his wife closer, and she smiled kindly.

He wiped his eyes, refusing to allow any tears to fall while surrounded by the most powerful people in the world. He had always hated his engagement. He knew what an arranged marriage had done to his parents, and knew what it had done to Jiang Yanli's. He had never wanted to experience it himself.

But, as he looked at the baby held in her arms, a very different fear overtook him.

'*What if we don't have Jin Ling*,' he wondered. The boy had been annoying, and had contributed to trapping them all, but suddenly the thought that he might not even be born *terrified* the Jin heir.

Even if he ended up with Jiang Yanli — boring, bland, plain, but happy, kind, warm, sweet, gorgeous, *irreplaceable* — what if something went wrong? It was a different timeline. What if Jin Ling simply didn't happen at all? What if their baby was someone *else*?

Their world was already different since they had all been dragged in. It would be nearly impossible to replicate the exact conditions of Jin Ling's birth.

What if he unknowingly killed his future son?

Panic began to sink in, and he mentally cursed the absolutely moronic idiots — his stupid, stupid, *beautiful* son — who might have destroyed the greatest thing to ever happen to him.

He stepped back into his chair, hands shaking.

What was he going to do?

The happy couple smiled at each other.

A blade pierced through.

Wen Chao shrieked, jumping back from where blood from an invisible source splattered across the ground. This time, Jiang Cheng couldn't even mentally mock the man.

He wasn't much better.

Suddenly, the older Wei Wuxian was there, a hand cupping around his face.

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered. Her hand fell, and they could see her lying in a pool of her own blood.

A disembodied voice growled.

"Wei Wuxian is a monster! Yanli treated him like her own brother!"

"I feel so sorry for her child. He was only a month old, and both his parents are gone."

The cries of a baby rang through the air.

"...What?"

"No," Jiang Cheng whispered, shaking his head. "No, no, no, no, no-"

"I *told* you!" Yu Ziyuan shrieked. "I *told* you he'd bring nothing but trouble to our sect. And look-look what he's-and now he's-"

Even the proud, furious Yu Ziyuan was in shock. She continued to shout at her husband, but Jiang Fengmian stood still, his eyes open wide.

No one knew what to say.

"At-at least our son finally learned," Yu Ziyuan said at last. "Yes, I should have cut that brat to pieces and fed him to the dogs *years ago!* Or maybe left him alive so they could slowly gnaw on him until-"

"San-niang, *please*," Jiang Fengmian spoke sharply, but his voice shook slightly at the end. "We don't know what actually happened."

"Of course you're going to defend him. *Of course*-"

"Well, I must say, this is *quite* horrifying," Jin Guangshan mused, his smirk turning conniving. "I never would have imagined your ward might turn my grandson into an orphan. Perhaps, once we're out of here, it would be in everyone's best interest for you to hand him over to the Jin sect as insurance. I'm *sure* you wouldn't want-"

"With all due respect, Sect Leader Jin," Jiang Yanli interrupted, bowing low but not allowing any trace of apology into her tone. "I believe we already agreed not to punish anyone for things that have yet to happen. In addition, given that we were specifically informed that he

was ‘set up,’ I think we should wait until we have more information before making any promises like that.”

“Y-yeah!” Jiang Cheng added. “He would never!”

“Of course, of course, my apologies,” Jin Guangshan allowed, carefully not mentioning how it was Jiang Cheng’s older self that allegedly killed him.

Wen Ruohan, who had remained silent until then, hummed in consideration.

Everyone tensed.

It was obvious what Jin Guangshan had been trying to accomplish. He wanted exclusive access to the mind which had completely changed the cultivation world in only a few years. As a Jin, he was well-versed in the process of obtaining a monopoly over unique resources.

The Wens had more than enough money, but the idea of having exclusive access to that mind was….

Wen Qing very carefully avoided glaring down at her sect leader, having a strong suspicion she knew what he was thinking about.

The vision around them faded, and they were back in the forest with Mo Xuanyu’s Wei Wuxian.

Eyes downcast, the young man clenched his fists with an unusually somber expression.

“How could I say that to him?” he whispered.

Raising a hand up carefully, he then gave himself a hard smack across his face.

“How could I?”

“Hm. So he didn’t know that was his shijie’s son,” Nie Huaisang muttered, making Jiang Cheng blink up from where he had been wiping away any traces of tears.

Wen Qing scoffed, “Obviously.”

“Uh, right, right, but… why not? I mean, he’s been dead, but he hadn’t reincarnated or anything. What’s he been doing as a spirit?”

The elaboration silenced further scornful remarks.

Nie Mingjue smiled at his brother, who glanced down with embarrassed happiness at the implied praise.

“He… might have been avoiding any reminders of what happened? Or worried going near Koi Tower would get him forcefully sent on?”

“The flag too,” Lan Wangji added in. Several people blinked in confusion.

Xichen elaborated, “He didn’t know his creations were commonly used tools until he saw our juniors use the spirit lure flags. Given that those rogue cultivators used his compasses, and his name was brought up several times on this random day thirteen years after his death, I’d say it would be nearly impossible for him to have not been aware of that.”

Jiang Fengmian frowned, “They said ‘the clans spent months trying to summon him, but to no avail. It seems the Yiling Patriarch has truly left nothing behind.’ Perhaps he… *couldn’t* contact them.”

Madam Yu frowned, scowling to avoid showing even the slightest flake of concern.

“You don’t think… something happened to his soul? Like, he’s Wei Wuxian. He wouldn’t have-*couldn’t* have… he’s practically impossible to keep down. And-and the ritual worked. It couldn’t have been powerful enough to pull a-to pull him back together. There’s no way he-his soul… it *couldn’t* have shattered. That only happens when the cultivator wants… that’s not what happened, right?” Jiang Cheng asked, looking to his father for reassurance.

The man had none to give.

‘*No matter what prey resides on Buddha mountain, I won’t be able to take it anymore,*’ Wei Wuxian decided. ‘*I would fight for it with anyone but Jin Ling*.’

Yanli smiled, unable to help herself when faced with the obvious love her A-Xian had for her son. She knew her mother would not be pleased — especially given Wei Wuxian’s supposed involvement in her apparent death — but she couldn’t help herself.

“Ow,” a voice downstream bemoaned.

Frowning, Wei Wuxian grabbed Little Apple’s reins and walked over to the injured man.

“Where does it hurt?”

Hearing the voice, the man turned towards them, and revealed his face.

“Gah!” Huaisang squeaked, turning away and hiding his eyes. No one else had spoken out loud, but all of them frowned when they saw the enormous injury on the man’s head.

“Here. The head. My head!” the man answered.

‘*A ghost! Killed by a blow to the head*,’ Wei Wuxian observed, then continued. ‘*He’s dressed in burial robes both excellent in material and craftsmanship, which means that he’s been buried properly. He’s not the lost soul of a living human*.’

Several people blinked. It was one thing to be told Wei Wuxian was a genius who had created nearly-mythical inventions, it was another entirely to witness the speed his mind could move at.

Lan Qiren scowled, internally despairing over the intelligence given to a man who had no moral qualms about delving into forbidden arts.

Continuing his journey, Wei Wuxian heard several people muttering between themselves.

“Are the Jin sect’s people still around here? Hopefully we don’t run into them again.”

The figures carried blades, and were probably more rogue cultivators who had abandoned their hunt after encountering “the last person you should ever offend.”

“We should be fine so long as we stay away from the goddess temple.”

“Goddess temple?” Wei Wuxian interrupted.

“It’s a cave-temple on this mountain. Over there,” a woman directed, pointing as she talked.

“What deity does this temple worship?”

“I-I think it’s a natural stone statue of a goddess.”

‘*I see*,' Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*That’s why the compasses of evil aren’t picking anything up, much less the spirit attraction flags*.’

“See what?” Jiang Cheng asked, frustrated he couldn’t follow along with his shixiong's mind. A quick glance around proved a majority of the people present didn’t know what Wei Wuxian meant, but Wen Ruohan, Lan Xichen, Jiang Fengmian, Wen Qing, and, surprisingly, Nie Huaisang all had fairly thoughtful expressions.

They wouldn’t speak until they were sure, but they had their own theories.

“Thanks!” Wei Wuxian called as he sped up. “Stay away from there no matter what!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the cultivators grumbled.

“He told us to stay away, while running towards it himself.”

“What a lunatic.”

Jin Zixuan scoffed, muttering “Ungrateful peasants.”

Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang nodded in agreement with decisive huffs.

Lan Wangji internally backed them up.

They had to admit Wei Wuxian’s actions were probably grounds for the man’s reaction. However, even the two who didn’t know Wei Wuxian before being trapped in the simulation had gotten to know the young man through it, and, like everyone who got to know the real him, had been lured to his side by his unbridled charisma.

All four teenage young masters were in complete agreement.

Along a different path, Jin Ling gave an annoyed grumble.

“Just my luck running into you. Can you stop following me?”

“We’re not following you!” Lan Jingyi protested. “Dafan Mountain isn’t your home. Knock it off!”

“And the spirit nets aren’t yours! You knock it off. Can you get 400 nets together? If you can’t, then shut up! You really think everyone should follow your lead?!”

“What did you say?!” Jingyi demanded, drawing his sword.

Lan Xichen coughed, then bowed to the Jins, “I apologize for my disciple's immaturity.”

“It’s-no need,” Madam Jin refuted, still shaken by the revelation of her son’s death. “It’s quite obvious that all of them are children. We apologize as well.”

“Let’s go! Bring it!” Jin Ling shouted in response, the two expertly jumping into their duel. It was obvious from a glance that both were highly skilled for their age.

Unfortunately, their childish motivation kept anyone from seeing it in a positive light.

Lan Sizhui reached a hand out, as if to stop them, but quickly brought it to his face to rub his eyes tiredly, sighing as he did.

“Why are they fighting *again*?”

Lan Qiren nodded twice, feeling a kindred spirit in the young man.

Two blades spun around each other, equally matched despite the different styles. Then, as Jin Ling attacked, Lan Jingyi flipped above him, landing on the other boy’s back.

Jin Ling was sent toppling forward.

Jiang Yanli sucked in a breath in alarm.

Jin Zixuan most definitely did *not* scream.

Lan Sizhui made a noise of surprise and hurried over.

“You kicked him into a cave?!”

“I didn’t hurt him. He did it to himself!”

There was a distant sound of a clatter from within. Both boy’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Hey! Jin Ling!”

No response came.

Madam Jin frowned. It was one thing to overlook teasing, but if something happened to her grandson (child of a union as perfect as she always knew it would be)-

The two Lan boys looked at each other, then began walking towards the cave.

A talisman glowed like blue fire, and the two ventured inside.

“This is where the villagers conduct their sacrifices,” Lan Sizhui recited as the two ventured further in. The closer they got, the more elaborate the carvings in the floor became, until the two were frozen in shock.

“It’s… it’s….”

Jingyi couldn’t finish his sentence, too shocked by the gargantuan statue he saw before them. It was too heavily shadowed for its features to be made out, but it towered over the room nonetheless.

"The statue the rogue cultivators mentioned?” Wen Xu suggested, eyebrows lifting in interest.

Rocks tumbled.

“Who-who’s there?!” Lan Jingyi demanded, spinning around as the talisman illuminated the danger.

A face stared back at them.

Jingyi screamed.

On the other hand, Lan Sizhui simply sighed, spreading out the light without further reaction. Seeing his friend’s calm behavior, Jingyi poked his head out from where he had hidden behind Sizhui.

Across from them, Jing Ling stood with his arms crossed and face set into a firm scowl.

“What a couple of cowards!” the boy declared. “Hilarious!”

“Pretending to be a ghost?” Jingyi responded. “How childish!”

“And you’re afraid of ghosts! You’re the childish one!”

Lan Qiren wanted to indignantly defend his to-be disciple, and both the Jins and Jiangs wanted to stand up for their to-be descendent, but none of them could manage anything but embarrassment in the face of the incomparably childish pair before them.

“Um, well,” Jiang Yanli coughed once. “At least we know they manage to grow much closer based on what we saw during their explanation. They probably mature greatly in the coming months.”

Lan Qiren stayed calm only by reminding himself of Lan Sizhui, who was ignoring the others to observe the statue. At least he knew there was *one* disciple he had managed to teach.

The heavily shadowed statue was easier to see with the spread-out light, and Sizhui saw it resembled a dancing goddess smiling down at them.

With the sound of stone rubbing against stone, its eyes moved.

Huaisang stepped back, moving through his brother's body to hide behind him, using the man's large stature to block his sight of the terrifying scene. Nie Mingjue just sighed, well-used to his brother's behavior.

"What? You're the one that started it!" the boys continued, but Sizhui turned his attention towards the statue with concern.

"I think the statue's eyes just moved," he reported.

"Thank god *one of them* was paying attention."

"Y-you think anybody's going to believe that? Ridiculous!" Jin Ling asked, his voice shaking slightly.

Regardless of his words, he turned to face the statue immediately, watching it as if he expected it to pounce on him at any moment.

However, as a few seconds passed without further movement, he turned back to Sizhui and shouted "Hey, nothing moved!"

"Stupid idiot," Jiang Cheng hissed, clenching his hands together in worry. "Be careful!"

Jiang Fengmian smiled at his son, amused at the protective instincts already kicking in.

Jingyi laughed, leaning toward Jin Ling and taunting "Ha! You were scared, huh?"

"I'm serious. I really saw it," Sizhui insisted.

"Are you going senile? Stone statues can't move."

"It's supposed to be a goddess-"

"Fine! If it really is so incredible, I'm gonna make a wish right now! I want the creature devouring souls on Buddha mountain to appear before me! Will it be able to do this?"

As soon as Jin Ling's wish was uttered, the candles flickered, and the entire cave of previously-unlit candles were soon illuminated by an unidentifiable force.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid-" Jiang Cheng continued, rubbing his hands together nervously. His sister giggled and made a motion like hugging air, giving comfort in the no-touch zone.

Huaisang saw both Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan leaning closer to their mothers, and even Lan Wangji briefly turned his eyes to Lan Xichen. Wen Chao's own terror was of no interest to him, but Huaisang carefully noted how the man very purposefully approached neither his father nor his older brother.

He still hated Wen Chao's personality, but information like that was worth noting.

The light filling the cave as candles flickered on and allowed more and more of the statue to be seen; the three teens present all tensed in preparation.

Jin Ling spun left, eyes wide.

"It's-"

"Look out!"

A massive hand had reached towards the boy, but he was luckily pushed away by Lan Jingyi in the nick of time.

Jin Zixuan gasped out in relief, but stayed upright, his clenched fists belaying the tension in his body. He knew (given that Jin Ling had talked to them just an hour ago), that his son would survive. However, with his new fears — how was he supposed to know exactly what conditions he had Jin Ling in? How could he be sure it was still his son's soul? — he was unconsciously viewing everything like it was out to kill his son.

"Thank you," he whispered to Lan Xichen, who blinked in surprise then returned an equally grateful smile.

The arm was pulled back, revealing the massive limb belonged to the previously-frozen statue.

The Lan boys made eye contact, then nodded to each other determinedly.

In an instant, both had sprung forward, running up the walls and attacking the gargantuan statue. Sizhui successfully attached a talisman to it, and a second later the goddess's arms shot out to implant themselves in the cave's walls. They pierced through like blades stabbing targets.

(Or, in the case of Huaisang, like someone who hoped imbedding the blade deep enough into the target would absolve them of further swordsmanship lessons.)

Madam Yu hid a nervous swallow, hoping the grandson she had yet to have would remain unscathed.

A nanosecond later, the arms curved back out of the walls, dozens of meters long and strong enough to snap the children in two. All three teenagers continued to move, avoiding as best they could.

The arms chased after them, soon crashing into the roof of the cave and causing a visible disturbance on the ground above.

Madam Jin nearly stumbled at the shock of suddenly being taken outside after so long spent within the cave; even if they had tentatively agreed to treat the simulation as real memories, it was still hard to get used to switching perspectives. In her mind, she cursed whoever had brought her in.

(Then, she remembered her adorable grandson was responsible, and, accounting for the fact that they seemed to have done the impossible and gotten her son to finally notice Jiang Yanli, she decided it was forgiven.)

A sound came from behind the watchers, and they saw Wei Wuxian turn towards the destruction the fight below the ground had caused.

From the cloud of dirt, Jin Ling jumped back, stance tense and defensive. The world shook like the rhythmic ticking of a pendulum as the goddess statue lumbered out of the cloud, still smiling her eerie grin.

Numerous cultivators dropped down from the trees, having sensed the conflict.

"Looks like it's alive!" one of them declared. "Let's go get it!"

Jin Ling scowled at the man, and sprang up to continue his assault.

With a disturbingly parental groan, Jiang Cheng leaned back in his chair, covering his face with his hands. He was long past the point of yelling "stupid kid" in front of the sect leaders.

That didn't stop him from thinking it.

'Stupid kid not knowing when to stop. Stupid other cultivators just watching. Stupid, useless Lan kids. Stupid Wei Wuxian not doing anything. Stupid older me for putting pressure on him. How were you expecting him to act?'

If Wei Wuxian were watching with them, he would have laughed at Jiang Cheng's misery. As it stood, Lan Xichen made a poor attempt to hide an amused chuckle. Jiang Cheng's glare only made him want to laugh more.

Nothing formed bonds quite like being trapped in a room with no way to kill each other.

Even as he continued to attack, it was obvious Jin Ling wouldn't be able to do anything. His sword couldn't break through the statue's tough exterior, only sliding off every time he tried.

He ran through the woods, but the arms followed. Each time they lunged for him, he dodged by smaller and smaller increments.

Wei Wuxian sighed.

"This kid is causing real trouble."

"Then help him!" Jin Zixuan all but yelled. Jiang Cheng didn't bother to berate him for the comment against Wei Wuxian; the young man's options might be limited by his lack of weapons, but their worry for Jin Ling had already overruled most logical arguments against it.

It took considerable effort for Jiang Yanli not to laugh, finding the near-identical reactions of her brother and fiance to be amusing.

Wen Chao did snicker slightly, but Wen Ruohan's annoyed glare shut him up quickly.

Clicking his tongue in exasperation, Wei Wuxian grabbed leaves off a nearby branch and sprinted closer. The leaves shifted and grew.

They were now talismans.

Wei Ying threw them forward, and they landed on the statue's extended arm.

Red energy seeped out, but the arm only tensed slightly.

'*Can't restrain it?*'

The talismans burned up.

Wei Wuxian frowned in annoyance.

Despite the tense situation, the general certainty that everything would be fine — because Wei Wuxian might want to stay hidden, but there was no way he would allow his nephew to die, not from what they'd seen — allowed Lan Wangji to make a few unusually thoughtless observations:

First, that Wei Wuxian, for all his power and past, was surprisingly open and expressive. His face was constantly displaying all of his intense emotions without regret.

Second, that in all his years, he had never seen anything as beautiful as the freely-shown protectiveness and passion before him.

Lan Wangji bit his tongue, forcing his brain to derail that train of thought. He knew what was said about his clan — they love only once, and they love forever — and he had seen what that had done to his parents. It was foolish of him to even *consider* something as immature as attraction.

He would have to take extra care to not spend any more time thinking on such an inane subject.

Another cultivator approached the statue, shouting "Watch this!"

A bell was flung into the air, and from it came an enormous seal. The bell expanded in size until it was as big as a building, and slowly lowered itself to trap the statue.

The bell made contact with the ground, and the earth shook slightly.

"It's trapped!" the cultivators declared.

"Oh, thank god," Jiang Yanli whispered; her fiance and brother couldn't help but agree. Jin Ling was highly talented — about as strong as they were, in fact — but he kept stupidly running at things alone.

Madam Yu thought the same, and huffed "At least it all worked out this time."

The cultivator approached the bell, and placed a hand on its smooth metal surface. He giggled in excitement.

“We’ve hunted basic zombies all night, but now we’ve caught something big!”

However, as soon as he finished congratulating himself, the bell shook.

Something had crashed into it from the inside.

The goddess wasn’t beaten yet.

Jiang Fengmian unconsciously moved between the bell and his children, his instincts instructing him to get close to them in case the worst occurred.

The simulation couldn’t actually hurt them, but Yu Ziyuan noticed the instinctual action all the same.

The shaking continued, and the bell trembled as it strained to keep the goddess trapped inside. Another crash, and a ray of light escaped through a tiny hole which had been punched through the metal. Then another. Then another. Then another.

The cultivator began to back up in alarm.

“W-what the-”

His skull was crushed.

One hand had broken through the metal entirely; as Wei Wuxian had noticed earlier, the goddess statue couldn’t be restrained.

Huaisang whimpered as the man had his life rapidly squeezed out of him.

Why would anyone want to go on a night hunt when this was a possible outcome? Honestly, what was *wrong* with cultivators?!

“What the hell is this?!” another one of the cultivators demanded.

Wei Wuxian turned to the two Lan cultivators and shouted, “Quick! Send a signal and tell your sect’s… your sect’s Hanguang-Jun to come up here! We found the soul-consuming creature!”

“Right!” Sizhui responded, checking his pockets.

Jingyi checked as well.

And they continued to check.

And continued.

“...All of the signal illuminations… were used up the night at Mo village.”

Wei Wuxian was speechless.

Lan Xichen sighed in chastising amusement, but Lan Wangji and Lan Qiren were far more infuriated. There was a *reason* disciples were required to carry them.

Finally getting his voice back, Wei Wuxian shouted "You didn't restock such an important item?!"

"We forgot…. We never really use signals."

Wei Wuxian buried his face into his hands and groaned.

While the teenagers knew the truth is Sizhui's words — having also gotten yelled at for forgetting them — it had only become a problem when they got back and realized they forgot. It rarely, if ever, was a problem while they were night hunting.

Not like now.

"This is so stressful," Jin Zixuan muttered, rubbing his temples.

No one disagreed.

"Young Master Mo," Sizhui began. "How do you know that the creature consuming people's souls is neither a spirit, nor a beast, but rather the goddess statue?"

Those with theories paid special attention, curious to see how theirs would compare to the apparently famed genius that created so many inventions. Creative intelligence and analytical intelligence weren't directly connected, but Wen Ruohan thought this would be a effective test on the authenticity of what they were being shown.

After all, even intelligent spirits were simply resentful energy prompted to engage in specific behavior. There had never been one more intelligent than a human.

"There are too many deceased souls in the area of the ancient tombs, so it definitely isn't a soul consuming spirit or beast. There are so many souls floating around. If it were one of those, would they still be around? Of course not!"

Lan Wangji's eyes widened. It was one thing to be told the goofy, childish (brilliant, passionate, humorous, upbeat) person before them was a genius who had invented demonic cultivation, but it was another thing to see the famed mind at work.

"Right," Lan Sizhui nodded, thinking the information over. "We all thought the landslide and thunder-striken tomb were what led to those incidents. Then it must be a soul-consuming spirit."

Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan nodded along, understanding the Lan disciple's line of reasoning.

"Wrong."

"Huh?"

“The order is wrong and the correlation is wrong. Between the landslide and soul-losing incidents, the latter came first and the former came second. The incidents were the cause, the landslide was the effect. Think about it. The first person to lose their soul, the sluggard. He was stuck on a mountain for the night, then married someone just a few days after he returned?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

None of the audience members had an immediate answer.

“Everything is wrong! He’s a penniless man who never does anything! How could he have found enough money to hold such a grand wedding?”

Words formed above the blushing young masters, added in by the watching spirits who created the simulation.

Young masters who have never had to think about money. ↓

Lan Xichen blushed as well, realizing that he had also struggled to come to a conclusion because of his own financially sheltered upbringing. Though, looking around, he knew the main clans of the most powerful families all had that fact in common.

“He wasn’t raised with you?” Xichen asked Sect Leader Jiang. His wife sniffed in disdain at the question, but the man answered calmly.

“He did spend awhile on the streets before I found him, but he was also a child then, and had no reason to think about what marriage was like as a civilian. Perhaps he had an opportunity to grow closer to the civilian side of things when he got older?”

Jiang Cheng shrugged, “He’s always had a terrible memory, so that makes the most sense.”

The sluggard suddenly married after the night of the landslide. Something special must have happened during the night.”

“Something special?”

“There was a storm that night, and he took shelter in the mountain. On Buddha Mountain, what is a place that provides shelter?”

“The goddess temple!”

“That’s right. And when most people go to the temple, there’s one thing they always do: make wishes.”

Nie Huaisang wanted to sigh. He liked knowing things, but in this instance he wished he hadn’t been right. The world was such a terrifying place!

“Wanting to become lucky, earn money, and so on, the man made his wish. The goddess granted it, sending down a bolt of lightning that allowed him to see the valuables inside the coffin. That’s why there’s an old man dressed in intricate burial robes among the

souls drifting on Buddha mountain. His burial goods were definitely taken by the sluggard. Now that his wish had been fulfilled, the goddess took her price. She came upon him on the night of his marriage and sucked away his soul!"

"You're just guessing though, aren't you?"

"Certainly, but following this theory, everything can be explained.

"Back then, A-Yan had just entered her engagement. She definitely made a wish to the goddess temple. The wishes of recently engaged girls almost always follows a pattern of 'I wish my husband will only love me for the rest of his life.'"

Both Madam Jin and Madam Yu scowled toward the ground at that line. Noticing this, Jiang Fengmian wanted to reach out and reassure her, but backed away uncertainly, not knowing how to go about that.

The Jiang siblings frowned at their parents, and Jin Zixuan just scowled in exasperation.

"Can such wishes really be granted?"

"Of course, it's easy. Her husband's 'entire life' just needed to end as soon as possible."

"...Oh."

"Oh, *oh*! So then A-Yan's husband died!"

"So that's what happened! But then, why did A-Yan's soul return to her?"

"Have you forgotten? A-Yan's father, blacksmith Zheng, lost his soul as well. He went to the goddess temple to make a wish! He asked for the soul of his daughter to be found!"

Jiang Cheng bit his lip. All the talk of souls was bringing his mind back into unpleasant directions.

A-Yan had her soul destroyed, and was now just a shattered piece of it. If their theory was right… if the same thing had happened to Wei Wuxian-

What on earth could have driven his idiotically-happy, hope-filled head disciple to something like that?

His meager reassurance was that Wei Wuxian seemed to have recovered from that state now. Perhaps the resurrection ceremony got rid of the excess resentful energy demonic cultivation caused?

(Or dying, but he wasn't going to think about that.)

"Even after her soul was returned, she would uncontrollably imitate the goddess statue's dance and smile."

"Wow! Then everything can be explained!" Lan Jingyi realized.

Wei Wuxian nodded, "That's why the Compass of Evil stopped working, and why the spirit attraction flags can't summon anything. Why both weapons and talismans are useless. The creature on Buddha mountain isn't a ghost or a monster.

"It's a god."

Lan Wangji clenched his hands, an unusual worry starting to come over him. It shouldn't matter, but the idea of something happening to the future disciples (or the brilliant beam of moonlight that was Wei Wuxian, but he resolutely ignored that) filled him with concern.

'*This is an untitled deity born from the nourishment of hundreds of years of incense*,' Wei Wuxian continued mentally. '*To try and deal with it using things meant for ghosts would only be fanning the flames*!'

"Do you think you'd be able to find L… Hanguang-Jun?" he asked.

Sizhui shook his head, "I'm afraid that-"

An arrow flew by him, and he cut off. His gaze turned to track the weapon, watching as it pierced the statue and created a crack.

It was Jin Ling's arrow.

Jiang Cheng silently buried his face in his hands yet again.

Not wasting a second, Jin Ling ran forward and shot three more arrows toward the goddess.

"What the hell is he doing?" Wei Wuxian asked. He tensed further, then looked left and right until his gaze finally landed on a lone bamboo stalk.

A slight crack resounded as Wei Wuxian snapped the top of the stalk off.

"What is he trying to do now?" Madam Yu growled. Even imbued with spiritual power, a bamboo stalk would make for a poor sword. The goddess statue had remained undamaged even with constant assault from several reasonably powerful cultivators. They at least had their blades; what could Wei Wuxian do with bamboo?

Madam Jin, Jin Zixuan, and the Jiangs all prayed that Wei Wuxian would be able to help.

Jin Ling's next three arrows were useless, bouncing off without leaving a scratch. The boy ran through the trees surrounding the statue, trying to get a good vantage point. Once he located one, he notched his arrow and pulled back as far as he could.

For a moment, another memory was overlaid on top of the one they were already seeing.

"*If you can't capture something presentable tonight, don't bother coming back," the older Jiang Cheng said.*

Yanli bit her lip.

While it was obvious Jin Ling knew Jiang Cheng wasn't literal in his threats, he was also clearly feeling the pressure of his uncle's expectations. It was so like Jiang Cheng himself that she almost couldn't believe he wouldn't realize the recklessness it inspired in her son.

She considered, for a moment, frowning disapprovingly at her brother to make it clear that would not be tolerated in the future.

Then she saw the expression on his face, and knew no one was angrier at future Jiang Cheng than himself.

After imbuing the arrow with even more energy, Jin Ling finally released it. Another insignificant crack in the statue was formed.

The statue looked up at him, tracing the attack back to its origin. The arm shifted, then grew.

Then *swung*.

"No!"

"Look out!"

"Jin Ling!"

Jiang Yanli flinched and turned away.

A sound pierced through the forest. It could barely be heard under the crackling of the fire which the statue had spread, but its power was obvious even to the watchers.

Mere centimeters away from the boy, the statue turned to instead face the origin of the sound.

Jin Ling dodged just in time to escape the attack. When he landed, he too turned to look at the flute that was playing its disjointed melody.

It was Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng wanted to relax. Jin Ling was safe, Wei Wuxian was finally going to start making sure their nephew remained unharmed.

But, instead, all he could see was the first thing the simulation showed them. The older, broken, *terrifying* Wei Wuxian who could end an army with a song. Mo Xuanyu's face looked strikingly similar to the Wei Wuxian he knew; sometimes, it was hard to remember that this was an older soul.

But now, with the music playing, that red-eyed demon wearing his brother's face was all he could see.

Wen Ruohan watched closely.

The music was surprisingly lovely. The flute had been carved out of bamboo in just a few seconds, and Wei Wuxian didn't even have any tools. Nevertheless, the eerie, hauntingly beautiful melody squeaked out of the pitiful instrument showed the skill of a true master.

The Jiangs were unsurprised; Wei Wuxian might be a troublemaker, but he was their head disciple for a reason.

"Hey, this is serious! Why are you playing the flute!" Lan Jingyi demanded. "It sounds awful."

"How would you expect an instrument more closely resembling a twig to sound?" Madam Yu demanded. She might not like Wei Wuxian, but she had pride in the Jiang sect. Her head disciple's ability with an instrument was not something she was willing to allow a privileged Lan boy who had never held anything less than a flawless instrument to mock. A soft giggle escaped Jiang Yanli's lips as Lan Xichen bowed slightly in apology.

Wei Wuxian thought along a similar vein. '*With such a poorly crafted flute made from a few chops, the fact that it makes any sound at all is good enough. Now then, anything will work so long as it has enough hostile energy to tear the goddess to pieces*.'

As if in response to the words, the scene momentarily transitioned to the inside of a dark cave, where a sealed fierce corpse lay chained up.

It's eyes opened.

"Wh-what was that?" Nie Huaisang asked.

"Ha. I suppose it only fits a member of a lower sect to be frightened by such a thing!" Wen Chao boasted, covering up his own tremble with a smirk.

The temperature seemed to drop twenty degrees as Nie Mingjue glared, but, before he could say anything, Wen Ruohan spoke first.

"Silence."

Wen Chao squeaked and obeyed.

As they spoke, several others were far more preoccupied with what was happening around them. The earth shook like a hatching egg and something burrowed through the ground.

Lan Jingyi had to leap out of its way.

"It's-"

~🎵~

‘*Whatever it is…*’ Wei Wuxian thought, continuing his song. ‘*As long as its wrath is strong enough….*’

Wen Ruohan watched the passing battle with concealed interest, his mind cataloguing the possibilities demonic cultivation was shown to have. He had thought, originally, it was most useful when ambushing someone else. It would allow the practitioner to ensure there were available corpses and could explain the enormous death count attributed to Wei Wuxian by the civilians.

However, even when trying to hide his true power, Wei Wuxian was able to act in a way he expected to be more effective than the dozens of trained cultivators present. Was demonic cultivation — a brilliant, unpredictable creation — really that powerful?

Or maybe, rather than the style of cultivation, it was simply Wei Wuxian that was useful.

From the dirt, chains popped out and looped themselves around the statue’s arms. The chains were pulled straight, tension increasing instantly.

The arms were ripped off.

“What?” Jin Guangshan demanded, eyes wide. The adult and teenage cultivators shown were nowhere near as strong as the sect leaders or senior disciples, but they were far from weak.

To instantly destroy what they couldn’t make a dent in-

A low, rumbling growl was hissed by the beast, and it straightened until they could see the fierce corpse’s face, blank with death.

Wen Qing couldn’t help feeling like it looked familiar. If she could just see under it’s bangs-

The sound continued as the base to the terrifying melody Wei Wuxian continued to play, and the creature's veins expanded across its body.

In a second, it punched the statue, knocking it to the ground and sending a cyclone of dust into the air. It’s hair flowed in the formed wind.

Then, it turned its gaze to the cultivators.

“What?” Wen Qing whispered.

Several people were surprised. They hadn’t spent much time together, but it had rapidly become obvious that the woman was stern and fierce, demanding respect from everyone she saw.

“Is something wrong?” Jiang Yanli asked, but Wen Qing just shook her head in disbelief.

“No. No, that couldn’t be-why would-”

Simultaneously, Wei Wuxian breathed out a shaky gasp of air. He stopped playing, relaxing his hand and allowing it to fall defenseless by his side. His eyes were wide in

shock.

His frantic heartbeat rang in their ears.

“Wei Wuxian?” Jiang Cheng asked, despite knowing there would be no answer.

“What? That’s-”

“It’s… it’s the Ghost General!”

“What?”

“It’s Wen Ning!”

At those words, everyone turned to look at the congregate of Wens, only to see them staring very specifically at Wen Qing. The stern, strong, proud woman was *trembling*.

“...Wen-guniang?” Jiang Yanli asked softly, beginning to approach. “Do you know him?”

“He’s my… my brother, but that isn’t-” she paused, clearing her throat and forcing herself to calm down. “I’m sure there was some mistake. He has never been skilled at fighting.”

‘*And that’s a fierce corpse*,’ went unsaid. Wen Qing wasn’t willing to believe it was him.

‘*Wen Ning*?’ Wei Wuxian repeated. ‘*Hadn’t he been turned to dust*?’

Wen Qing bit her lip to keep herself from falling to pieces.

“I thought the Ghost General was killed before the First Siege of Burial Mounds!”

Beside the man who spoke, Jin Ling’s face contorted with anger. He unsheathed his blade.

Despite being overwhelmed by questions, Jiang Cheng glared at his nephew, seeing what he was building up towards, and whispered “Don’t you dare do anything stupid.”

Jin Zixuan’s lips cracked into a smile.

Then, to Wen Ning’s left, the statue’s arm struck out and attacked.

Jin Ling was pinned to a tree.

“Jin Ling!”

The predicament his nephew was in finally shocked Wei Wuxian out of his frozen state, and he immediately resumed playing his flute.

~🎵~

The crackling sound of the crimson electricity was followed by Wei Ying’s eyes dawning the color. Wen Ning stiffened at the song, then turned his head toward the statue.

A low growl escaped the fierce corpse's mouth.

Jiang Fengmian and Lan Qiren frowned, recognizing the corpse's power and knowing that if all the Wens were this dangerous, the Sunshot Campaign would be a very bloody war.

Wen Ning paused.

Then *attacked*.

Within seconds the statue was under a fierce assault. Wen Ning leapt high enough to bound over buildings and striked with enough force to tear castles apart. As the battle continued, Wei Wuxian thought over what he saw.

'*Wen Ning was the most powerful corpse I created before I died. Aside from how he doesn't fear injuries, heat, cold, poison, or anything else humans fear, he could also think on his own. He was the only one of his kind.*'

Wen Qing glared furiously at the future Wei Wuxian's figure, mouth curled into a deadly frown. From what she had seen of him, it seemed unlikely that he would kill someone just to make a weapon out of them. However, she couldn't forget that Wei Wuxian had taken part in their "Sunshot Campaign." She knew she wouldn't have let her brother join the fighting, but if Wei Wuxian hadn't know that-

Or maybe he just hadn't cared.

She was a doctor. Coming to an emotional conclusion was the height of stupidity. She knew that, but-

But her little brother was *dead* and she didn't even know why.

'But the Wen Ning right now clearly lacks his own will!'

"His own will? He's a fierce corpse!"

Madam Yu sighed in disappointment, "I suppose this is just one of his projects. He loves experimenting with things like this. He must have given it the ability to fight by itself, and simply patted himself on the back for allowing it to 'think' on its own."

"He does tend to over exaggerate things for humor. I suppose he must have used the phrase 'thinking on his own' so often as a joke that his mind simply skips over the explanation," Jiang Fengmian added, not disagreeing with his wife but including a much more fond tone.

In the few seconds those realizations took, Wen Ning had already finished dismantling the statue. The powerful god was now simply a pile of rubble, crushed to dust by the fierce corpse.

Wen Ruohan was impressed.

"Close in on him!" the surrounding cultivators shouted.

“Ha. Who cares about some statue. The Ghost General is the real prize here!”

“Back off!” Sizhui ordered.

He was ignored.

“Fellow cultivators, we must stop him so he doesn’t escape! This is Wen Ning we’re talking about here!”

“What’s there to be scared of? It’s not like the Yiling Patriarch is here! His owner’s already been torn to pieces!”

The reactions to these words were mixed.

Wen Qing had clenched her hands into fist, and her gaze burned with all the molten, scorching heat of the sun her sect symbolized.

Similarly, the Jiangs were biting their lips, displeased at the reminder of Wei Wuxian’s fate. Knowing it was pointless to say anything didn’t change their emotions, and even Yu Ziyuan was frowning slightly.

On the other hand, the Jins and Nie siblings wanted to laugh.

“Oh, please. Wen Ning took out something they were all helpless against in seconds! What exactly do those idiots think they can do against him?”

“Well, they sure are lucky that at least the infamous Yiling Patriarch isn’t here!” Nie Huaisang fired back, grinning deviously behind his hand at Jin Zixuan. “Nope, just a wandering lunatic from Mo village who happened to be the only one to figure out the truth behind the statue. No one to worry about~"

The two dissolved into cackles, and even Jiang Cheng felt his mood lightened slightly by their points.

Leaning close, Nie Mingjue motioned to where the Jin and Jiang heirs stood and whispered to Huaisang “You can join them, if you want. We can’t hurt each other, so it’s not as important that we stay together.”

With a slight hum, Huaisang considered the suggestion. Unconsciously, Jiang Cheng had stayed in the position he had moved into when he went to silently support the Jin heir during his parent’s argument. The two had never been close, but it seemed as if their shared parental woes were drawing them together. Perhaps joining in would be fun.

(He’d be able to manipulate better reactions out of Wen Chao, if nothing else.)

As Nie Huaisang journeyed over to the other two teenagers, Lan Xichen turned a thoughtful gaze to his brother.

‘*You could also join in,*’ he silently suggested.

Lan Wangji carefully ignored him.

Still conspiring amongst themselves, the cultivators finally realized, "If we kill him, we'll be famous from today on!"

"But he clearly saved us just a minute ago-"

Sizhui was, once again, flawlessly disregarded.

Their stupidity was almost impressive. Lan Qiren was just glad his own disciples weren't so foolish.

"A mere dog who lost his owner, yet he's still so arrogant!"

"Let's go!"

"Wait-"

"Gah!" the attacking cultivators shouted, as they were thrown back by the fierce corpses chains. Continuing to use them as a whip, Wen Ning effortlessly picked through the surrounding men and women without faltering.

"...I never thought I'd be cheering for a fierce corpse's victory instead of the cultivator's."

Wen Ning's chain stilled as Jin Ling's arrow pierced it to a tree.

Following up his attack, Jin Ling shot forward and tried to attack, only to be thrown back by Wen Ning. He skidded across the ground and past the trees.

Jiang Yanli bit her lip in an effort to stay silent.

The corpse was attacking in a second, lunging dozens of meters forward and raising his fist to strike down on the unsuspecting Jin heir.

Jin Ling flinched away.

"*Stop.*"

Wen Ning froze, his fist mere centimeters away from his target.

"Oh, thank god," Jin Zixuan hissed, overwhelmingly grateful his stupid (reckless, brilliant) son hadn't gotten himself killed despite the numerous close calls.

Between them, Nie Huaisang giggled at his and Jiang Cheng's reactions, feeling a sudden levity now that the danger to the cultivators was gone.

"Oh, shut up," the Jiang heir hissed. "You'll be doing the same thing once we start focusing on the Qinghe Nie sect! Just let us have this!"

Huaisang laughed and looked away, offering no further comments.

As they spoke, Wei Wuxian switched his song. The first one had been hauntingly beautiful — made even more-so by the instrument's poor craftsmanship. That was not the one he continued to play.

'*I need a calmer, quieter tune*,' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Calmer, quieter.*'

Blurry, as though it was a long ago memory, their surroundings shifted into a dark cave. It was only lit by a small fire, so the two figures present were difficult to make out.

"We can even see memories?" Jin Guangshan asked, suddenly sounding nervous. It was one thing for Jin Ling to remember what his uncle said to him (it made sense for the illusion to know what it had shown them), but this was something else entirely.

Madam Jin thought his fear was silly; it wasn't like they had anything left to hide.

***'Calmer,'* Wei Wuxian thought again, and the blurry figures finally became visible. '*Quieter.*'**

🎵♪🎵

"Wangji?" Lan Xichen asked, his eyes widening in surprise. The two figures were injured, soaking wet, and neither the age they had already seen nor the age of the real ones, but were undoubtedly Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. The former was listening calmly as Lan Wangji sang to him the song Wei Wuxian was now playing.

"Do you know that song?" Lan Qiren demanded of his nephew. "I don't recognize it."

Blinking, then schooling his expression to cover up his shock, Lan Wangji responded, "No. I've never heard it before."

Wen Ruohan blinked, then frowned in consideration. First the mystery, and now composing music. The more he saw, the more convinced he was that what they were being shown was indeed a possible future, rather than an illusion created from their memories.

Which meant there was a teenage Wei Wuxian outside. One who had the skill to create, but not the power to resist.

Interesting.

Wen Ning turned to face Wei Wuxian entirely. As the more relaxing song continued, a peaceful, almost romantic aura settled over everyone.

"Is this… affecting our emotions?" Wen Xu asked, shaking his head in a vain attempt to get rid of the sleepy feeling which suddenly came over him.

Jiang Fengmian, already used to keeping calm, was far less affected and could explain "They mentioned that we were being shown memories. If-they're from spirits, perhaps we're feeling pieces of how the spirits were experiencing the demonic cultivation."

“Ah,” Jin Guangshan hummed in acknowledgement, enjoying the sensation. “I can see why he was able to control a fierce corpse like this.”

If she weren’t so tired, Wen Qing would have growled at him for referring to her brother as simply “a fierce corpse.”

***‘Wen Ning, it’s me,’* Wei Wuxian thought, silently calling out to his — friend? Bodyguard? Creation? Wen Qing would never accept the last one — summon.**

Slowly, Wen Ning began walking towards Wei Wuxian, eyes still blank with unconsciousness. Each step he took rattled the chains, giving Wei Wuxian’s romantic song a strange aura.

Lan Wanji looked over at the player, who was calming the terrifyingly powerful beast with just a few notes. It was demonic cultivation — he knew it was unacceptable; detestable — but somehow his mind was focused on something else entirely.

As Wei Wuxian played, all Lan Wangji could think about was how gorgeous he was.

The simulation’s cultivators, unfortunately, did not feel the same.

“Report to the Sect Leader immediately! Somebody can control the Ghost General using a flute!”

“Young Master Mo!” Sizhui gasped out.

But Wei Wuxian paid them no mind.

‘*Go back Wen Ning*.’ he warned.

Wen Qing relaxed slightly, and the sleepy feeling on her increased. It was good that Wei Wuxian was focusing his attention on keeping her brother — his body, at least, but she refused to think about that — safe.

Slow, careful steps were taken as Wei Wuxian slowly lured Wen Ning away from the other cultivators. The song remained as peaceful as ever, and made the fierce corpse look like he was being lured to sleep. With each step back Wei Ying took, Wen Ning’s hobbling fumble followed.

One step back from Wei Wuxian, one step forward by Wen Ning. One step back, one step forward. One step, one step.

Wei Ying banged into a white-clad wall.

Jiang Cheng sucked in a breath, clenching hard enough to bruise.

Wei Ying's fingers were ripped from the flute by a hand around his wrist. He looked back, and came face to face with Lan Wangji.

Jiang Yanli made a soft, fear-stricken whimper. The relaxing aura on them disappeared in an instant.

The Second Jade of Lan — the Hanguang-jun — would never allow a demonic cultivator to go free.

The two made eye contact, Wei Wuxian's now-crimson eyes reflecting against Hanguang-jun's steely gold orbs. The simulation sharpened, and the watchers could clearly see the intense, burning passion in the man.

"Oh no," Nie Huaisang repeated. He understood that the rule-following Second Jade of Lan would be especially against demonic cultivation, but if Wei Wuxian hadn't used it those kids would have died!

(But, as he gazed at Lan Qiren, he knew it was hopeless. The Lan sect cared only for following the letter of the law; they didn't care about the circumstances in which it would be just to break it.)

The people surrounding Lan Xichen all made similar noises of fear for the future's Wei Wuxian, but he saw something else entirely.

"Wangji. You-"

"Mn," his brother responded, cutting off his words, equally stunned by what he saw in his older self.

That wasn't hate in his gaze.

'Oh no. Lan Zhan has personally seen me use a flute to control corpses before.'

"...*Lan Zhan*?" Lan Wangji repeated.

The disbelief in his expression was the first emotion many participants had seen from him, but it was covered up fairly quickly. They had to admit, it was justified.

Wei Wuxian had been scared enough of Lan Wangji to run away the previous night and avoid interaction altogether. If they were truly so against one another, why would the demonic cultivator have used his given name without the slightest bit of hesitation?

Though, with the tense situation, it was hard for most of the watchers to care about the specifics of using Lan Wangji's given name.

With the groan of Wen Ning, Wei Wuxian snapped out of his frozen trance.

"Damn it," he hissed, watching the fierce corpse begin to resist in earnest.

Wei Wuxian clicked his tongue.

"I have to get him out of here."

“Hurry,” Wen Qing hissed.

***‘Whatever. Tens of thousands of people know how to play the flute, and the number who tried to imitate me by using flutes to control corpses could make up an entire sect. If nothing works, I’ll just refuse to confess no matter what*,’ Wei Wuxian decided.**

Jin Guangshan made another mental note into his profile of the Jiang sect’s head disciple; he was continuously surprised by how influential Wei Wuxian grew to be.

Wei Wuxian struggled against Lan Wangji’s grip just enough to allow his fingers to reach the instrument again. In the next second, he had begun a different song — one with an urgent tone and dropped quality to further disguise his identity.

~🎵~

Wen Ning snapped his body upright in an instant, before fleeing from the forest. He shook the ground as he jumped into the trees, moving far faster than the cultivators could follow.

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow, not bothering to hide his reaction. After all, despite the most powerful cultivators in the world being gathered to watch, none of them could deny the Yiling Patriarch’s weapon was impressive.

He had always considered Wen Ning to be most useful as a hostage to keep his sister in line, but perhaps there was more to the boy after all.

“There he goes!”

“Go!”

“Don’t let him get away!”

Several cultivators chased after, but it was obvious they would not be able to catch up.

With a bone-shattering clench, Lan Wangji squeezed Wei Wuxian’s wrist. He resisted as long as he could, but eventually flinched, gasping out and dropping the flute to the ground.

Wei Wuxian looked down, refusing to make eye contact with his captor.

“Um, Lan Xichen. Lan Wangji,” Jiang Yanli coughed softly, wringing her hands to calm her nerves. “What sort of… punishment… do you think your sect will give?”

Everyone turned to watch with interest as Lan Xichen considered his answer. The Jiang’s interest was obvious; the Jins were torn between genuine worry and more malicious curiosity; Huaisang’s involvement in Wei Wuxian's life caught both of the Nie brother’s attention; Wen Ruohan mostly wanted to see how Wei Wuxian would escape.

Finally, Lan Xichen smiled and answered, “I don’t think you need to worry. I doubt my brother will try and harm Young Master Wei.”

Jiang Cheng barely resisted scoffing aloud.

Finally, Lan Wangji released him.

Energy crackled in the air.

Wei Wuxian turned in surprise, but, before he could act, Lan Wangji was in front of him, using his guqin to resist Zidian's power.

Their combined energy dented the ground between them with their attacks, showing a skill far beyond that of the already-powerful clan members.

Now, Jiang Cheng felt a sharp bite of shame on top of his anger. He had fully expected Lan Xichen's prediction to be off, and had mentally prepared himself for watching Wei Wuxian fight for his life against the Second Jade.

Instead, Lan Wangji had defended his martial brother. Against *him*.

(How could the future be so *wrong?*)

Dust began to clear, and Wei Wuxian watched Lan Wangji with unconcealed shock. His defender didn't move, remaining firmly between the two Jiang brothers.

"Zidian?" Lan Jingyi gasped out, looking up to where Jiang Cheng stood on the branch of a tree.

"Zidian steals souls. It can also force the soul out from a stolen body. Does Sect Leader Jiang suspect Young Master Mo of being possessed?" Sizhui theorized.

The watcher's perspective switched until they were directly before the new Sect Leader Jiang. He glared down coldly at Wei Wuxian.

"So, you're back, Wei Wuxian."

The older Jiang Cheng's lips slowly curled into a smirk.

Jiang Cheng flinched, disappointment stabbing into him.

He had hoped — naively, in hindsight — that this was all a misunderstanding. Sure, everyone *said* that he hated demonic cultivators with a passion (that he had *murdered* his *brother*), and it was impossible to miss the very-real anger his older self kept tightly wrapped around him, but he had thought-

Maybe, just maybe, when Mo Xuanyu was revealed to actually be his older brother back from the dead, his older self would lose his anger. Maybe, having his brother (his last family, aside from Jin Ling) returned to him would fix all the problems, and even his hate for demonic cultivators would fade.

Evidently, that wasn't going to happen.

Seeing his son's internal grief, Jiang Fengmian stepped closer, hoping he could provide comfort with his presence and knowing the nearby sect leaders made open affection difficult. Jiang Cheng didn't notice him.

Wei Wuxian stepped back once, scanning his surroundings. The watchers followed his gaze, moving over trees and rocks, until finally it landed on Little Apple, grazing calmly in the middle of cultivation battles and spiritually-formed forest fires.

In a second's pause, Wei Wuxian glanced back at Jiang Cheng.

Then, he *ran.*

"Wanna leave?" Jiang Cheng asked rhetorically, gracefully flipping down from the tree before whipping Zidian out like the strike of purple lightning its name implied.

It cracked the earth.

Wei Wuxian was hit.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli yelled.

Rolling several times as he fell, the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation finally came to a stop with a tired, pained groan. He was still in Mo Xuanyu's body.

Both Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji did a double-take.

"What?" Yu Ziyuan demanded. "But that's not his body!"

Lan Qiren scoffed, "It must have been the demonic cultivation. It figures something as vile as resentful energy would be able to interfere with even powerful weapons."

"Or maybe it just doesn't count as possession," Nie Mingjue suggested, raising an eyebrow as if challenging anyone to disagree with him. "Wei Wuxian didn't seem to have much choice in the matter."

"That does seem likely," Lan Xichen agreed instantly. He had never heard of a ritual that could force someone into your own body before (it was likely no one had even *thought* of such a thing until Wei Wuxian created it) so it was hard to tell exactly how pre-existing weapons would interact with his creations.

Jiang Cheng stared in shock at the still-conscious body that he had expected to house his brother. Instead of falling to the floor as a corpse, the body continued to obey Wei Wuxian's commands as he rubbed his back, playing up the extent of the pain.

"How amazing!" Wei Wuxian cried out, his eyes watering to a surprisingly realistic effect. "You really can do anything when you're the Clan Leader of a powerful sect, can't you?! You can even beat up whoever you want to! For shame! Tsk! Tsk! Tsk!"

Nie Huaisang snorted slightly at the return of Wei Wuxian's 'entitled lunatic' act, and noticed Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan do the same. Unknown to all except Lan Xichen, Lan Wangji

was also highly amused by the performance from the — gorgeous, selfless, protective, talented, passionate, joyful — demonic cultivator.

(The one who, for some reason, called him "Lan Zhan" when even his own brother used "Wangji.")

"Impossible," Jiang Cheng hissed. "Why didn't it work?"

'Of course Zidian can't take my soul. I haven't possessed anyone's body. This was a sacrifice! A forced sacrifice!'

Simultaneously, Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen turned to look at each other, smiling at their theory being proven right. The doubters stayed resolutely silent.

"You-how did you summon Wen Ning? I'm going to find out just who the hell you are!" Jiang Cheng declared, only to be answered by some of the surrounding cultivators.

"Sect Leader Jiang, you might not know, but Mo Xuanyu is one of the LanlingJin sect's… ahem. Because he had low spiritual powers and didn't work hard in training his cultivation, and he had a sort of… anyways, he was thrown out of the LanlingJin sect. If I had to make a guess, he probably ventured onto the wrong path since the right one didn't work for him. It doesn't necessarily mean… that the Yiling Patriarch possessed him."

Madam Jin sighed at the obvious why the cultivator was talking around the cause. It seemed, even thirteen years later, the Jin sect could not escape the constant stream of clan-related scandals.

Jin Ling nodded and added, "Mo Xuanyu's always been a lunatic. He'll chase after anything that looks good. Men or women, trees, flowers, or animals, he'll pursue them all with a smile. It's disgusting."

Jiang Cheng's eyebrow twitched, and a look of revulsion came over his face.

'I can't believe Mo Xuanyu being an idiot saved me,'* Wei Wuxian thought. '*This is hilarious.'

Lan Wangji coughed, covering up the hint of a smile that appeared for a brief second.

"That's right," another cultivator agreed. "Wei Wuxian was a monster-"

Jiang Cheng bit his lip to avoid screaming at the unquestioned declaration.

"-but he at least had good taste. He liked flirting with pretty girls. If he wanted a body, he wouldn't have picked a madman's, would he?"

"Exactly. And his flute sounded terrible. He can't compare to the Yiling Patriarch and his flute!"

"...Really."

Wei Wuxian blinked once, then laughed embarrassedly.

Once again, chuckles rang out across the gathered cultivators. Although somewhat hesitant, Jiang Cheng was in agreement; they might not know his brother's morality, but they were all still aware of his skill ~~that he could never measure up to~~. Besides, it was nice to have something to laugh about.

(Anything to distract from his A-Jie's death.)

(Or how his shixiong had to be kept *safe* from future-him.)

'*It doesn't mean anything,*' Jiang Cheng thought. '*I should first find an excuse to take him back and use every possible method to get information out of him. It's impossible for him to not confess anything or give himself away — especially now that he's reacted this way. I've done things like this plenty of times already.*'

Jiang Cheng shook his head. It was all a lie. It had to be.

"Alright. Then… take him back."

"Yes!"

With a feigned squeak, Wei Wuxian immediately ran behind Hanguang-jun and gripped onto the man's arm for support, shouting, "What are you gonna do to me?!"

For indecipherable reasons, Lan Wangji felt the tips of his ears grow hot at the scene.

To the watcher's surprise (and relief), Lan Wangji stood protectively in front of Wei Wuxian, guarding him from the Sect Leader and blocking the Yunmeng Jiang disciples who had been walking closer.

"...Young Master Lan, are you making this difficult on purpose?"

"Sect Leader Jiang, the evidence is right before your eyes. Mo Xuanyu hasn't been possessed. Why would you put so much effort into troubling such an unimportant person?" Lan Sizhui defended.

The trio of Lans brightened at seeing their disciple.

Ignoring the conversation about him, Wei Wuxian calmly thought '*I need to find a way to get rid of both sides. Oh, I could-*"

"Hm. I could ask Second Master Lan the same question. Why are you trying to protect a lunatic who knows demonic cultivation?"

Keeping his gaze steady on Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji answered "He used resentful energy, but he did the right thing. I can't sit and watch others bully him."

"Wangji!" Lan Qiren shouted. "He is using resentful energy! It's sacrilegious!"

“I know,” Lan Wangji responded immediately, bowing his head and ignoring the glares sent their way by the Jiangs and Nies. “I do not know what he — I — am thinking. I apologize.”

His uncle huffed, but acknowledged “We agreed to not punish for things that have yet to happen. However, keep this in mind going forward.”

Lan Wangji nodded once in agreement.

As they spoke, Lan Jingyi also spoke up in defense of Mo Xuanyu (though, granted, in a decidedly un-Lan-like manner), reminding them all that “Mo Xuanyu” had saved the teenagers three times. In an instant, the watcher’s view shifted and allowed them to see Jin Ling’s slightly guilty expression from where he stood behind his uncle.

“Look, Sect Leader Jiang,” Wei Wuxian protested. “Having you go after me like this is making me feel very troubled. I don’t chase after *everything* that looks good!”

Jiang Cheng promptly choked on his own spit, and noticed the people around him weren’t doing much better.

Using deliberately provocative body language, Wei Wuxian ran a finger over his lips in a considering gesture, continuing “Like that big cow in my village. He was way too fat. That’s not my type. And you? You aren’t my type either.”

In conclusion, Wei Wuxian flicked a bit of hair forward, getting it stuck in his mouth.

Jin Guangshan was impressed. Given Wei Wuxian’s exemplary physical appearance (in both bodies), the confidence and freedom portrayed was certainly a display that could entice any audience. He might not personally be interested in boys, but he could appreciate beauty.

In fact, coupled with the direct opposite that was Lan Wangji, the two of them could make a lovely pair. Like two precious, porcelain dolls — no, no, they were much too dangerous for that. More like exotic beasts, who should be collared and locked down; kept beautiful, but only brought out when they were of use.

A glance to his left told him Wen Ruohan was thinking along the same lines as him.

Lan Wangji shivered, feeling an inexplicable chill run up his spine.

In response to Wei Wuxian’s shameless statement, Jiang Cheng’s Zidian sent a trail of purple lighting crawling up his arm.

“You-fine. Then, may I ask what kind of person *is* your type?”

A sense of dread fell over all watchers as Wei Wuxian began to giggle.

“...What is he doing?”

Giving a long, drawn-out sigh, Yu Ziyuan braced herself for the impending blow.

“Well, to be honest… Hanguang-jun is my type!”

“What?!”

“That-”

“Shameless!” Lan Wangji shouted, raising his voice for the first time the other sects had heard as a terrible (telling, repulsive, shameful) heat of pleasure scorched through him. He tried very hard to not focus on how Wei Wuxian was playfully running his hand through stray locks of hair, nor on the shock (but very pointedly *not* disgust) that shone in his older-self’s expression.

Even Lan Xichen’s mouth was gaping open for a moment in an usual display of uncontrolled emotion, before he forced himself to calm down and moved to help his uncle (who had begun coughing up blood at the proclamation).

A moment later, Jiang Yanli gave a delighted giggle.

“Oh, A-Xian,” she whispered fondly.

The subject of their attention only gave a pleased, mischievous hum.

‘*Feeling disgusted, right?*’ he thought, eyes turned towards Lan Wangji. ‘*This is killing two birds with one stone! One who’s overly-competitive, and one who’s overly-proper. They’ll definitely feel repulsed and keep their distance from me!*’

While most were impressed with his knowledge and creativity (and audacity), Lan Wangji frowned and looked down. He knew future Wei Wuxian was right — he *should* be disgusted, he *should* be repulsed — and the lack of those emotions made shame tear through his heart.

Hanguang-jun very calmly ran a hand along the strings of his guqin as if in contemplation.

(To Xichen, it looked more like he needed an outlet for his affection.)

Then, his gaze turned to a now-confused Wei Wuxian and grasped the latter’s wrist yet again.

“Mark your words.”

“...Hm?”

“...What?”

Nearly every member of the audience had the same reaction as Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji was sure his ears had turned as red as the Yiling Patriarch’s resentful energy.

“I’ll take him back to the Lan sect.”

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian repeated. The befuddled eyes of the Jiang cultivators showed even those in the future were confused.

Lan Wangji still didn't answer.

"*...Huh?!*"

"...What just happened?"

The scenery around them had faded out, leaving the watchers to fill in the blanks on their own.

"...That at least didn't seem like a… punishment was intended, perhaps?" Jiang Fengmian suggested, still looking somewhat dazed. He knew his ward's habit of using words to play with people's emotions — either to flirt or anger, or both at the same time — but he had never seen it responded to in such a way. Given how confused the future Jiang cultivators had looked, it couldn't be about the changes in time.

But the Lan sect of today would never accept such a thing.

('*At least he escaped me,*' Jiang Cheng acknowledged, before realizing what he'd just thought and convulsing in a full-body flinch.)

The watching cultivators turned to look at the younger Lan Wangji, but he seemed even more confused than all of them combined. As Lan Qiren had said, it was *demonic cultivation.* Most of them would agree that Wei Wuxian had used it for righteous reasons just then, but there was no way the Lan sect would agree. Even if he didn't think so, wasn't bringing Wei Wuxian to the Cloud Recesses just asking for him to be killed?

"Wangji?" Xichen whispered, leaning in. "Are you okay?"

But Lan Wangji had no answer to give, too struck by what he saw. He knew the shameful, disgusting things he was feeling were probably paralleled by his future self, but for Hanguang-jun to have so little restraint as to *act* on those feelings was incomprehensible. Where had his prided self control gone? Where were the qualities that gifted his future self the title of "Light-Bearing Lord?"

What was wrong with him?

Finally the scenery faded back into existence, this time in a beautiful, tranquil mountain. The cliffs were covered with grass, and the stone steps reflected the light like silver.

A serene aura washed over the world.

It was broken by a scream.

"No! I'm not going in! I'm not! No, I'm not!"

"A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked, recognizing the voice.

As much as Lan Qiren wanted to watch out for the disaster Wei Wuxian was inevitably causing, his attention was momentarily torn away by something else: bunnies.

‘*Why are there bunnies in the Cloud Recesses?*’ he asked himself upon seeing a large colony of them in the abandoned grassy fields.

“I’m not going in!” Wei Wuxian repeated, and their view switched so that they could see him clinging desperately to his donkey as Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi tried (and failed) to coax him in.

“Why are you complaining? You said you liked Hanguang-jun!” Lan Jingyi pointed out, not realizing Wei Wuxian had just been trying to manipulate the groups.

As much as Lan Qiren despised the shameless nature of his future-nephew’s act, he had to admit it was amusing to see how much Wei Wuxian’s attempt had blown up in his face.

(But, if what Lan Xichen said was true — if Wangji truly didn’t intend to simply re educate the demonic cultivator — then there might be a problem)

(Forcing someone to enter the Cloud Recesses to protect them was just a little too close to what his brother had done. He prayed his nephew would not end the same.)

“Hanguang-jun has brought you all the way here!” Lan Jingyi continued. “What are you crying about?”

“I also like my dear Lil’ Apple, but I don’t live in a donkey shed!” Wei Wuxian explained from where he lay clinging onto the creature. The donkey looked even more disgusted with him than all the humans combined.

“What are you going on about? You need to keep it down here. The rules are all written on that wall. Now settle down, or you’ll regret it.”

As he spoke, he made a motion to the large wall to their side.

Even the Lan cultivators were shocked.

“There seem to be… quite a few more,” Lan Xichen observed. The Gusu Lan sect’s wall had gained 3,000 rules in its hundreds of years in existence, but now-

“Have the rules on your wall of discipline increased in number? Last time I came here, there were only three thousand,” he demanded, thinking back to the culture exchange twenty years before.

“How long ago was that? It’s been four thousand for years!”

Wei Wuxian made a strange noise between gasping and hacking as he heard the outrageous number.

“So, our style of cultivating has changed immensely because of the inventions he has created in quite a short time. Is it likely that your new rules exist for the same reason?”

“Indeed,” Lan Qiren agreed. “Demonic cultivation would easily explain the required additions.”

Beside his sons — one who had zoned out of the simulation completely (Wen Chao) and one who had grown bored now that the fighting had ended (Wen Xu) — Wen Ruohan smirked in amusement. It appeared Wei Wuxian's influence was farther reaching than even the man himself could have guessed.

Though, if they were right about Wei Wuxian splitting his soul, he supposed a lack of awareness and even memory loss could be explained.

'*So many new rules,*' Wei Wuxian thought to himself, then laid his head against Lil' Apple. '*I hated this place from the beginning.*'

Lan Wangji frowned, feeling hurt but unable to identify the reason why.

"Young Master Mo," Sizhui spoke. "His Lordship is doing this for your own sake. Otherwise, Sect Leader Jiang wouldn't have let you go."

Wei Wuxian cried again.

"Alright! Stop being so noisy!" Jingyi growled. "Making noise in the Cloud Recesses is forbidden!"

"I'm only being noisy because I don't want to go in there!"

Huaisang thought he had a point.

"Please give up on me!" he continued, and Jingyi took a step forward as if to begin ranting.

"Don't bother with him," Hanguang-Jun ordered as he continued to walk up the mountain, pausing Jingyi mid-step. "Let him cry. When he becomes tired, drag him in."

Now, nearly everyone was gaping openly.

"What are you trying to do to my brother!" Jiang Cheng demanded, momentarily forgetting proper decorum. With Lan Qiren frozen in horror at the similarities to Qingheng-Jun, and Lan Wangji stunned over his own shamelessness, Lan Xichen was left to answer.

"Rest assured, I don't believe my brother intends to do anything uncouth. I think he's just trying to make sure Young Master Wei doesn't run off and fall back into some other Sect's clutches where he would, undoubtedly, be punished. It's obvious in the concern in my brother's expression."

"*Obvious* concern?" Jin Zixuan repeated, but Jiang Cheng had grown quiet. There wasn't much more he could say in protest, when Lan Wangji's future self was trying to protect Wei Wuxian from *his* future self.

Wei Wuxian stared in shock for a moment after Lan Wangji made that declaration. Then, blinking himself out of it, he immediately hopped onto his donkey.

“Lil’ Apple, let’s go!” he shouted, trying to get as far away as possible. Lil’ Apple, however, simply spun in a circle and started going in the wrong direction, ignoring Wei Wuxian’s cries of protest.

The Lan juniors could only watch, flabbergasted and frozen.

“Stop, stop!” Wei Wuxian shouted. In the conflict, his hair had fallen out of the previous bun he had kept it in, switching to a ponytail.

Yu Ziyuan blinked, once again shocked by the physical similarities between Wei Wuxian and Mo Xuanyu. It seemed like the other sects would have no problem recognizing Wei Wuxian if they saw him.

Slowly, Hanguang-jun turned to face the donkey which was steadfastly approaching him, and held out his hand to reveal the apple in it.

“Lil’ Apple! You’re a traitor!” Wei Wuxian screamed.

Not even Wen Qing could hide her amusement here.

However, the scene then began to fade before their eyes, and the hours of the day switched in an instant, allowing the sun to change position with the weather.

“Twenty years earlier,” Lan Sizhui’s voice read. However, it was instantly clear that this was the older Sizhui, who had trapped them in the simulation and narrated information, rather than the one who had been part of the play put on before their eyes.

Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli made eye contact, both simultaneously feeling a sense of dread creep up on them. If they were going to see what would have happened if not for the simulation, were they also going to see what had caused the older Wei Wuxian to have such a dull look in his silver eyes?

(Would they learn why everything in the future was so *wrong*?)

Worry clung to them like a shadow.

“Wei Wuxian! Wei Wuxian! Wei Ying!” the younger Jiang Cheng shouted.

Laughing slightly as he finished putting down some jars, Wei Wuxian then spun around and ran over, appeasing with an “I’m coming! I’m coming!”

His smile was still bright, and his eyes held the same joy they did when he was in Mo Xuanyu’s body, making them look even more similar. It was readily apparent why he was considered the fourth most sought-after young master despite his lack of bloodline.

Taking a deep breath, Lan Wangji forced himself to look away. He was staring too intensely for it to be appropriate; he resolved to work on his self control.

“He’s not dressed in Yunmeng Jiang’s robes?” Jin Zixuan asked Jiang Cheng, feeling more comfortable now that they had spent some time together.

Jiang Cheng shrugged noncomentally. Internally, he signed in frustration; his mother had always encouraged Wei Wuxian's different appearance. His brother took it as expressing his individuality, but Jiang Cheng knew his mother saw it as widening the divide between Wei Wuxian and the sect.

The watchers could only see his friends' backs now, but it was instantly apparent who the two figures were.

"Huaisang?" Nie Mingjue blinked in shock. He had seen the other's older selves, and had known it was possible, but it was still surreal to see such an accurate recreation of his brother standing before him.

Similarly, Huaisang did a double take towards himself. However, knowing the mischief that was likely to be revealed to his brother (even if he hadn't technically done it yet), he began tugging his hair in a nervous tick. He really, really wished he had his fan to hide behind.

The Jiang, Jin, Wen, and Lan clans had gotten pieces about them revealed. Perhaps it would soon be the Nie clan's turn.

"The 18th year of the reign of Xuanzheng, the year of Wuyin," Lan Sizhui narrated again.

The world came into view, turning into a river at night.

"Gusu, Cloud Recesses."

Nearly-silent, a figure ran across the bridge at twilight. Their surroundings switched to the middle of town, and they saw Wei Wuxian hop onto the roofs of buildings, sneaking through the darkness.

He looked around, and, seeing as no one was there, finally pulled out the jars he had hidden earlier. He brought it closer and breathed in the scent.

"Bringing alcohol into the Cloud Recesses?" Lan Qiren assumed. Really, the boy was just like his mother. Equally unruly and uncouth and undisciplined and stunning-

He resolved to keep his nephews away from the boy at all costs.

At the sound of someone landing behind him, Wei Wuxian turned around. A younger Lan Wangji was staring back at him.

Eyes all fell to the Lan Wangji with them, gauging his reaction. Although no one else could see anything in the Second Jade's stone-still face, Lan Xichen instantly realized that Lan Wangji was worried. If his older self was so obvious in his intentions and feelings, would this version of him behave equally shamefully?

He wasn't even sure if that would be so bad.

Despite having been caught, Wei Wuxian did not panic. Instead, he quickly took in the situation, glancing around to see if there was anyone else. Finding no one, he glanced up

at Lan Wangji, smirked, and then turned completely towards him with a blinding smile.

Eyes brighter than the moon; a smile brighter than the sun. Lan Wangji was mesmerized.

Wei Wuxian held up a jar in offering.

“Emperor’s smile! I’ll give you a jar, so could you pretend you never saw me?”

It was over. The vision around them had faded back to white.

Lan Wangji blinked twice, stupefied by what he had seen.

That was — would have been — their first meeting? They were going to see what caused those differences — the sorrow in Jiang Wanyin, the death of Jiang Yanli, the grief then ~~love~~ passion in Lan Wangji’s own eyes?

The fall of the Wens?

An unusual sense of nervousness came over Lan Wangji as he glanced towards the Wens. Wen Qing seemed to be preoccupied thinking about her brother, and Wen Chao was easily distracted, but Wen Ruohan and Wen Xu were watching with unfaltering focus.

Finally, after nearly a minute of contemplative silence, Lan Xichen coughed and said, “Perhaps we should… review. I think we can all agree this segment gave us quite a lot to discuss. Especially with how... *wrong* most of us felt that future was.”

In response, Jin Zixuan squeaked, his cheeks flushing bright red, then a deeper red as everyone turned to look at him. He turned purple when Jiang Yanli failed to suppress a giggle.

“Ah. I… have a nephew,” Jiang Cheng added on, eager to discuss one of the few happy facts hidden in the barrage of tragedy. Only inches away from the Jiang heir, Jin Zixuan looked nearly blue.

When he made eye contact with a pleasantly-pink Jiang Yanli, that color only darkened.

Nie Huaisang laughed as well, agreeing, “he was rather cute, wasn’t he. I can’t believe you already know what your son looks like at pretty much your age.”

Now Jiang Yanli was blushing as well, though hers was more of a thankful flush than Jin Zixuan’s outright mortification. It seemed both were happy with what they saw.

(Jin Zixuan very carefully didn’t bring up his fears of changing the timeline. He should — would have to — later, but for now he didn’t want to consider the possibility. He refused to wonder if the information they were getting would inadvertently stop Jin Ling from being born.)

(Yes, it was better to focus on the happier things first.)

Then, as if in purposeful contradiction to Jin Zixuan's thoughts, Madam Yu said "We'll need to ensure your son doesn't end up an orphan this time, A-Li."

Just like that, the playful mood which had crept into the viewers' minds was flushed out without remorse. It was hard to imagine, but if they accepted the visions as true, they would need to accept that Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan would be dead in a few short years.

"If we believe this!" Wen Chao countered. "I, for one, find your belief that the Wen sect could be wiped out to be a childish fantasy. Wishing for something to be true doesn't mean you have the power to make it happen!"

Jiang Cheng gritted his teeth. If Wei Wuxian were here, he would have said something like '*Oh really? And what's someone like* you *going to do against my demonic cultivation? Just throw Wen Zhuliu at it like you do with all your other problems*?!'

But he wasn't here, and everyone else was too smart to risk pointlessly offending Wen Ruohan.

However, to everyone's surprise, a defense came regardless.

"Until we have more information on the war, we can't confidently say that this can't be true. So far, I've only seen evidence in favor. Unless you've somehow caught something everyone else has missed, I suggest you stop making assumptions without proof," Wen Qing lectured.

The "idiot" at the end went unsaid but clearly heard.

Jiang Fengmian glanced to Wen Ruohan, ready to defend the brave girl if needed, only to see the man smirking at his cousin's words.

He agreed.

At first, the Jiang Sect Leader was pleased. It would lower the chance of another similar confrontation (keeping his children away from starting potential arguments), and the sentiment was indirectly supporting his ward. Wen Ruohan believed what the vision said Wei Wuxian could do.

Oh. Wen Ruohan believed what the vision said Wei Wuxian could do.

That… might be a problem.

"Speaking of which," Lan Qiren began. "Wen-gunian, do you believe that was your brother?"

A barely-visible flinch shook Wen Qing's body like an earthquake, but she understood the reason for asking. They had to check everything they could, and she was the only one who knew what her brother looked like.

"...Yes. There were noticeable differences, in part because he's-" Wen Qing, cut off and swallowed, "but he was undoubtedly my brother. Turned into a weapon."

Jiang Cheng frowned and turned to protest, but didn't know where to begin. Silently, his sister walked closer and simply gave Wen Qing a reassuring smile, thanking her for speaking despite the difficulty.

The tension in Wen Qing's stature faded away.

"On a different note," Nie Huaisang began, shrinking away when Lan Qiren and the Wen brothers turned their gazes upon him, but regaining his confidence when Nie Mingjue stood between them. "Um, I was looking at the dates, and I got curious about something. This takes place in the future, and we've tentatively agreed Wei Wuxian didn't seem to be…."

Awake? Conscious? Alive? A full soul?

The Jiang siblings looked like they'd start crying if he tried the last two.

"...*aware* during those thirteen years off. I was wondering how old the Wei Wuxian we just saw was. We probably shouldn't include the time in which he didn't… exist."

Ah, messed up there. Jiang Yanli's eyes were watering. Luckily, Jin Zixuan seemed to be trying to comfort her.

"Well, based on the timeline, Wangji is almost thirty-six."

"And A-Cheng is also thirty-five."

"Then, with thirteen years removed, Wei Wuxian would be… what? Twenty-two? Twenty-one?"

"That's unbelievable."

Most of the mid-teens muttered among themselves, feeling weird yet again at seeing such old versions of themselves and their friends. That Wei Wuxian might not be quite as old, but even twenty-one was definitely an *adult*. The first thing they'd seen had been the adult Wei Wuxian.

It made them feel comparatively young.

The adults shared the sentiment, but for the opposite reason.

"Only twenty-one?" Madam Jin spoke aloud with clear consideration. Nie Mingjue was the youngest Sect Leader currently in position (Lan Xichen might commonly stand in for his father, but he was not yet sect leader), and yet Wei Wuxian was slightly younger.

Wei Wuxian was twenty-one, old enough to lead classes, but — especially to cultivators — still a young man.

"And to the public, he's been a child, a street rat, a young master, a head disciple, a war hero, and the greatest monster in history. And yet he's still practically-"

"A child," Jiang Fengmian agreed.

“You can’t baby him forever,” Yu Ziyuan snapped. “He’s an adult.”

“Was he an adult during the war?” Fengmian asked back. “Were any of our children adults?”

“Well, perhaps you shouldn’t have allowed them to participate, then,” Wen Ruohan suggested with a cruel smile. Nie Mingjue barely held back an outraged growl.

The countdown to the next segment reached zero.

Wei Wuxian leaned back in his seat, rubbing his forehead in an attempt to remove his growing headache. He could last a fairly long time with his golden core as powerful as it was, but even he had limits.

(Simultaneously running a sect and investigating an unknown medical condition nearly shot past his maximum capabilities, but he wasn’t a member of the YunmengJiang sect for nothing.)

But it wasn’t as though his efforts were futile. Scanning the Jiang clan and the Nie brothers (the Lans, Jins, and Wens refused his offer) had revealed three things: the power’s purpose, effect, and characteristics.

The intentions were easy enough to determine after comparing the energy signature to the ones produced by various different talismans. These comas were created as a way to convey information, rather than out of malicious intent. The effect brought the consciousnesses of everyone under the spell to some sort of dream realm, where they were all shown the same thing. Once he had sufficient data, the Lan sect was willing to run their own tests, and confirmed his results in the Twin Jades and Lan Qiren. It was the last discovery that was the most concerning, however.

One identifiable part in the spell was characters related to time. There were more powerful factors still indecipherable, but there was one that was easy to see. The patient’s perception of time was slowed down so that they could exist inside the same dream realm without removing their souls from their bodies. Because the signal needed time to move across the hundreds of miles between cities, their sense of it slowed down.

It had been only a little over an hour to the clan leaders; it had been nearly two days outside.

He rubbed his forehead again, feeling the pain multiply. Maybe he should have asked A-Yue for some water before sending her to bed.

According to Wei Wuxian’s calculations, the spell was going to last for just under two weeks. He wasn’t sure the other clans would make it another day!

When the Lan elders heard his report, they had reacted with outrage, screaming (against their own rules) and cursing the dastardly monsters who had concocted this insane scheme.

A dimension away, 4 teenage radishes sneezed.

Chapter End Notes

Am I shamelessly picking, choosing, and arranging whatever parts I want to include from the donghua, book, fan-theories, manhua, and live action? Yes. Yes I am.

Beta read by Kuramas_Kat :)

I Wasn't Aware It Was Possible To Be So Annoying

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite being sect leader of the Yunmeng Jiang sect, Jiang Cheng hated going to inter-sect conferences. He hadn't liked them to begin with, but, after the events at Guanyin temple, they became *unbearable*.

"Did you hear?" someone would ask. "Of Jin Guangyao's crimes?"

"Yes, what a horrible, *dreadful* man. He murdered Jin Zixuan, his *brother*."

"His sister in law-"

"His father-"

"Jin Guangshan had it coming."

"Of course, of course. But did you hear about his wife?"

"His *son!*"

"And did you know? The Yiling Patriarch was proven innocent!"

With Hanguang-jun's impeccable reputation, and all four of the great clan leaders supporting the same story, the common folk and cultivators had no choice but to accept their explanation. And, if they picked the story the clan leaders offered, they would be forced to accept Wei Wuxian's innocence as well.

Now, all everyone — from cultivators to civilians to sect leaders to *children* — wanted to talk about was Wei Wuxian's proclaimed innocence. Once Wei Wuxian was brought up, Lan Wangji was sure to follow.

"Our glorious new Chief Cultivator."

"Yes, even when the whole world told him he was wrong, he stayed on the side of justice, even getting scars to prove his loyalty to truth."

"He was the *only one* who wasn't tricked by Jin Guangyao and Jin Guangshan. They only one who stayed on the side of justice. He is truly Hanguang-jun."

"And I heard he's getting married to the Yiling Patriarch!"

"Really?" they would ask, as if they didn't already know. "How wonderful."

Because Wei Wuxian might have been proven innocent to all of them, but that was only innocence in terms of intention. No one would deny the fact that he was still the *weapon* used

to kill 5,000 cultivators in a single night.

He was no less dangerous.

(Only more useful, allowing them to make infinitely preposterous requests for his time and inventions and research while still scaring their children into behaving with his name.)

“No one will dare cause trouble for Hanguang-jun and the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation.”

“With him in charge and the Yiling Patriarch keeping him there, we’ll never have to worry about being tricked by an evil like Jin Guangyao again!”

Unquestionable villains being defeated by romantic heroes would always be the most interesting version of events.

(And anything was better than admitting *they* were in the wrong.)

“I’m glad Hanguang-jun has him.”

“Yes, if the second young master of the Lan sect keeps him on a leash, we have nothing to worry about.”

“Under the right hands, he’s the world’s most powerful tool. We’ll never have to worry about a cultivation war again!”

“Truly, this is the beginning of an era of peace.”

And Jiang Cheng knew they were wrong — knew Lan Wangji would rather *die* than keep Wei Ying imprisoned — but that didn’t stop those words from reminding him that it was no longer his job to make sure. He didn’t have a *right* ensure Wei Wuxian was living happily. Not anymore.

It seemed like the whole world was trying to rub it in his face that Wei Wuxian was no longer part of the Yunmeng Jiang sect, and he had no one but himself to blame.

“...Back then, the LanlingJin sect, the QinghеNie sect, and the GusuLans Sect had already finished fighting over the biggest share. The rest could only get some small shrimps. You, on the other hand, had just rebuilt Lotus Pier and behind you was the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian, the danger of whom was immeasurable. Do you think the other sects would like to see a young sect leader who was so advantaged? Luckily, you didn’t seem to be on good terms with your shixiong, and since everyone thought there was an opportunity, of course they’d add fuels to your fire if they could. No matter what, to weaken the Yunmeng Jiang Sect was to strengthen themselves. Sect Leader Jiang, if only your attitude towards your shixiong was just a bit better, showing everyone that your bond was too strong to be broken, or if you exhibited just a bit more tolerance after what happened, things wouldn’t have become what they were.”

Even knowing that Jin Guangyao couldn’t be trusted, and even though it was probably only said as a response to what Jiang Cheng said, he couldn’t get those words out of his head.

“Just go talk to him!” Jin Ling shouted. “Senior-I mean… We both know Wei Wuxian *wants* to reconnect with you! Your relationship isn’t irreparable jiujiu! It’s obvious he misses you!”

But what Jin Ling didn’t understand was that Wei Wuxian *always* forgave slights against himself. He held a grudge against Jin Zixuan for years, and hated Wen Chao with an erupting passion, but even after coming back to life never held any real animosity for Jin Guangshang or Jin Guangyao or Su She or even *him*.

He was always looking forward.

(Not like Jiang Cheng. Never like him.)

If their situations were reversed, and Wei Wuxian had exterminated the newly-rebuilt Lotus Pier, he would never forgive the other; he wouldn’t give Wei Wuxian an opportunity to forgive him.

Of course, repeating that thought like a mantra in his head became significantly harder when Wei Wuxian was all anyone wanted to talk about.

(Jiang Cheng hates them all. He hates the mindless worms who gossip and the clans whose opinions bounce back and forth and the Jin sect for focusing on Wei Ying instead of helping Jin Ling and the Nie sect for leading the gossip under Huaisang and the Jiang sect for continuing to talk and the Lan sect for taking his brother away and stupid, stupid Wei Wuxian ~~and himself~~ and so much more.)

After failing (repeatedly) to get his own sect to stop talking about his brother, he decided to go find Jin Ling. His nephew might also enjoy talking about Wei Wuxian, but at least he actually *knew* the man rather than getting all his information from the local watermelon sellers.

The only problem was that, when he wasn’t seeing Jiang Cheng or running the Jin sect, Jin Ling spent all his time in the Cloud Recesses!

Jiang Cheng scowled, speeding through the sky and praying that he wouldn’t run into Wei Wuxian when he visited.

The white void around the watchers vanished as the Cloud Recesses faded into existence.

“The 18th year of the Reign of Xuangzheng, Cloud Recesses,” Lan Sizhui’s voice narrated again.

Their surroundings switched, and they saw Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng running through a bamboo forest. As if it wasn’t obvious enough, Wei Wuxian’s color-divergent but otherwise identical Yunmeng Jiang sect robes proved they were being shown the teenage Wei Ying and Jiang Cheng.

“Here we are! Let’s take a break” Wei Wuxian shouted, panting heavily.

Being abruptly confronted by what would have happened without them being dragged into the vision suddenly filled Madam Jin with a sense of worry. They had no way to contact the outside world, but she knew without a doubt that the immobilization or perhaps outright *disappearance* of the 16 most powerful leaders would throw the world into disarray. She prayed the sects would remain standing until they got out.

The pair finally returned to the watcher's lines of sight as they left the forest to walk across a stone bridge, giving them a perfect view of the Gusu mountains. While Wei Wuxian stretched excitedly, Jiang Cheng quickly straightened his robes out and turned to his brother with a scowl.

"If you get up late again tomorrow, I definitely won't wait for you," he declared.

To everyone who knew their relationship intimately, these words were no surprise.

However, to the people whose greatest understanding of the pair was the simulation's previous segments, they couldn't be more shocking.

"Huh. You don't hate each other."

"Of course not!" Jiang Cheng shouted, nearly standing out of his chair while trying to emphasize his insistence. Cracking a smile in response, Nie Mingjue allowed the assertion without complaint.

It was obvious Jiang Cheng needed to defend the authenticity of his relationship with Wei Wuxian. If Nie Mingjue was shown a divide between him and Huaisang, he was sure he would be behaving the same way.

Wei Wuxian gave a careless chuckle in response, easily threading fingers through his silky hair as he turned around.

"I was only just barely late. The worst punishment I can get is to stand in the corner!"

"Oh, look!" Jiang Yanli whispered to Jin Zixuan, pointing toward the nearby path where the simulation's version of him began to approach.

He turned, forcing himself to not blush at her close proximity.

"Zixuan-xiong," Jiang Cheng greeted, both Yunmeng boys bowing immediately.

The Jin heir flicked a careless glance over, before preforming an equally disrespectful mockery of a bow.

Normally, Jin Zixuan wouldn't have cared. He was used to barely interacting with others, and often made no effort to get close to anyone from different sects.

But, somehow, seeing that felt *wrong*.

Jiang Cheng had stood by his side while his parents argued, creating a silent show of support which Huaisang had later joined as well. Jiang Yanli had unquestionable, genuine kindness,

with none of the additional motives he had learned to expect from people.

He didn't like this feeling.

"I-" he began, then cut off, cheeks flushing. Several people glanced his way, but turned back once they saw he wasn't going to add anything.

Then, silently, he preformed a proper bow in Jiang Cheng's direction even though the other boy was facing away and couldn't see it.

The only two who saw were Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang, who shared an amused chuckle as they made eye contact.

Once Jin Zixuan had left completely, Wei Wuxian relaxed his bow with a scornful huff.

"He's becoming more and more presentable."

Lost in self-reflection, Jin Zixuan didn't bother to comment on the boy's scorn.

"Jin Clan of Lanling, as rich as the princes," Jiang Cheng agreed. "He's the heir of the Jin Clan. He has to be presentable."

"Hmm?" Wei Wuxian responded, bringing a hand to his chin as he watched with mischievous contemplation.

Jiang Cheng elbowed him.

"Huh?"

"Ah!" Wei Wuxian stumbled momentarily, before righting himself and rubbing his back tenderly.

Jiang Cheng was not amused.

"Don't get any ideas," he lectured. "I'm warning you. No matter what, Jin Zixuan is still my sister's fiance. He'll be family one day. You will have to bear with it."

Madam Jin was still diffused by the revelation of her son's possible death, so Jin Zixuan was the only one left to feel grateful toward his soon-to-be in-law. He had seen what Wei Wuxian had done to the Mos; experiencing the same would have been unbearable.

"The Orchid room?" Wei Wuxian asked as the watchers view changed to random pieces of scenery in the Cloud Recesses. "Huh. The name's not bad, but the old man who teaches is so stubborn."

Hiding a huffed laugh, Jiang Fengmian turned to Lan Qiren and gave a slight bow, "I apologize. A-Xian tends to be too free with his words."

Lan Qiren looked as though he was about to delve into a lecture, but Lan Xichen stepped forward immediately and bowed back.

“No need for that, Sect Leader Jiang. None of the people being shown asked for this to happen. I’m sure such a great violation of privacy will cause many similar incidents in the future.”

Despite wanting to disagree, the lack of Wei Wuxian — the one who had actually made the comment — allowed Lan Qiren to drop the argument with a dignified nod.

”But he’s extraordinary indeed. However useless one may be, he can turn them into presentable men.”

“Hah. Am I not presentable enough right now?”

“Ha! As though he could be!” Wen Chao cackled, causing Jiang Cheng’s smirk and Jiang Yanli’s pleased smile to vanish. It would have been a much more enjoyable experience if the Wens weren’t included.

(Though the whimper Wen Chao made following Wen Ruohan's unimpressed raised eyebrow was amusing.)

Farther down the path, one visiting cultivator dressed in gray and gold robes turned to face the pair.

Nie Mingjue blinked.

He had seen the back of his brother in the last segment, but this was his first frontal viewing. Unable to resist, he made his way over until he was standing directly in front of the simulation, his real brother following closely behind. He nearly did a double-take.

The Huaisangs were indistinguishable.

”Jiang-xiong! Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang cheerfully greeted.

“You are definitely going to be the one spot staining his whole teaching career,” Jiang Cheng told his brother, but nodded in response to Huaisang’s greeting.

An older disciple next to Huaisang furrowed his brow in confusion.

“Wuxian is only a disciple of the Jiang Clan. How come he’s able to study at Gusu?”

If Jiang Cheng could have punched the man, he would have. It was only made worse by how much his mother seemed to agree.

”Wuxian’s parents were friends of Jiang Fengmian, who’s treated him like his own,” Nie Huaisang responded.

“Oh, I see.”

“Or *as* his own,” Madam Yu hissed under her breath. Her husband had never confirmed her suspicions, but she refused to discount the possibility of Wei Wuxian’s true lineage.

Jiang Fengmian frowned, but turned away, not knowing what to say.

Playfully, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian began nudging each other as they walked. The scene was a stark contrast to the interrogations and whipping which had taken place in the supposed future.

“No wonder Jiang Cheng and Wuxian get along so well. They’re like brothers!”

Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli nodded furiously in agreement. If there was one thing the pair hadn’t believed about the simulation, it was the supposed dissolution of their relationship.

(However, if their current relationship was being accurately shown, then perhaps that future was also-)

”Jiang-xiong. Wei-xiong. I’d say enjoy your stay, but the Jiang Sect’s lotus pier is much more fun than here, isn’t it?”

“Hmm. Depends on how you have fun,” Wei Wuxian responded. “There definitely aren’t as many rules. We don’t have to wake up this early either.”

“Hm? We start at 5:00 am here. It’s not that bad, right?” Huaisang asked as his fan crept open. “When do you two get up?”

“Him?” Jiang Cheng scoffed playfully, as Wei Wuxian yawned. “He rises at 9 and sleeps at 1. Instead of practicing swordplay, he goes to hunt pheasants and fool around.”

“I’m the best in hunting pheasants!”

Lan Qiren frowned disapprovingly at the proclamation, and almost everyone else just rolled their eyes, but Wen Ruohan found himself growing even more interested. Not much was known about Wei Wuxian’s skill. There were rumors regarding his parents and true status in the Jiang clan, but most reports simply agreed that he was a powerful head disciple. Plenty of talent, but no motivation to cultivate at beyond his already-outstanding pace.

(Then, the Wen Clan gave him motivation, and he revolutionized the world.)

”I want to go study at Yunmeng next year! No one will stop me!”

Nie Mingjue raised a very telling eyebrow at his brother, who in turn quickly hid behind a snickering Jiang Cheng.

His companion patted his back, responding “Huaisang, no one will stop you. Your brother will just break your legs.”

Wei Wuxian giggled at the comment, adding “Honestly, you can still have fun in Gusu.”

Lan Wangji imperceptibly perked up, feeling personally invested in Wei Wuxian’s enjoyment of Gusu but unable to discern the reason why.

”Are you kidding me, Wei-xiong? A piece of advice for you, this place doesn’t tolerate misbehavior,” Nie Huaisang explained, leaning in to whisper conspiratorially. “Now that you’re in Gusu, make sure to never mess with this one man.”

This time, it was Wen Xu who scoffed, and Wen Xu who was met with Wen Ruohan’s disapproving gaze.

“Who? Lan Qiren?”

“Not that old man, but his favorite student-”

Paired with Huaisang’s words, the watchers were allowed to observe a man in Gusu Lan robes from the back as he deftly straightened his appearance.

“-Lan Zhan, one of the Lan Brothers.”

“Lan Zhan of the Twin Jades of Lan? Lan Wangji?”

“Of course. He’s a perfect example of the legendary ‘other people’s children’ that parents tell you to compare yourself to. Heavens, he’s the same age as us, but he’s got no youthful energy. He’s in charge of discipline. Everyone here fears him.”

A stinging bite of displeasure gnawed at Lan Wangji’s mind in response to the description. For the dozens of disrespectful disciples learning at the Gusu Lan Sect, that was a fine first impression to have of him, but for Wei Wuxian-

It was only years of self-control that kept him from childishly glaring at Huaisang’s true self.

Though, judging by his brother’s expression, perhaps he wasn’t hiding as well as he wished he was.

”Is he a boy who looks quite handsome? Dressed in white, wearing a ribbon, carrying a silver sword on his back? And with his sour face, he looks like he’s at a funeral?”

‘*Handsome?*’ Lan Wangji echoed mentally. ‘*Shameless!*’

The tips of his ears burned crimson.

”Yeah, that’s him. However, he likes to meditate alone, so how did you see….”

Nie Huaisang trailed off, his eyes laying on the very person he was just talking about, sitting calmly and facing away from them. As the wind blew both his hair and the ends of his ribbon to the left, Lan Wangji turned his head to face them.

With the early morning sun behind him, he gained an ethereal presence.

Wei Wuxian laughed nervously.

Wen Qing’s lips momentarily cracked upward in an amused smile. She hadn’t forgotten what Wei Wuxian had made her brother into — a cold, dead, lifeless, *soulless* corpse which even

she couldn't save — but the boy before her wasn't that man yet.

She doubted she would ever forgive him, but she could acknowledge that the simulation's 15 year old Wei Wuxian didn't deserve to die.

Not yet.

Unfreezing after a moment, Nie Huaisang glanced speculatively toward Lan Wangji, then slowly turned until his extended fan pointed toward Wei Wuxian.

Wei Ying refused to make eye contact.

In an instant, Nie Huaisang's fan had opened to cover everything below his eyes as he glared disapprovingly at his still-turned-away friend.

"Wuxian… have you done something wrong?"

"Ah… well…."

The bright morning sky darkened to night immediately, returning the audience to Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian's first confrontation on the roof.

Lan Wangji's icy gaze fell on Wei Wuxian, containing none of the deep passion found in the previous segment. With the barest trace of acknowledgement, he spoke.

"You are not allowed in until 7 am tomorrow. Get out."

To Xichen's confusion, those words made Lan Wangji relax just slightly. He had been worried the story could continue unrealistically depicting him as possessing no restraint, but it seemed the past, at least, was accurate.

"Emperor's Smile!" Wei Wuxian responded, thrusting one of the jars forward. "I'll give you a jar, so could you pretend you never saw me?"

While Huaisang snickered at the futile negotiation attempt, Madam Yu frowned.

"Apologies," she begrudgingly said at last. "He truly should know better."

Lan Xichen shook his head to convey how unnecessary the apology was, but Lan Qiren nodded in acceptance. Although this was a relatively minor infraction, knowing the boy's parents, more severe ones were sure to follow.

Including Demonic Cultivation.

"You can't drink here."

"Is there anything we *can* do here?"

"The rules are listed on the Rock of Disciplines. Go see for yourself."

Wei Wuxian sighed in response, turning around so he could sit on a nearby branch instead.

“Your house rules have more than 3,000 lines. Who’d look at that?”

Lan Wangji’s glare deepened.

“Ah, alright, alright. Liquor is prohibited in the Cloud Recesses. Then, if I don’t go in and drink it on the wall, it wouldn’t be a violation, right?”

“That isn’t the *point* of the rules,” Lan Qiren lectured, then rubbed his temples, realizing it was pointless to try to interfere.

Gleefully, Wei Wuxian tore the jar’s covering off with his mouth, then lifted it above his head. Slowly, liquor began pouring out, a significant portion missing its mark.

Small streams of liquid began trailing down the pale expanse of his neck, soaking his clothes but giving him an unnatural shine in the dim moonlight.

He looked *ethereal*.

“*...Wow.*”

“HUAISANG!”

“What?! We were all thinking it!”

Several people scoffed in disgust, but Huaisang quietly noticed no one denied it. Noticing this as well, Jiang Cheng and Jiang Fengmian simply gave tired sighs (though one considerably more amused than the other). They could never think of someone who was all but family that way, but they were neither blind nor ignorant to the way Wei Wuxian attracted eyes like a magnet despite his lack of family status.

By this point, they had simply grown numb to the feeling.

What they hadn’t become numb to, however, was the icky sensation which crept up their spines when they saw the considering look Jin Guangshan was giving Wei Wuxian.

Lan Wangji then blinked, seemingly snapping out of his shock, and immediately drew his sword.

Lan Qiren wanted to disapprove of his nephew jumping to an unsanctioned battle so quickly, but he knew first hand how tempting that was around people like Cangse Sanren (and, now, Wei Wuxian). If anything, he was just grateful that his nephew was still trying to uphold the rules.

The blade struck forward, attempting to destroy the jar, but Wei Wuxian slipped out of the way just in time. Lan Wangji sliced the air and cut it in two, but continued to miss his target with every attempt as Wei Wuxian narrowly dodged.

Bichen struck forward, and its opponent immediately wrapped the jar's strings around the blade, momentarily stalling it. Then, Lan Wangji brought his blade to the sky, shattering the jar.

The contrast was intriguing.

While most members of the audience were preoccupied with being impressed with or simply amused by the fight, Wen Ruohan's mind observed something else entirely.

Based on the battle before them, it could be said that Lan Wangji's fighting was the pinnacle of order, while Wei Wuxian's style was the pinnacle of freedom. Lan Wangji used millennia old techniques and rules which had been hammered into him until he was tapered like a fine blade; Wei Wuxian bounced off the surrounding trees and used whatever tools he had on him to his advantage, adapting within seconds.

They were a nearly-perfect balance.

"Huh?" the simulation's Huaisang asked, and they were instantly thrust back to the next day. "It's prohibited here to go out at night, drink alcohol, or fight privately. You-you've already broken three rules!"

Contrary to his friend's shock, Jiang Cheng just rubbed his eyes tiredly, muttering "Three rules in one night. You really are a special snowflake, aren't you?"

A long, tired sigh was breathed out through Lan Qiren's nose as he rubbed his eyes. Even though the vision hadn't yet shown his class with the ~~demonic cultivator~~ boy as his student, he could already predict how taxing it would be.

He silently lamented that the vision couldn't offer them any soothing tea.

Rather than showing the slightest bit of regret, Wei Wuxian merely pouted.

"There are more rules than ants," he mumbled, crossing his arms like a child.

In turning away from his friend, he moved to a new angle which allowed him to see something that attracted his attention like a spirit to a summoning: Lan Wangji.

Even after Wei Ying's explanation, Lan Wangji had not looked away from the trio. Under the other boy's befuddled gaze, he narrowed his eyes further into a disapproving glare.

Nie Huaisang silently slid away.

A few smiles were shared at the obvious childishness of boys being boys, but most of the adults couldn't relax. The more they saw the kids playing around and acting like the children they were, the more authentic the video seemed. And if this was real, who was to say that the predicted future of war and pain couldn't be true as well?

And Jiang Cheng-

With the casual nature of a gesture between brothers, Jiang Cheng put his hand on Wei Wuxian's shoulder.

"He's watching you. Good luck."

Wei Wuxian thought the warning over for a moment, before tilting his head teasingly and smirking as if he found the prospect of Lan Wangji's challenge entertaining. He probably did.

Jiang Yanli bit her lip and turned away, unable to face her brothers acting so normal as the fear of what might happen in the future crept up on her. Seeing this, Jin Zixuan wanted to comfort her, but flushed and turned away.

He had plenty of half-siblings, but he didn't even know their names. He had no parallel to Jiang Cheng's relationship with Wei Wuxian to draw on, and no experience to know how such an obviously inseparable bond could have been… separated.

None of this made any sense!

"Good morning, sir!" the students chorused as the disciple exchange began.

Having been brought inside the large lecture hall, the watching cultivators spread out. Unable to resist, Jin Zixuan walked toward the illusion of himself, standing before him and observing intently. His parents followed, and the Nie brothers did the same with Huaisang.

In response to his student's greeting, the simulation's Lan Qiren merely gave a considering hum, then ordered the students to "Be seated."

With a soft thump, an enormous scroll unrolled itself until it was crossing the entirety of the room. Thousands of small letters were just barely visible from where the watchers were standing.

To Nie Huaisang, who remembered how his last stay at Gusu went, the scroll brought about an unnerving sensation of dread.

Wei Wuxian gaped openly when he saw the length.

"House rules of the Lan Clan:" Lan Qiren recited in near-monotone. "No private fighting, no promiscuity, no killing inside the city, no wandering around at night-"

Only a handful of seconds had passed before Wei Wuxian relaxed, setting his elbow on the table and resting his chin on his hand, disbelief written across his face.

"-no shouting, no rushing, no smirking, no sitting hunched over-"

To the watching Lan Wangji's surprise, Wei Wuxian's eyes soon drifted over to his simulation's seated figure. Despite the tiresome repetition of words he surely knew by heart, the Lan boy still sat straight up, looking forward intently.

Most of the teenagers (and Jin Guangshan) had begun to zone out only seconds after Wei Wuxian did, justifying it to themselves that they weren't actually present in the class. So, the sight of both the real and fake Lan Wangji still watching the explanation with proper respect was staggering.

"He's terrifying" Nie Huaisang muttered, to the silent agreement of all the teenagers and even a few of the adults. Opposite to them, Wen Xu watched with something akin to patronizing amusement.

What would it take to break the Second Jade's facade?

'*How can he listen to something so boring?*' Wei Wuxian wondered, more rudely mirroring the thoughts of many of the watchers.

"...no-" a sharp wack struck the classroom as Lan Qiren cut off, causing Wei Wuxian to turn back to him. "I'm reciting them one by one because no one reads them. Let's see if anybody continues to use *ignorance* as justification for breaking the rules.."

'*Is he talking about me?*' Wei Wuxian wondered cheerily.

"Yes!" Jiang Cheng responded, running a hand through his hair in exasperation. Even through that, he couldn't stop a small smile from sticking to his face.

Yes, *this* was Wei Wuxian, the brother he remembered playing with and protecting from dogs; the one who didn't know demonic cultivation and wouldn't have felt the need to run from Lan Wangji.

"Since someone is still not paying attention," Lan Qiren continued, "alright then, I'll tell you something else. Wei Ying?"

"Here!" the boy responded, throwing a hand into the air and giggling.

As if struck, Lan Wangji flinched, eyes widening in realization. The smile, laugh, and teasing nature were all too similar to that of the woman he had his brother gone to see every month without fail.

(The one whose house he kept returning to, even after she was gone.)

"What was the profession of the Qinghe Nie sect's founder?"

"Butcher."

"What type of white peony is the symbol of the Lanling Jin sect?"

"Sparks amidst snow."

"Who was the first in the cultivation world to focus on the rise of his clan rather than his sect?"

"The founder of the Qishan Wen sect, Wen Mao."

When their sects were mentioned, each of the clan members perked up slightly, focusing intently and becoming even more impressed.

They knew from the visions of the future that Wei Wuxian was intelligent, but, based on his personality, they wouldn't have pegged him as someone book smart as well.

"Huh. That's amazing," Nie Huaisang whispered. As the person standing closest to him, Jiang Cheng heard the utterance and responded with a barely-hidden smirk.

"Yeah, that idiot hates reading when he's forced to, but he'll still spend half his free time in the library. He knows plenty because he likes learning, but no one's ever been able to force him to learn something when he doesn't care."

"How do yao, mo, gui, and guai differ?"

"Yao come from living plants and animals, mo from humans, gui from the dead, and guai from dead plants and animals."

Jiang Cheng, who had tensed while Wei Wuxian answered, finally relaxed as his brother finished correctly.

Simultaneously, the real Jiang Cheng let go of the breath he had been holding in.

Frowning, Lan Qiren explained, "As a disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang sect, you should know these facts like the back of your hand. Answering correctly is nothing to take pride in."

Although Lan Qiren understood his other self's attempt, he couldn't shake the feeling that his strategy would be useless against the son of Cangse Sanren.

'*You must carry on, Wei-xiong!*' several other disciples thought. '*Please don't give Lan Qiren a chance to call on anyone else!*'

An amused smile danced across Lan Xichen's face as he observed his uncle and brother's outraged reactions. Truly, Wei Wuxian was no more internally shameless than anyone else, he just had no qualms about outwardly expressing it.

"Hmm," Lan Qiren began walking closer to the students. "There is an executioner who has both parents and children. He beheaded over 100 people. After he died, no one buried him. Full of resentment, his ghost haunts the streets. What should we do?"

"Well…" Wei Wuxian trailed off, bringing his hand to rest at his chin as he thought.

Both Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu were surprised; even if she disliked admitting it, they both knew it was rare for Wei Wuxian to stumble on a problem.

Leaning down as much as possible to hide his face in his book, Nie Huaisang shook slightly.

"Don't choose me. Don't choose me."

Nie Mingjue was about to glare sharply at his brother, but a snicker from the side distracted him. Apparently, Wen Chao found what he saw from an intrusion into their private lives amusing.

He opened his mouth to speak, however-

“Silence,” Wen Ruohan commanded sharply. Once again, Nie Mingjue was surprised. This was not the first time Wen Ruohan had stopped his children from speaking out against the other sects, which was at odds with the arrogant Sun Sect Leader’s usual behavior. He couldn’t figure out what the man’s motives were.

Wen Qing frowned similarly, clenching her first and practically glaring at Wei Wuxian to make sure she didn’t turn her eyes upon her sect leader.

Wen Ruohan, meanwhile, was ignoring his confused children, cousin, and fellow sect leaders, observing instead. The other sects might be willing to look at the experience as comparable to mere recreational entertainment, but Wen Ruohan knew the opportunity this presented.

This would be the unfiltered casual behavior of the people most likely to lead the next generation, and a unique look into the current sect leaders' reactions to it. If he managed to make them forget the Wen sect was watching (keeping his own cards close to his chest as he learned what caused their defeat), they would be more willing to act genuinely. Even discounting the invention of Demonic Cultivation, this would be a near-unparalleled chance to obtain information.

Information about the other sects, of course; it was unlikely there was anything this would teach him about his sons, so there was no benefit to allowing them to talk.

”Wangji, you tell him how to solve this,” Lan Qiren instructed.

Standing up calmly, Lan Wangji complied, “Talk to him first. Remind him of his family and calm him down. Find out his unfulfilled wish, clear what is chaining him to this world. Force him to leave if that doesn’t work.”

Wei Wuxian, who had continued to stand in a contemplative position throughout the explanation, suddenly brightened in realization.

“If he refuses to repent, destroy him.”

Wei Wuxian sat down, ignoring the rest of the class and pulling out a blank piece of paper to write on.

A foreboding premonition struck Lan Qiren, and he had a feeling this would not end the way the fake-him was hoping it would. Based on the expression Jiang Fengmian was making, the Jiang Sect Leader likely felt the same.

(That expression was at least better than the undisguised interest in Wen Ruohan’s eyes.)

”That’s the procedure we should follow,” Lan Wangji concluded, but both his and Nie Huaisang’s eyes were firmly on Wei Wuxian.

As if summoned by those gazes, Wei Wuxian finished writing and announced, "I have doubts. Find out his unfulfilled wish, and clear whatever is allowing him to cling to this world? But what do we do if his obsession is revenge?"

"We'll use force when it's necessary," Lan Wangji countered, his eyes turned back to his uncle in the front. "Destroy him if we have to."

"What a waste! It's not that I didn't know the answer, I was just thinking of a fourth option."

Wen Ruohan's focus remained firmly on Wei Wuxian, while Jin Guangshan glanced between the surrounding cultivators, observing their reactions.

"I've never heard of any other solutions."

"Here," Wei Wuxian offered, holding the paper out to the Lan disciple. On it, a cartoonish but expressive drawing depicted a man digging up graves.

"A-Xian," Jiang Fengmian muttered in worried reproach, his eyes darting briefly to Wen Ruohan before returning to his pseudo-son. The other sect leader's attention didn't leave the Jiang's ward.

"**The executioner died a violent death and is full of wrath. Given the number of people he beheaded, why don't we… dig up the graves of those killed by him, and gather their ghosts to fight with him?!"**

Every cultivator sucked in a breath.

While the copies that the vision projected reacted with shock (or long-suffering exasperation, given Jiang Cheng's facepalm), the gathered cultivators's reactions were even more justified.

Because these were no longer the mere musings of a boy looking to cause a fuss. These were the words of the man who would one day go on to invent genuine demonic cultivation.

Who knew how much he had already thought through?

Wen Ruohan's smile widened.

A stick came down with a crack and Lan Qiren whacked the hand which had been holding the paper, causing it to fall to the ground.

"How dare you?!" Lan Qiren growled. "Our goal is to liberate and purify those evil spirits. You're trying to make evil fight evil? You would be reversing the natural order… *completely ignoring ethics and morality*!"

He threw a scroll towards Wei Wuxian, but the boy simply ducked and allowed the object to smack Nie Huaisang in the eyes instead.

Huaisang, who had been standing next to his virtual-self, jumped at the attack and squeaked in fear. Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan gave simultaneous sighs, quickly being calmed down by

Wei Wuxian's playful, shameless nature. Yanli laughed when she saw.

On the other hand, the Lan brothers were shocked. Yes, what Wei Wuxian said was inexcusable, but they had never seen their uncle lose composure in such a way.

"Spiritual energy is energy, but resentment and wrath can become types of energy too," Wei Wuxian continued unfalteringly. "Why can't we make good use of them? When Yu the Great tamed the flood, obstruction was the inferior method and redirection was superior. Suppression is the same as obstruction, so isn't it inferior?"

Disappointment had sunk into Jiang Fengmian's features. He had hoped, even if Wei Wuxian had truly used demonic cultivation, that the circumstances would justify it. Unfortunately, it seemed as if idle curiosity was his ward's only motivation.

Lan Qiren glared down, demanding "Then tell me. How can you be sure the resentful energy follows your commands and doesn't harm innocents?! What if you lose control?!"

Knowing the dubious circumstances surrounding her daughter's death, Madam Yu couldn't help but grit her teeth in worry.

But Wei Wuxian simply hummed to himself, acknowledging "Good question. Haven't figured that out yet."

"If you *had* figured it out, the cultivation world would not let you live! Get lost!"

"Goodbye!" Wei Wuxian responded, running out with a cackle.

Nie Huaisang and Jin Zixuan snorted at the boy's audacity (and many others transitioned into full-blown laughter), but Jiang Cheng's mind flashed back to the first thing the simulation had shown them:

"Great news! The Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian, is dead!" the civilians had declared.

He bit his lip, forcing himself to remain silent. It wasn't like Lan Qiren could have *known* allowing Wei Wuxian to continue would lead to his brother's death. Why would the man have considered it to be anything other than a simple prank? He couldn't blame the Lan elder.

And yet….

Unbeknown to Jiang Cheng, Lan Qiren's thoughts were running along a parallel trail.

The vision faded to black for a moment, before clearing up to reveal a tranquil lake at night. A lake which they all stood far above.

Wen Chao may or may not have shrieked at the transition. Before, they had been standing on the floor of the Lan Sect's classroom. Now, they stood in the air, suspended by nothing they could see yet feeling a pressure under their feet all the same.

As cultivators, all of them were well-accustomed to heights. Nonetheless, seeing people and chairs floating in the sky without swords couldn't be anything but off-putting.

Several people stood on the pier below, talking worriedly between themselves.

"How come the boat's not here yet?"

"Exactly! We've waited so long already. Hopefully nothing's happened."

An infant's cries permeated the air.

Both Yanli and Zixuan were abruptly reminded of their own infant, babbling in joy when he was held in their arms.

Right before the simulation had shown Jiang Yanli's corpse.

Their good mood extinguished like a doused candle.

"Oh! I see it! It's here!" one of the waiting civilians shouted.

From the distance, a boat rapidly approached, cutting through the water like a blade.

"Here comes the boat! Pack your things and get ready!"

Abruptly tensing, Wen Ruohan glanced down at the water, causing everyone else to follow shortly after. A second later, they realized what the Wen sect leader saw.

Barely visible in the night — camouflaged to the point where non-cultivators would never notice — a tendril of resentful energy approached. It spread as long as the boat, then from the boat to the pier, and continued expanding until it looped across the entirety of the coast.

Several watchers stepped back nervously.

The lake immediately became turbulent, making the boat shook violently. Cyclones of water burst into the air, approaching the boat like starving wolves.

"Water ghosts! We're doomed!"

"Water ghosts don't behave like that!"

"It must be something even more dreadful!"

Most of the adults had a sneaking suspicion as to what it could be, but they silently prayed they were wrong.

(Or, in the case of the Jin and Wen sect leaders, prayed they would get to watch the to-be Yiling Patriarch battle against it.)

"How-how do we deal with it?"

As soon as the man spoke, his prayers were seemingly answered. Numerous cultivators descended from the sky, surrounding the being and announcing their presence.

“The Wen Clan has arrived to cleanse evil! All of you leave!”

Wen Chao bounced excitedly in his seat, but was careful not to say anything.

”To your position!”

The sky lit up with the golden seals the cultivators produced, shining like dim suns in the cloudy sky before combining into a single large seal. Lightning-esque ribbons looped around the pillars of water, and the watching civilians only barely escaped the enormous, crashing waves.

For a brief instant, Lan Xichen frowned disapprovingly at the disregard shown for the innocent’s safety, before he quickly covered it up with a politely neutral expression.

It seemed Wen Ruohan was taking great delight in watching their reactions.

The waves calmed at last, settling into a lazy tumble.

“It’s done,” the leader declared. “You can all safely pass through now.”

“Done?” Lan Xichen repeated, making eye contact with his uncle only to see an equal amount of confusion.

Jiang Fengmian furrowed his brow, slowly realizing what had just happened.

Jin Guangshan chuckled.

The crowd thanked the Wen cultivators, not recognizing the odd circumstances.

Another Wen approached the leader, leaning in to whisper, “Isn’t this quite inappropriate? We were ordered to destroy it, and we only pushed it downstream.”

The teenagers all felt their eyes widen, and Lan Wangji was most shocked of all. With their proper upbringings, they would have never *considered* simply directing it away.

”What’s inappropriate?” the man responded. “That creature under the water is powerful. It’s easier said than done to kill it.”

“But the downstream reaches the boundary of the Lan Clan. I’m afraid-”

“Ha! Afraid of what? Today, most sects depend on us. The Lan Clan alone won’t pose a threat.”

Three pairs of hands clenched into fists as the Wen brothers silently preened. Abruptly, the words of a future Wei Wuxian passed through their minds.

‘*All these years, and the Lan Clan still hasn’t changed. Why bother being so polite? Hilarious!*’

All three knew and respected their rules, but it was times like these that they internally wished they were allowed a bit more freedom of expression.

(That feeling only increased when they saw Wen Ruohan’s entirely unrepentant smirk. Based on how the simulation had been structured so far, it was likely those Wen disciple’s actions would cause Wei Wuxian to come into contact with the abyss. He was intrigued by the possibility of witnessing Wei Wuxian’s reaction to a foe that completely outclassed him.)

(Nie Mingjue silently scoffed. Wen Ruohan could at least *pretend* to feel guilty.)

In the next instant, they had returned to the Cloud Recesses, watching as Wei Wuxian dipped the tip of a branch into a lake of koi fish.

“Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang called, presumably having just been let out of class.

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian murmured as he turned to face his friend and brother. Both Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang were beginning to approach, with Lan Wangji watching from behind.

Lan Wangji sincerely prayed none of the other him’s thoughts would be read aloud. The spirits had done that several times for further exposition, but the gathered crowd really didn’t need to know how his mind kept drifting to the many ways Wei Wuxian’s eyes resembled piercing moonbeams.

Wei Wuxian perked up as he noticed his ~~favorite victim~~ friend, shouting “Wangji!” across the path. In response, Lan Wangji simply turned and walked away.

The real Lan Wangji breathed an internal sigh of relief, grateful his fear seemed to have been unnecessary for the time being.

”He ignored me,” Wei Wuxian observed cheerily.

“What did you expect?” Jiang Cheng asked with a raised eyebrow. “Remember what you answered in class? You’re impossible! He’s probably just like Lan Qiren, who thinks you’re evil to the core.”

“Yeah, Lan Wangji usually… no, he’s never been that rude. Though, given what you did….”

Wei Wuxian laughed, “Lan Qiren asked and I answered. He told me to get out, so I got out. What else would he have me do?”

“Doesn’t it seem like Lan Qiren is especially strict towards you? He keeps directing his scolding and questions at you.”

The boy did have a point. After the emperor’s smile incident on the first night, the simulation’s Lan Qiren had no doubt his other self had written Wei Wuxian off as another

Cangse Sanren, and tried to respond accordingly. Obviously, he had been less subtle than he hoped.

“It serves him right. What sort of answer is that?” Jiang Cheng demanded. “It’s fine if he spouts nonsense at home, but he dared to say these in front of Lan Qiren. What were you thinking?!”

Wei Wuxian shrugged, “No matter how I answered it, he wouldn’t like me, so I might as well just say what I wanted to say. Anyways, I wasn’t trying to offend him. I was just answering properly.”

Here, Lan Qiren was forced to look away, his mind suddenly completing a theory which had been nagging at him for some time. If Wei Wuxian originally came up with the idea in his class, then was he partly to blame? If he had managed to maintain restraint and avoid projecting his feelings of Cangse Sanren onto her son, would Wei Wuxian have ever considered such a diabolic path?

He mentally promised himself to never allow Xichen or Wangji to experience such temptation.

“But honestly, I think what you said makes sense!” Nie Huaisang added. “I don’t know how many years it’ll take someone like me to cultivate to strength step by step. The wrath and resentment of vengeful ghosts can be readily used. That sounds exciting, doesn’t it?”

“*Huaisang!*”

“Ah! Sorry, Da-ge!”

”That’s exactly what I meant. If we can make use of it, then many places that gather resentment won’t be forbidden places anymore.”

Without turning to Wei Wuxian, Nie Mingjue maintained a deadly glare.

“I won’t! I won’t Da-ge! I’m sure other-me was just kidding!”

”Even the Burial Mounds at Yiling,” Wei Wuxian added, leaning back to look at the sky.

“Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, Jin Clan of Lanling, Lan Clan of Gusu, and Nie Clan of Qinghe have all taken the lead, and burned the Burial Mounds to the ground,” the man at the bar explained.

“...You don’t think he actually went there, right?” Jiang Yanli asked, fear for her brother suddenly overwhelming all else.

“I’m sure he didn’t!” Jin Zixuan immediately proclaimed, coughing embarrassedly when all eyes turned to him. “I mean, we all heard what they said. They claimed Wei Wuxian killed 5,000 cultivators in a single night. They might have been right about inventing demonic cultivation, but I’m sure the other parts were hearsay.”

As Yanli bowed lightly in thanks, Jin Zixuan's blush make him look nearly purple. Jiang Cheng turned away and tried to hide a repulsed groan.

(He wanted Zixuan to value her, but he really didn't need to see more.)

Rolling his eyes with amusement, Nie Mingjue added "Besides, he's a ward of the Jiangs. What reason would he have to go there?"

Xichen nodded in agreement, turning to his worried brother to smile reassuringly.

"Enough," Jiang Cheng commanded. "This is getting ridiculous. You can say whatever, but you can't go down that path."

"I'm not stupid enough to try that. I'll follow the right path like everyone else. Why would I sneak across a single plank bridge instead of a wide, broad road? Besides, if it were that easy, someone would have figured it out already."

"And yet, he failed to maintain that promise," Lan Qiren growled.

"Do not make assumptions without proof," Lan Wangji fired back, surprising even himself. Even with the "set up" warning in the opening narration, he should know better than to argue with his elder. He immediately bowed in apology to his uncle, not noticing Jiang Fengmian and Yanli smiling gratefully.

"It's still early," Wei Wuxian laughed, wrapping an arm around Jiang Cheng's shoulders. "We should go hunt pheasants."

"Forget the pheasants! Lan Qiren ordered you to copy The Book of Discipline three times, and reflect on your wrongdoings."

"Three times! I'd rather kill myself!"

Those words were far less amusing from someone who would die at 21.

"No way," he decided.

"I'll do it for you! I'll do it!" Nie Huaisang offered.

"...We agreed to not punish for things that haven't happened…." was Nie Huaisang's only defense when the adults turned their glares on him.

"But you won't do it for free, will you? Say it. What do you want in return?"

"Ah… here's the thing, Wei-xiong. Lan Qiren has a bad habit. He likes to quiz us unexpectedly."

"Hold on," Wei Wuxian thrust a hand forward in a stopping motion. "You want me to take the exam *for* you?"

"Ah, no, no! Telling me the answer is enough. I have everything prepared."

He handed over a long, thin scroll, which Wei Wuxian skeptically unraveled.

"...Lan Qiren already hates me. If he finds out…."

"Please, Wei-xiong! It's okay! Nothing will go wrong."

Nie Mingjue was half tempted to join Lan Qiren in scolding his brother for allowing himself to be corrupted by Wei Wuxian's bad influence, but he knew Huaisang had done this last year too. If anything, he was simply grateful his brother had found someone who accepted him for who he was.

(But that didn't excuse demonic cultivation. He needed to keep watching.)

In a blink, their setting had switched to following Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang trudge up a hill.

"Ah… Wei-xiong, I'm sorry."

"Didn't you say it'd be okay?"

"I didn't expect Lan Wangji to suddenly appear!"

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, interrupting "Anyways, you're on your own. There, the library is right ahead."

As the watchers followed the trio to gaze over the top of the hill, they gazed upon the Lan sect's intimidating yet graceful library. In the cool, ever-present fog, it radiated an aura of tranquility found nowhere else.

Wen Xu idly wondered how it would look on fire.

Wei Wuxian sighed dramatically.

"It's just copying a book. Huaisang?"

"Lan Qiren said no one is allowed to help you."

"Ha! How would he know that? Unless…. Will he have someone watching me?"

"Exactly."

"Huh? Seriously?" Wei Wuxian asked, looking in.

Lan Wangji was seated before him.

An unusual sense of doubt crept into Lan Qiren. Less than a minute ago, Lan Wangji had spoken back to him. He had bowed and apologized immediately after, but that didn't change what had happened.

Perhaps his other-self wasn't aware his goal should be keeping his nephews *away* from the temptation that was ~~Cangse Sanren~~ Wei Wuxian.

Although he didn't realize this, Lan Qiren's thought mirrored many which Madam Yu had regarding Wei Wuxian's relationship with her own children.

After a beat of silence, golden eyes looked up from the calligraphy and made contact with Wei Wuxian's silver orbs.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian breathed out in surprise.

Only after reciting the first twenty rules in his head did Lan Wangji's ears return to their normal shade. The constant use of his birth name was ~~pleasant~~ off-putting.

Both Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang slid out of the room.

"Hey!" Wei Wuxian protested. "You people-"

He cut off with a sigh, realizing the traitors were likely out of hearing range.

"This guy is dead boring, and I'll have to sit with him for a month? This is torture."

The words themself were nothing new, but somehow they twisted in far deeper when it was Wei Wuxian saying them. It made Lan Wangji want to ~~*shut him up with his*~~ act unrighteously.

Wei Wuxian plopped down across from Lan Wangji, legs spread casually and arms against the table.

"Wangji, a question for you. Do you actually really hate me?"

Without even the slightest falter in his brushstrokes, Lan Wangji continued writing.

"Hey! You're still ignoring me!"

The frowning mouth shifted into a mischievous grin, looking much like he had (would) when playing up the role of a lunatic.

"Hey, hey," he crawled his hand across the table like a spider. "What should I call you to get a response? Wangji? Wangji-xiong? Lan Wangji?"

They were far, far too close.

"Lan Zhan!" he tried, sitting on both the table and Lan Wangji's sleeve.

"Our… apologies," Jiang Fengmian told Lan Wangji, failing to completely cover his amused smile.

"We agreed to not punish for actions that have yet to occur," the boy responded. "Apologies are unnecessary."

"Don't look at me like that! I only called you by your birth name because you didn't answer me when I called you Wangji. If you don't like it, you can call me by my birth name as well. Or… is Lan-gongzi better?"

Here, Lan Wangji paused, though more because his sleeve was caught than due to what Wei Wuxian said.

“Oh, I got it! Lan-er-*ge*!”

The following smile was far brighter than the Wen Sect could ever hope to be.

Energy crackled, and Wei Wuxian’s mouth was abruptly sealed shut. He flailed around slightly, then leapt off the table and ran around to his original side, grabbing paper and a brush.

***'Sorry, please remove the spell’* was written on the paper and held up in front of Lan Wangji.**

Wei Wuxian’s face was gradually turning red.

However, Lan Zhan only glanced at the request for a moment before turning away and bringing a book up to cover his face.

Nie Huaisang bursted into laughter, finding the reaction an amusing reflection of how he used his fan. Despite their best efforts at staying composed, Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan followed shortly after.

“You could join them,” Lan Xichen whispered to his brother, jerking his head slightly toward the three teens.

Ears flushing slightly, Lan Wangji shook his head in refusal.

Realizing his request had been rejected, Wei Wuxian angrily crumpled his note up and buried his face into his crossed arms against the table. He sneaked a red-faced glance up.

Lan Wangji felt his ears grow even warmer.

There was a short, huffed laugh, and Madam Jin saw her husband glancing at the pair of illusions greedily. She sincerely hoped his thoughts remained conventional.

Another note was slammed onto the table, this time carrying a surprisingly well-done sketch of a wolf looking at a chicken.

A wolf, and a chicken.

狼望鸡, for Lang Wang ji.

While Jiang Cheng sighed, Xichen and Mingjue snorted slightly with the amusement only overprotective older brothers could experience. It seemed Wei Wuxian was clever in a variety of ways.

Lan Wangji began reciting the rules in his head again.

With precise, purposeful movements, Lan Wangji picked the drawing up, folded it into quarters, and tossed it into the waste bin.

“Ridiculous,” Lan Wangji scolded as Wei Wuxian hummed in outrage.

Finally, the seal was removed.

“Oh my god, I thought I was gonna die! Hey, Lan Zhan! I wanted to apologize to you! How could you treat me like that! Fine! That night was my fault. I was wrong. I shouldn’t have jumped over the wall. I shouldn’t have had alcohol. I shouldn’t have fought with you. Happy now?!”

“One more word, and I’ll do it four times as long.”

Jin Guangshan huffed a laugh, muttering “Are you sure *that’s* how you want to silence him?”

Lan Zhan froze.

Madam Jin’s patience cracked like porcelain on stone.

“They are *children!*” she screamed. “How *dare you* project yourself onto them. They are our *son’s* age! What? Is the hour or two we’ve spent in here too long for you to contain yourself?! Your brain needs a certain number of deplorable thoughts each day? And you *dare* to call yourself a sect leader!”

Not realizing he was loud enough to be heard, Jin Guangshan was completely unprepared for the brutal assault his wife unleashed upon him. He quickly hurried to deescalate the situation, sufficiently distracting everyone from noticing Lan Wangji’s relief.

Those words had been said because of how the man’s mind worked, rather than because his emotions were obvious to the people around them. His heartbeat began to return to normal.

“...It’s-it’s just that, come now dear,” Jin Guangshan continued. “They make quite an interesting pair. I certainly don’t think of them that way, but it doesn’t change the fact that many people will value their appearance more than their age-given innocence. Besides, we saw them in the future, subconsciously pairing them together is only natural. Both become such unparalleled weapons that-”

“I would like to ask you to not refer to my ward as a *weapon,* Jin-xiong,” Jiang Fengmian interjected, his smile remaining even as his eyes cooled into the arctic ocean.

“And I would also have to request you don’t finish your thought,” Xichen added. “I don’t believe that was appropriate given the current setting.”

Lan Wangji’s face was paler than it had ever been. Jin Zixuan wasn’t too far behind.

It was obvious to everyone who heard what Jin Guangshan was viewing them as. Jewels, perhaps. Statues; paintings; beasts. Trophies, but certainly not *people.*

It seemed having their lives on display had caused Jin Guangshan to forget they were real.

“Come now, no need to be so violent,” Jin Guangshan attempted again. “I was simply exploring possibilities of different ways to group them together-”

“And you mind automatically went to-”

“I’m sure,” Wen Ruohan interrupted, “that he simply couldn’t help himself.”

Jin Guangshan nodded vigorously at the words, and everyone else paused. So far, the Wen sect leader had been trying to make them forget he was there. But now, he was joining their conversation unprompted.

He agreed with Jin Guangshan, and wanted the other man to continue thinking up ideas.

With everyone else still frozen in horror at that realization, Jin Guangshan was able to easily bow once in gratitude and say, “Of course.”

As the watchers had talked, their surroundings had dimmed into night. Now, the only light in the room was the soft, yellow glow of a candle. Lan Wangji continued to copy texts, while Wei Wuxian laid carelessly on the floor.

Then, the sky brightened again, and Lan Sizhui’s voice spoke.

“A month later.”

Wei Wuxian sat before the table, working diligently at writing something. On the other side of the library, Lan Wangji stood, his eyes looking up at Wei Wuxian when he noticed the other’s approach.

“Lan-gongzi,” Wei Wuxian cheerfully greeted. “It’s already been a month; I won’t come tomorrow. Here’s a parting gift to you!”

The piece of paper Wei Wuxian had been working on was held out before Lan Wangji’s face.

The watching crowd surged next to the virtual Lan Wangji to see the gift for themselves.

”Here. You can have it!” he shoved the drawing forward, allowing them to see.

It was Lan Wangji.

Glancing away from Wei Wuxian’s laugher, Lan Wangji snapped *Poems by Lan An* closed and set it on the shelf to his right. He reached forward, and took the paper from Wei Wuxian’s outstretched hand.

And *froze.*

“What?”

“That’s-”

"*Flower!"*

None of the teenagers could form a full sentence, too shocked by the enormous flower drawn onto the painting of the Second Jade of Lan.

Wei Wuxian's laughter shook the room as he nearly collapsed in on himself, singing "How do you like my gift, Lan-gongzi?"

"Ri-"

"It's 'ridiculous' again?! Can't you say anything new?!" Wei Wuxian asked, his gaze momentarily flickering to the set down poetry book.

"Utterly Ridiculous," Lan Wangji amended.

The real Lan Wangji found himself inexplicably, irrationally *jealous* of his other self. He doubted he would get Wei ~~Ying~~ Wuxian's painting now.

Why couldn't they have been brought in after this moment so that he'd at least have that?

(It suddenly, abruptly occurred to him that if they changed things, it wouldn't be only the bad moments that disappeared.)

Calmly, Lan Wangji reached out and grabbed *Poems by Lan An* again.

Then threw it down like it was on fire.

Wei Wuxian snickered, giggled, then dissolved into full-bodied laughter.

He had snuck porn into the poetry book.

"Shameless!" Lan Wangji shouted, unable to resist in the face of Wei Wuxian's audacity.

Jiang Cheng buried his face into his hands and gave a long, tired groan, not noticing that the reddening of Lan Wangji's ears was from more than just anger.

Xichen coughed to hide his laughter.

Lan Wangji stepped back, trembling, then clenched his fists in rage.

"Wei Ying!"

'*Ying?*' Lan Wangji repeated disbelievingly.

"Here! I'm here!"

"You-"

He cut off, his gaze turning to the side, before he grabbed and unsheathed Bichen in a single, fluid motion.

Wei Ying's laugh cut off as he blinked nervously.

Hearing Wei Wuxian call him "Lan Zhan" was one thing, but the idea that *he* also referred to the other by their first name was staggering. Then, Wangji forced himself relax, reminding himself that his other-self would shoo off the little beast ~~whose lips and neck kept drawing his eyes~~ before anything else happened.

He resolved to punish himself thoroughly once the simulation was over.

Grabbing the book, Wei Wuxian quickly skipped back to the table, snatching his own sword in preparation.

"Manners, Lan-gongzi, manners! If you fight me, your library will be destroyed!"

"You…. What sort of person *are you*?!"

"I'm a man! What else would I be?"

"Shameless!" Lan Wangji repeated, a light flush dusting his cheeks as his ears turned darker than cherries.

"Is this something to be ashamed of? Don't tell me you've never looked at it before?"

He paused when Lan Wangji didn't answer.

"...Have you actually never-"

"Shut up!" Lan Zhan exclaimed, raising his voice for the first time. "You really are… utterly shameless!"

Lan Xichen bit his lip. Laughing at his younger brother would *not* be appreciated.

Luckily, Nie Mingjue was happy to take that role for him. Even Lan Wangji's frigid glare wasn't enough to stop the Nie sect leader.

With a twist of Bichen, spiritual energy sent the papers between them flying.

"Lan-gongzi, calm down, calm down! Don't you know? No private fighting in the Cloud Recesses!"

Then, Wei Ying looked up, and realized the book had been thrown into the air as well.

Bursts of spiritual energy brought them to impossible heights as both reached for the book. Simultaneously, they grabbed it, and slammed it down onto the table.

The air shook as the remaining papers floated down, synchronizing with the boys' hair.

Nie Huaisang briefly thought the image would look beautiful depicted on one of his fans.

(Then, in the privacy of his mind, wondered if Jin Guangshan's crude utterance wasn't as far off as everyone else thought it was.)

”Let go,” Lan Wangji growled.

“Hm? Why?” Wei Ying asked, tilting his head to the side. “I thought you didn’t want to see it…. Oh! So you actually wanted to. You were just pretending, weren’t you?”

By this point Lan Wangji was unable to hide how he shook with rage.

“Why do you keep poking the sleeping dragon?” Jiang Cheng muttered, near-silently. Wen Qing smiled slightly at the question, knowing the exact feeling of brotherly exasperation Jiang Cheng was experiencing.

”I. Won’t. Look.”

“Then why are you grabbing it? Are you gonna hand it to Lan Qiren? Oh, I mean, your uncle. Well, don’t do that! What if he suspects you’ve read it? Wouldn’t you die out of embarrassment?”

“*You*-”

Said Lan Qiren was deeply, *deeply* regretting his simulation’s decision to allow his nephew to spend any amount of time with Wei Wuxian.

”You were the one who read it! I-”

“What’s with the ‘you’ and ‘I?’ Everyone says you’re the finest gentleman in the world. And yet you hid erotic pictures in books!”

By this point, the two had stood up and begun a tug of war with the book.

“You study them tirelessly,” Wei Wuxian added on as a rip began to form. “If your uncle found out-”

Sky-blue spiritual energy suddenly surged, crashing into the book and overwhelming it until it exploded into a million flecks of paper.

“Huh? Oh, no! Those pictures were really great! How could you just tear them up?”

“Get lost.”

Even in the face of the numerous rules his prized nephew had broken, Lan Qiren couldn’t be angry. Truly, Cangse and her son were a force neither of them were equipped to deal with.

"What? Get lost? I can’t believe you’d say that!” Wei Wuxian declared, spinning around and bounding closer to Lan Wangji. “Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan. They say you’re cultured and elegant, always well behaved. But look at you now, goodness….”

“GET LOST!”

By this point, the trio of Jin Zixuan, Nie Huaisang, and Jiang Cheng had fallen to open laughter as they curled in on themselves, clutching their stomachs as the pain from their

giggles increased.

The Wen brothers found the Second Jade's failure to maintain composure amusing, but Wen Qing's emotions were identical to the other older siblings: the sort of fond exasperation that came with watching those younger than you try to interact (doubly so with Lan Xichen, who knew for a fact his brother had never lost his cool before).

The adults were mostly amazed; even those who had already known Wei Wuxian were shocked at how incomparably annoying he managed to make himself in a short amount of time.

"My, I wasn't aware it was possible to be this bad," Madam Jin murmured to Yu Ziyuan, her lips cracking open in a slight smile. From the expression her friend gave her, Madam Jin assumed this was hardly the first-time.

Unlike everyone else, Lan Wangji was not thinking over what he had just seen. In fact, he was desperately reciting the rules in an attempt to forget what he had just seen.

(The smiles and laughter and confidence and skill and shamelessness and joy and continuing to talk to Lan Wangji even with every refusal and-

Perhaps, when this was finally over, he would ask his Uncle for advice on how to prevent such emotions.)

The sun turned into a moon, and the blue sky darkened into a murky black.

"Emerald Lake, Caiyi Town, Gusu," Lan Sizhui's voice read.

Lan Xichen frowned, remembering where the Wen cultivators theorized the spirit would end up.

A small boat floated gracefully on the calm surface of the water. The watchers floated in air once again, feet and chairs resting firmly against something they couldn't see. It wasn't flying — there was no breeze or humidity; no unbalance or feeling of weightlessness — but they stood suspended above the water all the same. Across from them, a man sitting in the boat patiently fished.

He yawned, not noticing the darkening shake of the lantern-lit water.

Unconsciously, Nie Huaisang departed from his fellow heirs and moved closer to his brother again. Watching this was bad enough, but watching it next to a creepily intrigued Wen Ruohan was torture!

The fishing rod bounced twice in the man's hand as the lake gently tumbled, then jerked down.

"*Huh?!*" the man demanded.

He struggled and pulled with all his might, but whatever he had caught would not budge. From their elevated position, the watchers could see the movement of the

supposedly-caught creature.

It was nearly double the size of the boat.

It took every bit of restraint Lan Qiren had to not lecture Wen Ruohan on the actions of his disciples.

The creature began to circle around the boat, causing it spin in turn, still attached by the fishing rod.

“W-what’s this?!”

Bending the fishing pole into a steep arch, the creature continued to secure the rod and tug and tug and tug.

Until finally, it snapped.

“Gah!” the man screamed, having not expected the sudden break and falling back. Luckily, he was standing facing the outside, so he did not fall out of the boat.

Breathing shakily, the man looked to the left and right in confusion, and then held up his torn up hands, eying the roughed up skin.

“What on earth was that thing?” he couldn’t help but ask, then flinched when he heard a few bubbles pop behind him.

The bubbles continued at an increasing frequency, until the large object they came from reached the surface. Dozens more followed, covering the lake’s surface like flies on a carcass.

The man looked closer at the objects, then realized what they were.

Corpses.

His scream filled the air.

Judging by the sharp intakes of breath around him, whatever had happened was bad. Huaisang was perfectly happy continuing to hide in his brother’s intangible body, but his Da-ge had other plans.

“Don’t look away,” Nie Mingjue ordered, stepping to the side and allowing his brother to see. “Closing your eyes from danger is more dangerous than watching it.”

His brother responded with a truly pitiful whine.

Then, the black night around them brightened, switching to the pure white field of the in-between realm they were allowed to talk in.

“...Ominous,” Jin Guangshan muttered at last.

Madam Yu scoffed at the grievous understatement, but agreed nonetheless. Even without ~~the favorite son's~~ Wei Wuxian's universally-accepted categorization, they knew nothing normal would be able to amass such a high kill count in such a short amount of time.

If anything happened to her son-

...An overwhelming sense of powerlessness gripped at her heart as she realized there was nothing that could be done. If there was an enemy before her to defeat, she would never back down, but she didn't even know where to *begin* on stopping whatever caused the simulation.

Luckily, a distraction came quickly.

"Sect Leader Jiang," Lan Qiren spoke. "Yunmeng Jiang has Gusu Lan's full support on stopping Wei Wuxian. Whatever you need to do to convince him to avoid resentful energy, we will help with."

"Uncle!" Lan Xichen turned, raising his voice for the first time in years.

"...I thought we had agreed to not punish anyone for things that have not yet happened," Jiang Fengmian responded.

"I not suggesting we punish him, simply that we take action," Lan Qiren explained, cursing in his head. He could acknowledge that the boy shown here was not yet the embodiment of evil and was ~~as bright as his mother~~ not mean spirited, but he had still done — would do — the unforgivable.

Nie Mingjue hummed doubtfully. He was always a vote towards doing something rather than simply talking about it, but he had seen how happy Wei Wuxian made his brother. Was anything they had seen really worth what Lan Qiren was suggesting?

"Some of these scenes would have taken place in less than a week if we hadn't been sucked in here. We need to take action as soon as possible."

"Do you believe Yunmeng Jiang cannot take care of its own disciples?" Madam Yu growled back.

"It obviously didn't work the first time," Jin Guangshan sang in response. "Perhaps you should try allowing Lanling Jin to watch over him for a short while-"

"Unnecessary."

"Surely, we can't leave him to fall on his own," Lan Qiren continued, only to be countered by the last person he expected.

"We can't make any decisions without all the information," Lan Wangji declared. "There are… rising tensions. Wei Ying might behave differently this time around, even without our involvement."

"Yeah! We should wait and see!" Jiang Cheng jumped on, very intently not thinking too deeply about the ice-cold Second Jade's use of "Wei Ying."

Seeing other people his age join in, Jin Zixuan added “We can’t get out anyways. It couldn’t hurt to wait and see.”

Behind him, Nie Huaisang and Jiang Yanli nodded in agreement.

“Wangji, that was *demonic cultivation*.”

“...It was a theory,” Lan Zhan responded hesitantly. “A joke; not an action.”

Was it foolish of him to put blind faith in the smiling boy he had known about for less than two hours? Probably. But somehow, he couldn’t make himself feel guilty about it.

He added two sessions to his mental list of punishments for when they got out.

“Why are you speaking so highly of him?” Wen Xu wondered. “From what I saw, your other-self understandably detests him.”

Madam Yu glanced over, equally suspicious, adding “As usual, there was no end to the trouble he caused.”

"My lady-"

"Am I wrong?"

“...That is a little weird,” Jin Zixuan tacked on, more confused than accusatory. “You would have apparently hated him. Why do you feel so different now?”

He very carefully didn’t add how his own perception of Wei Wuxian was drastically different from what it would have been. In his mind, it was completely different.

“Actually, I don’t believe Wangji feels animosity towards Young Master Wei,” Lan Xichen corrected, ignoring his brother’s deadly glare. “He might have been flustered and confused, but he wasn’t angry. If anything, I think my brother might have been charmed.”

Those words caused many watchers to scowl in disbelief, but Jiang Cheng was unsurprised. After all, not even *he* called Wei Wuxian “Wei Ying.” Similarly, Yanli and Jiang Fengmian were pleased with the First Jade’s assurance Wei Wuxian had not caused too much trouble.

Lan Qiren scoffed quietly, the stressful situation lowering his self control until even *he* was unable to hide his doubt.

Having seen his father had no complaints with Wen Xu’s words, Wen Chao puffed up his chest and said, “Well, I don’t see why we spent so much time on the school life of a couple of *boys*. Were those parts of the vision really necessary for us to see? The Wen Clan wasn’t even involved!”

“Except for when you shoved your own work onto the Lans,” Madam Yu pointed out.

“Ha! If it really bothers them, then I’m sure we’ll see a counter-attack in the next segment!” he bragged back, knowing full well that even the Lan Clan wouldn’t be able to raise a fuss

over something the Wen Clan did. Even if they realized who the culprit was, it was unrealistic to expect retaliation.

'All these years and the Lan Clan still hasn't changed. Why bother being so polite?' repeated in their heads again. It wasn't even that the words themselves were groundbreaking; it was the person who said them.

Wei Wuxian was the creator of demonic cultivation. In all aspects, he should represent the antithesis of their ideals and values. And yet, every action they had seen him take so far could only be described as righteous.

He had stayed behind to help the Lan disciples, even though that might get him killed; he saved Jin Ling despite the threat adult Jiang Cheng posed; his inventions were used across the cultivation world, yet his reputation remained pitch-black. Regardless of the crimes attributed to the future Wei Wuxian, he had not shown himself to be evil.

And then, on Dafan mountain, he had been the brilliant mind who pulled the scant clues together, muttering about how much time the Lan Sect wasted on learning rules when they could be focusing on the practical investigation work that came with night hunting.

There was nothing the three Lans respected more than their acclaimed rules, but the simulation made the little cracks in their trophy that much more obvious.

"...Wait, so you like Wei Wuxian?" Huaisang checked again, partly because he couldn't believe it, and partly to distract the crowd from the aggravating words.

"Hard to tell," Lan Wangji responded, not wanting to make a claim he wasn't sure about.

His brother's barely-suppressed snicker did not support his assessment.

"My, how romantic!" Huaisang declared. "Two perfect opposites — even your clothes directly counter each other!"

Lan Wangji froze, even his breathing halting.

"You don't have to make everything *romantic,*" Nie Mingjue responded, rubbing his eyes with fond exhaustion.

For a moment, Madam Jin's eyes strayed to her ~~useless, wild beast of a~~ husband. There was the callousness with which he observed Mo Xuanyu, and the depraved way he discussed Lan Wangji's relationship with Wei Wuxian (because *apparently* he couldn't last 5 *minutes* without some whore draped over his shoulders). Her blood bubbled with anger.

"I don't see why it would be a problem," she declared at last, attracting a multitude of surprised eyes. "If they truly do enjoy spending time together, it would be a fine basis for a relationship. *Any* kind of relationship, depending on what they want. I doubt either of *them* would be unfaithful."

Her husband turned to her with an astounded expression, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

“Absolutely not!” Lan Qiren declared. “I will not have my nephew-”

“Thank you for the kinds words, Madam Jin,” Lan Xichen interjected, ignoring his uncle’s flabbergasted expression (do not interrupt was a rule Lan Xichen hadn’t broken in years).

Jiang Fengmian turned to her as well and bowed in thanks, not entirely agreeing with discussing his ward’s romantic life so openly but not wanting to return to the tense discussion Second Young Master Nie brought them out of.

With a sudden clicking noise, the next segment began.

Jiang Cheng had been Sect Leader for years. He was now one of the older ones in the Great Sects, and had been a main contributor in numerous battles ~~including one to kill his brother~~. He had thought, for a time, that nothing could surprise him anymore.

But, as he walked through the Cloud Recesses searching for his exhausting nephew, he heard a voice that froze him to his ~~brother’s~~ core.

“Hello? If anyone’s there, I need your help!”

Wei Wuxian.

Not the Wei Wuxian in Mo Xuanyu’s body, who sounded unnervingly similar yet still had his own distinctive tone. It was the voice of Wei Wuxian at fifteen, around the time they went to the Cloud Recesses for the disciple exchange.

(Wei Wuxian was always happy, but this voice had his charming, carefree innocence too. One that had been lost all too soon.)

“My name is Wei Wuxian,” the voice declared. “And I’d like to make a formal request-”

Unable to stop himself, Jiang Cheng found his feet guiding him towards the sound of the perpetually-cheerful boy he had seen shatter in the massacre of Lotus Pier.

He pushed the door to Wei Wuxian’s lab open.

“Wei Wuxian?” he asked, his voice almost breaking. “Wei Ying?”

It couldn’t be a spirit — he had felt the Cloud Recesses’ fully operational wards on his way in — and yet there was no mistaking the voice calling out to him.

“-I’d like you to reverse what you’ve done to the sect leaders,” Wei Wuxian’s voice continued. “When I checked on the energy, it didn’t seem malicious, just informative. So… you know.”

After investigation, Jiang Cheng found his once-upon-a-time brother’s voice was coming out of a glowing red orb hidden between three stacks of books. It might not be unusual for Wei Wuxian to make his workspace look like 50 children had been left unsupervised there, but he

rarely allowed anything dangerous to be left unattended. Hopefully, the orb wouldn't blow up the mountain.

(Did he still know his brother well enough to be sure?)

(He did. Of course he did.)

"If you didn't mean to do this, it would be great if you could reverse it. Or, you know, send over some hints on how to? It's kinda causing a bit of a mess. Thanks!"

What on earth had Wei Wuxian done?

"How do we make it stop recording?" a child's voice asked.

It took Jiang Cheng a little while longer to recognize this one (there were few people he knew as well as Wei Wuxian), but, a second later, he did.

A-Yue. His Shi-mei.

Who had died during the massacre of Lotus Pier.

"Maybe the people on the other side can stop it?"

A-Lu, whose head had been chopped off by one of the Wen-dogs and displayed like a trophy on the Pier's main entrance.

"Are there even really people there?"

"Sure there are!" Wei Ying responded, his voice the tone he always used when trying to sound more confident than he was. "The energy's function resembles empathy, and the Lan sect said the data I sent them was similar to an ancient incense burner they had. The energy is like resentful energy, but it's probably just some evolved form of the Nie Sect's technique. This is definitely the work of humans. And we're sending the message back on the trail they already laid out, so it definitely went back to them."

"...No one's stopping the message."

"Ah, well… maybe the spiritual energy-storage just needs to run out-"

As if prompted by those words, his voice vanished.

Sandu Shengshou, likely the most feared Sect Leader in the modern era, stood frozen in shock.

Chapter End Notes

Wei Ying: being his usual adorable baby self.
Lan Qiren: ***sOrCEry***

From Ice-cream to Abysses

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For a solid minute, Jiang Cheng remained frozen before the red orb.

Now that Wei Wuxian's voice had vanished, the lab was far, *far* too silent. Aside from the barely-audible crackling of resentful energy around the improved Compasses of Evil, the only sound in the room was his own, faltering, breath.

Was it a fever dream? A spirit powerful enough to breach the Lan Sect's barrier? A delusion? An illness? Exhaustion? Or was it simply his insurmountable regrets piling on top of each other until they breached his mental fortress?

After all, how many otherwise-innocent demonic cultivators had he tortured and murdered, fueled by rage for circumstances he didn't understand? How much hate had he tried to teach Jin Ling to have for the boy's own uncle? How many times in the month since Guanyin temple had he dreamed of a do-over, of getting another chance to help his brother before everything fell apart? The kind, untouched, *spiritual* cultivator Wei Wuxian had been requesting his assistance? Offering him a chance to redeem himself?

Too good to be true.

What a cruel thing to imagine.

~~He would give anything for it to have been real.~~

But if time travel was possible, did that mean Wei Ying had-

"Eh? Jiang Cheng?" a voice asked from behind him. He turned, coming face to face with Mo Xuanyu's silver eyes, brightened from their previous gray by Wei Wuxian's lively soul.

Tensing up slightly, Wei Wuxian did a quick survey of the room, cataloguing everything he saw. Compass prototypes, check; experimental tracking-maps, check; half-written cultivation score, check; time travel orb….

In Jiang Cheng's hand.

Wei Wuxian swallowed nervously.

Conversations with his former brother were always awkward these days. Jiang Cheng had every right to hate him, and nothing — especially not Jin Guangyao's words — should change that. While Wei Wuxian might disagree with many of the actions he had taken, he knew better than anyone how valid Jiang Cheng's emotions were. At times he missed how they were as children, but some things couldn't be recovered.

It was best to avoid interacting at all costs.

"...Jin Ling is in the library with Sizhui," he said at last, hoping the orb hadn't caused any problems. Maybe, if Jiang Cheng talked with Jin Ling and left, they would be able to avoid too much damage. With all the delicate prototypes in his lab, he wasn't sure the Cloud Recesses would survive an encounter with Zidian!

Of course, as with all things Wei Wuxian was involved in, the worst occurred.

"What is this?" Jiang Cheng demanded, holding the orb out as infuriated purple lightning sparked up his arms.

Clenching his fists, Wei Ying forced himself to remain calm.

"Ah… well, I was looking at some of my old notes, and combined it with an incense burner I found and empathy to… create a way to store memories, kinda? And-"

"What were those notes on?"

"Things on… time, I guess. Nothing bad! Our reality is perfectly safe, I promise. It's… kinda like the beginnings of time-"

"Travel?" Jiang Cheng suggested.

"...What?"

"Am I right?"

"Um… yeah, I mean-"

"*Really?*"

Here, Wei Wuxian hesitated. From the tone Wanyin was using, he could tell this question was far more important than it seemed, but he couldn't figure out why. What made Jiang Cheng jump to the conclusion that-

"You made time travel, didn't you? Tell me the truth."

"I… yes, I did."

Windows shattered as the full weight of the Sect Leader's power flooded the air, setting it alight with energy. The walls shook, the ground trembled, and the room's talismans became blinding.

The Earth seemed to *shake* with his rage.

Contrarily, Wei Wuxian stood frozen still. It had taken Lan Zhan and even Sizhui hours of intricate explanation to convince them he was telling the truth. Time travel was an element of *fiction*, not reality.

Why would he ask that?

“Uh, Jiang Ch-”

“What did you change?”

“What?”

“You said you can go to the past? And change things?”

“Well, it’s complicated-”

He growled, “Are… are you the reason Sect Leader Nie found out about Nie Mingjue? Did you make Lan Wangji artificially fall in love with you? Make sure Jin Guangyao was caught, even though that *broke* Lan Xichen?! You can *travel through time*. What. Did. You. Change.”

(He still didn’t know why Wei Wuxian only chose to come back to life after *thirteen years*. Was it because of this, somehow? Why wasn’t he told? Why didn’t he *ever* know *anything*?!)

“What are you-”

“You didn’t even *try* to save A-Jie?!” he demanded.

His hand reached his eyes, and Wei Wuxian realized with horror that he was wiping away tears.

“Jia-”

“No. Of course not. You’d rather spend time playing pranks or galavanting off with Lan Wangji and Wen Ning like always. Is that all we ever *meant* to you?!”

~~*’Was it my fault? Am I the reason you didn’t care enough about us to try?’*~~

“Jiang Cheng, what are you *talking about?!*” Wei Wuxian’s voice rose as well, his eyes gaining a slight, red tinge.

“No matter happened between us, I thought you at least loved A-Jie.”

The ground at his feet shattered as Wei Wuxian finally snapped. With a hiss, the room’s lingering resentful energy striked and disrupted the electricity-filled air Jiang Wanyin had created.

Purple light and red darkness danced around each other until Jiang Cheng could *taste* the power in the room.

The two brothers made eye contact, fury blazing in their eyes and fists clenched in rage. In the sudden silence, the approaching footsteps resounded sharply.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji called out once he was close enough, standing protectively in front of his betrothed and glaring the Sect Leader down, ignoring said betrothed’s furious orders to stop.

Hanguang-jun watched the purple light, ready to attack the *second* it got too close to Wei Ying, and the other two responded in kind. The three most powerful men in the world faced each other, a swirl of deep purple, icy blue, and demonic red.

The Cloud Recesses *shook* under their power.

Wei Wuxian forced himself to breathe out a shaky exhale, refusing to lose control, and shoved away the area's resentful energy. Feeling it dissipate, both Lan Wangji and Jiang Wanyin looked over.

"Jiang Cheng, why don't you start from the beginning?"

Over a clear, bright lake, several wayward leaves drifted lazily, before landing delicately on the water. The ripples they formed distorted the cloud's reflections as if the liquid was a piece of embroidered fabric, fluttering in the wind.

Trembling like an earthquake, Nie Huaisang willed himself not to remember the creepy being the last segment had shown drifting through a river.

The leaves were pushed aside as a boat passed through the water, and the watcher's surroundings faded into existence; a quaint, lively town formed before their eyes. A tall bridge created a tunnel for the boat to pass through, and allowed the watchers to recognize the mountains before them.

"Caiyi?" Lan Wangji asked his brother, receiving a nod in return. Both remained tense, feeling the peaceful beauty before them was only the calm before the storm.

A voice sighed pleasantly, then observed "Small streams and bridges. People living next to water. Caiyi Town is wonderful."

At the words, Lan Xichen smiled gratefully at Nie Huaisang, appreciating the observation (and expertly masking any lingering worry he felt).

Delighted, boyish laughter bounced through the town, making the day glow even brighter than before.

'*Wei Ying!*' Lan Wangji realized, perking up, then forcing himself to return to proper posture.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian laughed again. "We're really so fortunate to be here. Thank God! Good luck has come, and there's no way to stop it!"

Lan Wangji clenched his fists, trying desperately to ignore the stinging hurt that came from Wei Ying referring to leaving the Cloud Recesses as "good luck." It was all for the best, truly. At least this way there was no chance of him humiliating himself by revealing his internal thoughts.

Scoffing at Wei Wuxian's over-exuberant voice, Jin Zixuan rolled his eyes and walked away from the Jiang boy, who sat at a table across from Jiang Cheng, a treat before them.

Once again, Jin Zixuan felt the slightest tinge of regret over his actions. If Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng weren't as irredeemable as he had thought, perhaps he would have enjoyed spending time with the Yunmeng Jiang pair.

He rid his head of that thought immediately, reminding himself that he still had his cousin. They might not be as close as the Jiang siblings, but Jin Zixun would keep him company.

With the joy of a child, Wei Wuxian happily bit into the ice-cream.

"Good luck?" Jiang Cheng repeated skeptically. "You've offended the Lan Clan. When Lan Qiren comes back, he'll make you pay for it."

"Comes back?" Qiren repeated.

"Ha! Since you've covered for me many times, one more isn't a big deal! And who cares what'll happen in the future? Let's enjoy things while we can!"

"Idiot," Jiang Cheng couldn't resist muttering, and the expression on his virtual-self's face conveyed the same sentiment. However, his other-self's thoughts were layered with fond exasperation, while his had genuine concern.

Had Wei Wuxian's refusal to think about the future contributed to his death? What kind of mistake had his brother made for the Clans to rally together against him?

Why had he been stupid enough to turn to demonic cultivation?

"We're in the thick of spring!" Wei Wuxian declared, utterly ignorant to the real Jiang Cheng's thoughts. "And we have this delicious ice cream. Why not just enjoy it!"

With that declaration, he happily devoured another bite.

"You're acting like you've never eaten frozen desserts before."

"Well, the Cloud Recesses always starves people. If I could eat these amazing desserts every day, I wouldn't mind staying in Gusu longer."

Lan Wangji immediately circled around, finding the name of the store and committing it to memory. For purely intellectual reasons, of course. Understanding cultural differences was important.

A longing sigh.

"I really envy people who grew up with this."

"Come on. If I tried to make you copy books for a month, you'd disappear faster than a rabbit!"

Huffing in offense, Wei Wuxian leaned across the table, sticking his tongue out at his brother.

Once again, their relationship couldn't be further from the one portrayed in the future. Laughing with each other? Eating snacks together? Teasing? Sticking his tongue out? How did this evolve into one brother fleeing, and the other hunting down and murdering anyone who he *suspected* of being Wei Wuxian returned to life?

Clenching his teeth, Jiang Fengmian forced himself to breathe.

The two brothers continued their stare-off for several long seconds, before Wei Wuxian smiled again.

"I bet Shi-jie would love this!" he declared. "We can come back here and bring some home with us!"

Jiang Cheng nodded intensely in agreement.

Seeing her brothers' over-exuberant sweetness, Yanli laughed delightedly, and Yu Ziyuan huffed in acceptance. Coughing awkwardly, Jin Zixuan took a deep breath, then forced himself forward.

"W-would you like to go together?" he whispered, and she turned to look at him. "I mean- when this is done. If you want to. Not that we'd need to go, I could just buy-"

"I would love to," Yanli responded, smiling brightly at him. Jin Zixuan hurried away, forcing himself to not squeal in joy.

Nearby the brothers, two men spoke sternly to each other over a trade deal. When Wei Wuxian noticed, he huffed slightly in disbelief.

"People from Gusu talk so softly. How is *this* arguing?"

Genuine confusion blanketed his flabbergasted tone, making Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue both laugh slightly. The former found the reaction amusing, while the latter remembered voicing a similar question before.

Jiang Cheng followed Wei Wuxian's gaze to the pair, adding "If they saw how people in Yunmeng argued, they'd be scared to death for sure."

At this, Yu Ziyuan raised an eyebrow at her son, daring him to imply the comment referred to her. Her son, predictably, unconsciously moved closer to Yanli when he felt her gaze. At least she could take comfort in the fact that Yanli knew how to provide assurance without making a scene.

Then, Wei Wuxian stopped, straightened up, and began sniffing the air. He spun around fully, face lighting up into pure, unadulterated joy as he looked past the arguing pair.

"That smells like rice wine!"

Seeing his brother carelessly jump into a nearby boat, Jiang Cheng scowled and shouted "Don't run so fast! You'll fall in the water!"

But Wei Wuxian paid his warning no mind, instead grabbing onto the bamboo pole and pushing himself along with a simple "Thanks for your concern!"

Jiang Yanli made a sound half way between a laugh and a sigh as she watched her brother's blatant disregard for his own safety. Not that *that* was anything new.

Having experienced the same sensation due to their own younger siblings, Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, and Wen Qing gave short huffed-laughs as well. When Wen Ruohan's eyes turned on her, Wen Qing immediately regretted her own carelessness, resolving to remain vigilant.

The boat passed under a bridge on which the Twin Jades of Lan stood.

"Brother," Lan Wangji began. "Why did you decide to bring them? Exorcism is no laughing matter."

Before him, Lan Xichen hummed once, then turned his gaze to his younger brother with a soft smile.

Instantly, the world remolded itself into a new shape: Gusu's Guest Disciple Dorms. Outside the blurry room, a voice called out gleefully.

"Wei-xiong, Wei-xiong!" Nie Huaisang shouted, slamming the room's doors open. "This really is your lucky day!"

A foreboding expression landed on Nie Mingjue's face. He loved his brother with all his heart, but had long-since learned to remain vigilant when Huaisang became so excited.

The room came into focus, and the watchers realized they were in Wei Wuxian's dorm room. Said boy blinked once at the announcement, then sat up.

With a sharp turn, Lan Wangji forced his eyes away from the figure before him. Of all places, why did it have to show him relaxing on *his bed*? Was the simulation *aware* of his shameful thoughts and choosing the scenes that would hit the hardest? Lan Wangji clenched his fists, once again confident that the simulation's creator must have been some sort of demon.

Wei Wuxian's mouth twisted into an amused smirk, and he asked "Really? What's up?"

"No school for the next few days! Last night the old man went to Qinghe to attend my sect's Discussion Conference!"

"Oh, no," Qiren whispered, finally understanding.

"Really? That's great! If the ol' fuddy-duddy's gone, the lil' fuddy duddy will be easy to take care of!"

Slowly and carefully, Nie Huaisang slid away from his older brother, approaching Lan Wangji in the hopes that the steadily increasing icy aura would snuff his brother's explosion. To his surprise, however, neither Lan Qiren nor Nie Mingjue made any move to reprimand him. Had they truly decided not to punish for things that hadn't happened?

Unlikely.

Nie Huaisang slid his gaze back and forth between his elders, trying to puzzle them out. Unbeknown to him, they were both preoccupied by identical waves of melancholy sorrow.

The future Nie Huaisang hadn't appeared yet, but they had all seen the future Wei Wuxian. He might still laugh and tease, but there was a notable innocence and immaturity in his current expression that was gone in the future. Qiren might want nothing more than to guide Wei Wuxian to the right path, but even he could admit the loss was disheartening. The boy who cackled while switching poetry for porn was gone.

A victim of the war.

Wei Wuxian immediately got off the bed, hurriedly putting his shoes on and singing "Today really is my lucky day! Even the heavens are helping me~"

His laugher rang out across the room.

Lan Wangji had never heard a sound so mesmerizing. If sailors heard at sea heard something even *half* as beautiful, he could understand why so many fell prey to the spirits' traps.

(Though he wished he hadn't been referred to as "lil' fuddy-duddy." He wasn't quite sure how to respond to the words, but being grouped with his uncle, which had always been a source of pride, suddenly left a sour taste in his mouth.)

"I can't believe I can't even find a few pheasants on the Lan Clan's mountain!" Wei Wuxian complained as the watcher's surroundings switched to a hallway.

"Tone it down a bit!" Jiang Cheng ordered crossly, "when he comes back, you're still gonna get your punishment."

Wei Wuxian responded, "Why would a living person worry about what happens after they die? I'd rather live freely for as long as possible."

'What an unbelievably optimistic person,' Nie Mingjue thought. The way Wei Wuxian's name was continuously dragged through the mud even 13 years after his death would initially seem to undermined the statement, but Wei Wuxian had never given any sign that he was hurt by the words.

He truly didn't care about his reputation.

Across the hallway, two figures approached: Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen. Other than their expressions and slightly differing eye color — Lan Wangji's eyes closer to gold while Xichen's resembled a pale bronze — the two siblings seemed identical. Though, with one having an ever-present frown and the other a smile, most people could tell them apart.

Not everyone though.

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian asked once his eyes landed on the brothers. “There are… two Lan Zhans.”

Lan Wangji glared.

Both Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan snorted at the description of the twin jades, while Nie Huaisang began to openly laugh. The Wen brothers huffed in disdain, but the other teenagers all seemed amused by the reactions.

Especially Xichen.

“You turned your head away,” Lan Xichen whispered, leaning close to his brother. “Is there something-”

“*No.*”

Lan Xichen raised an eyebrow, amused rather than intimidated by his brother’s ferocious insistentance.

”You two are?” the virtual Lan Xichen prompted.

“Jiang Wanyin of Yunmeng.”

“Wei Wuxian of Yunmeng.”

“Brother Xichen,” Nie Huaisang greeted with a small bow.

“Huaisang,” Lan Xichen returned. “Some time ago, while I was at Qinghe, your brother asked about your studies. How have you been? Do you think you’ll be able to pass this year?”

“Er… probably.”

Reminded of the Nie heir’s rather shameful academic history, Wen Xu gave a huffed laugh. The older brother was a pain in his neck, but the younger Nie brother could probably be dealt with much more easily.

He regretted the act when his father’s gaze landed on him.

Wei Wuxian smiled at his friend’s response, before asking, “Zewu-jun, what are you two planning on doing?”

“We’re going to exterminate water ghouls,” Xichen answered. “We were short-handed, so I returned to get Wangji.”

“Ha. ‘Water ghouls,’” Jiang Cheng parotted mockingly. Based on the earlier scenes, it was obvious what the so-called “water ghouls” would turn out to be.

“Brother, there is no need for small talk,” Lan Wangji interrupted. “The matter permits no delay. We should depart immediately.”

Lan Wangji relaxed slightly, nodding in agreement. Good, yes, he should get as far away as possible while he still could. Before people other than his brother started noticing his feelings.

”Wait, wait!” Wei Wuxian called out. “We can help!”

Paling unnoticeably, Lan Wangji silently begged his brother to prevent the ~~beautiful~~ boy from coming along.

(Wen Ruohan prayed for the exact opposite.)

”In Yunmeng Jiang, we catch water ghouls all the time!” Wei Wuxian explained. “Besides, it’s not like we have any lessons for the next few days. Zewu-jun, could you take us along?”

“That is not necessary,” Lan Wangji immediately countered, talking insistently on the other side of a tranquil Lan Xichen. “The Gusu Lan Sect is also-”

“Sure, then. Many thanks for your help,” Xichen interrupted.

Even the most disciplined couldn’t resist snorting slightly at the identical betrayed looks both Lan Wangjis gave their brother. It was the most emotive expression they’d seen on him aside from when he shouted at Wei Ying.

To Lan Qiren, who had seen his nephew lose control more often in the past hour than in the past decade, this exchange was accompanied by an exhausted sigh.

”You can go prepare,” Lan Xichen instructed. “We can depart together. Would Huaisang like to come as well?”

“Maybe I’ll just tag along to Caiyi town.”

“Instead of studying?” Mingjue asked, raising a single, unimpressed eyebrow.

“You can’t blame *me*, Da-ge! This is a future me!”

”Let’s go! Time to get ready to catch water ghouls!” Wei Wuxian declared, swinging an arm around Jiang Cheng’s shoulder as all three boys made their way back to the dorms, excitement clear in their expressions.

The flashback faded away, returning the watchers to the bridge in Caiyi town.

Having thought about his answer for a moment, Xichen finally responded “Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian have a good reputation in Yunmeng. They are highly capable.”

Jiang Cheng blushed slightly, surprised by such genuine praise from the respected Zewu-jun, and flushed deeper when both Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli giggled at his reaction. The ‘I beg to differ’ written all over both Lan Wangjis’ faces seemed to double their amusement.

Lan Xichen smiled and continued. "And you wished for him to come, didn't you? I only agreed because you looked as though you wanted Wei Wuxian to come along."

Lan Wangji did a double take, his ears glowing a dusty rose.

"...He did?" Jiang Cheng asked, not having seen anything but annoyance in Lan Wangji's expression. His father then began to laugh slightly, nodding once to Lan Xichen.

"You are quite skilled at reading your brother," Fengmian acknowledged. Lan Xichen bowed back to the Sect Leader, ignoring his uncle's concerned frown.

(Were Qiren's efforts to save his nephews from their father's fate worthless? The future Lan Wangji, who had dragged Wei Wuxian back to the Cloud Recesses, seemed to support that theory.)

At the sound of moving water, Lan Wangji glanced down at Wei Wuxian's boat, which had just passed under the bridge. He stared for a moment, then turned back to his brother.

"That's not true."

Despite the confident assertion, immediately following it by walking away from his brother lowered his credibility quite a bit. All the more so when the pink on his ears became increasingly noticeable.

For the first time, Nie Huaisang, Jin Zixuan, and Jiang Cheng turned their gazes on Lan Wangji with something akin to *understanding*. So far, he had always been — as Huaisang said — the perfect example. A piece of jade with neither emotions nor sympathy, who only operated under his Clan's rules. The genuine annoyance at Wei Wuxian had been a surprise, but nothing ground-breakingly different from Lan Qiren.

However, if he was simply not *showing* what he was feeling-

Wangji glared at his brother with all the embarrassed rage he could muster (and doubled it, when his brother had to choke down an amused laugh).

In a blink, the watchers had been pulled away from the bridge to hover over the water, following along as Wei Wuxian continued his search for the wine.

"Where is it?" he wondered to himself. Then, with another sniff of the air, doubled down in his pursuit.

"Young man, where are you running off to so quickly?" a woman called from the side. "Would you like to try my freshly picked loquats?"

"I appreciate the offer!" Wei Wuxian shouted back. "I'll try some when I return!"

"Ooh, we should all go there together!" Nie Huaisang whispered, glancing at Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng beside him. The two of them blinked in surprise, but considered the idea carefully.

"...If we're going to Caiyi town, it would be easier to have a guide."

"Right," Jin Zixuan nodded. "A local would be best."

Despite hearing their words, Lan Wangji made no move to take them up on the implied offer. Xichen frowned slightly at his brother's aloofness, as the glare he gave silenced further offers.

Simultaneously, the Jiang, Nie, Jin, and Lan heirs realized the same thing: if Wei Wuxian had come, he would have shamelessly needled Lan Wangji until he got an invitation.

Instead of him, they got a dozing Wen Chao who couldn't be bothered to pay attention to the things involving other clans.

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to continue, but cut off as his boat jerked to a halt, ramming into Jin Zixuan's.

Seeing his other-self get splashed by the resulting water, Jin Zixuan couldn't help but be grateful all of the simulation's elements would phase through the watchers.

"Ah…" Wei Wuxian realized, bowing in apology. "I apologize, Jin-gongzi."

The soaked Jin heir glared up at the other boy.

The water might not have actually affected him, but the real Jin Zixuan was still annoyed at Wei Wuxian's carelessness.

Then, Yanli laughed lightly and bowed as well, a slight blush on her cheeks.

"My apologies as well, Jin-gongzi."

And just like that, Jin Zixuan suddenly couldn't find it in himself to be angry anymore.

"Wei Wuxian. Was that intentional?" Jin Zixuan demanded.

"*Shut up!*" Jin Zixuan hissed at his other self, mentally begging the simulation not to ruin the moment he had just had with Jiang Yanli. Seeing this, Jiang Cheng felt the irritation which had begun to crawl into his mind immediately vanish.

Madam Jin nodded once at her son, pleased.

"It's such a wide river. Did you really have to hit me?"

"I wasn't paying attention. I'll get you some more rice wine if you want!" Wei Wuxian promised as Jin Zixuan tried to squeeze the water out of his clothes.

"No need for that."

"All right, if that's what you want, then I'll-"

"Just make sure the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng stays away from me."

At this, both Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng turned to look at him. Their gazes were neither scornful nor offended, just abruptly concerned that their presences by his side were unwanted. If they had tried to help and unknowingly made things worse, they might have just justified his complaint.

“Er-no. No, um, I….” Jin Zixuan began, but ran out of words to say.

‘*I want to get close to you,*’ he should have said. ‘*I want to thank you for the support you showed. I want to get to know you two. I want to have Jin Ling.*’

Instead of explaining any of that, he simply stood there, gaping like an idiot. Sometimes he really hated himself.

”What do you mean by that?” Wei Wuxian finally asked. When he turned so that his eyes could rest on the Jin heir, they were shadowed, the sun appearing directly behind him.

For the first time, the watchers were shown the past Wei Wuxian without a smiling face.

Jiang Fengmian nodded once; even against Yanli’s fiancé (and the warning look Yu Ziyuan was giving the simulation), it was Wei Wuxian’s right to defend the Jiang sect.

On the other hand, Huaisang swallowed nervously, wondering if Lan Xichen's assurance about Wei Wuxian’s skills was about to be proven in the worst way possible.

Slowly, Jin Zixuan turned as well, gazing upon Wei Wuxian’s clenched fists with disdain.

The two made eye contact, and tension spiked. A cloud shadowed them overhead.

“A-ah,” Nie Huaisang gave a hesitant laugh, moving his boat to pass between the two. “Calm down. Just calm down.”

Still speechless with embarrassment, Jin Zixuan could do nothing as the Jiang siblings started seriously considering walking farther away.

”Huaisang, here’s some advice…. If you lay down with *dogs*, you’ll end up with flees.”

Now, Jiang Cheng’s worry was overwhelmed by a biting anger, especially at the specific comparison between Wei Wuxian and “dogs.” He turned a furious glare on Zixuan.

”Be careful who you call your friend,” Jin Zixuan continued, digging the real-Zixuan’s grave even deeper. “Don’t neglect your studies. Your brother will have words for you.”

Although the terrifying Nie Mingjue had joined Jiang Cheng in glaring at Jin Zixuan, he found himself unable to care. Instead, his mind was consumed by the realization that Jiang Yanli, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang, three people who he had begun to grow close to — as *equals*, rather than subordinates like with Zixun — were being alienated by the simulation’s words. And, worst of all, he knew he would have said the same.

"Apologies, Young Master Jin," Jiang Cheng growled as he stalked off.

”Let’s go-”

Zixuan’s order was cut off as his boat abruptly shook, causing him to sway dangerously.

“Wei Wuxian! How dare you!”

“Huh? Wasn’t me!”

Indeed, Wei Wuxian’s boat was still separated from his by Nie Huaisang’s. Shortly after, all three boats began to shake.

“Something strange is going on!” Jin Zixuan declared.

“What? What’s happening?” Huaisang asked, not noticing the powerful wave unnaturally surging up behind him.

“Huaisang!” Mingjue all but shouted, leaping between his brother and the wave. However, with the way the simulation was set up, the wave phased through him as if he wasn’t even there.

(Zixuan recalculated his earlier gratitude about being untouchable.)

From the water, a legless water ghoul turned, surged forward, and *pounced.* Huaisang screamed.

Nie Mingjue felt his heart stop.

A *crack* brought the ghoul down as Wei Wuxian’s pole slammed into its head. Huaisang stumbled back, and the civilians on the pier ran away with terrified screams.

“Water spirits! It’s water sprits!” they shouted.

The lotus seller was too slow running away, as, mid-stride, she was pulled down by a hand chained around her ankle. In the next second, however, a red streak sliced the ghoul’s arm in two, Wei Wuxian’s sword having responded instantly. He landed, body upright and expression serious.

Lan Wangji blinked once, impressed.

Seeing that, Xichen laughed slightly.

An enormous water ghoul burst out of the water and climbed onto Huaisang’s boat.

Nie Mingjue, still standing ineffectively between them, could only curse his own powerlessness.

The pull continued, eventually tipping the boat and forcing the Nie heir to clutch to the boat’s rail. Despite wanting to help, Jin Zixuan was surrounded on all sides, a new

ghoul attacking every time he cut one down; he was trapped.

Then, two arcs of bright blue light cut through the water. Enormous waves surged up.

With his robes flowing elegantly in the air, Xichen landed on Huaisang's boat.

"Th-thank you, Xichen-gege," Huaisang muttered.

Breathing out slowly, Nie Mingjue turned to Xichen and nodded once in thanks.

On the street, Wei Wuxian continued slicing through the water ghouls with ease born from experience. To his right, Jiang Cheng landed on the roof of an abandoned boat.

Five talismans flew out from behind Wei Ying, subduing an equal number of ghouls. Wei Wuxian turned in the direction the talismans had come from, and saw Lan Wangji flying high above him.

Seeing how outclassed they were, the few remaining ghouls quickly fled.

"Exemplary work," Jiang Fengmian softly praised. Lan Qiren looked torn between pride at the compliment and annoyance at what he was forced to admit as a result.

"...Your boys did well," he finally said. Grouping them together at least saved him from directly admitting Wei Wuxian's skill, and Jiang Cheng was certainly an above-average student.

Luckily for him, although Jiang Fengmian smiled slightly at the obvious conflict going through Lan Qiren's mind, he simply nodded in return, hiding his amusement.

The teenage cultivators returned to the boats, fiercely staring down at the water ghouls their cultivation-enhanced eyes could make out fleeing in the depths.

"They're gone now," Wei Wuxian reported, watching the last of the shadows fade out of sight.

Lan Wangji's frown deepened faintly as he turned to his brother, "I thought there weren't any monsters in Emerald Lake."

Xichen nodded once in agreement, turning to observe a more heavily shadowed area of water.

"...The situation is more serious than I expected."

Wen Qing breathed out through her nose slightly, reminding herself again that the actions of random members of her sect did not involve her.

(But, in her head, a traitorous voice continued asking how many victims her sect's actions would create.)

“Huaisang, you should just wait for us here,” Xichen advised. “The rest of you will come to the Emerald Lake with me.”

Although he hadn’t relaxed since the simulation started, Xichen noticed Nie Mingjue’s shoulders lower a fraction of a centimeter. It took all his self-control to avoid laughing at the unexpected softness.

From there, the watchers were pulled along the river, quickly speeding after the now-distant boats.

”Zewu-jun?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Does this match the reports on the river path?”

A nod, “Water ghouls have not haunted Caiyi town in over 10 years, but, recently, people and ships have started sinking.”

“Were arrays set up to catch the water ghouls?”

“Yes,” Xichen explained. “A few days ago, I set up net arrays. I thought I would catch one or two, but there were more than a dozen.”

At his own explanation, Lan Xichen felt a sudden regret that they didn’t have Wei Wuxian’s spirit-attracting talismans yet. It would have saved many lives.

(Or just "would," if they managed to convince Wei Wuxian develop it once they got out.)

”Were all the bodies you found people who live here?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“I’m afraid not. We cleaned the corpses, brought them to the town, and asked around, but there were many that nobody claimed. Yesterday, arrays were set up again, and even more were caught.”

Wei Wuxian hummed in consideration.

The watchers had already seen Wei Wuxian puzzle through an incident on Dafan mountain, but, this time, they had more information than him. As he was surely considering, water ghouls became accustomed to specific regions of water, rarely leaving the region they drowned in. A group floating down to Caiyi town was unlikely.

But, if it was what the Wen Clan chased downstream, all their questions would be answered.

As if in response their thoughts, Wei Wuxian continued “What we just encountered might not be water spirits.”

“Neither you nor Wangji managed to catch them,” Xichen agreed. “That’s quite unusual.”

Not reacting to the implied praise, Wei Wuxian bent down to dip his hand in the water, pulling up tangled, dirty strands identical to what he found during the battle.

A sudden chill brushed over Jiang Fengmian, and he turned to see Wen Ruohan watching his ward with the consideration one might use to appraise jewels. Except, rather than the outward appearance (thankfully not copying Jin Guangshan's words), Wen Ruohan was far more interested in seeing how Wei Wuxian's mind worked. How accurate were the future's rumors? What moral code did he follow? What made him *tick*?

In some ways, that was even worse.

Sect Leader Jiang took a forceful, slow breath, reminding himself to remain vigilant.

"Zewu-jun, water ghouls and whatever else this might be are really clever. If we use boats like this, isn't it possible that they'll hide underwater and refuse to come out? What if we can't find them?"

Lan Wangji replied, "We will wait until we find them. After all, we do what we must."

Qiren nodded once to his nephew's words, offering a rare trace of silent praise.

"Just by using nets?" Wei Wuxian confirmed.

Lan Xichen nodded, "That's right. Does the Yunmeng Jiang Sect use other methods?"

Seeing that Wei Wuxian wasn't going to answer the crowd instead turned their gazes on Jiang Fengmian, who smiled somewhat embarrassedly.

"We, of course, use nets as well. However, Wei Wuxian is an exceptionally good swimmer, and has always preferred jumping into the river and dragging the water ghouls out. That said, this method is obviously too dangerous to set as a standard, and we try to discourage him from doing so."

Huffing slightly, Madam Yu rolled her eyes, muttering "It's like he's allergic to following simple instructions."

Both Jiang siblings snickered slightly at their memories of similar incidents, and Jin Zixuan once again wished he could approach them.

Oblivious to the discussion, Wei Wuxian continued humming in consideration, and bringing a hand against his chin as he thought aloud.

"If only there was something like a compass, that could point out where the spirits are."

"What? Think about who invented the compass of evil! I've never heard of anything that could disrupt his work!"

"I know it was the Yiling Patriarch, but he couldn't make everything perfect, could he?!"

"Oh?" Jin Guangshan murmured. "He's thinking about that even now?"

Madam Yu huffed, "Of course. That makes far more sense than him simply inventing it in an instant during his free time. What exactly were you expecting?"

"...My apologies. You're right, of course. Just thinking out loud."

But the implication was clear: if Wei Wuxian was already theorizing, then he was just as valuable now as the one shown in the future. More, perhaps, as he couldn't yet escape.

Wen Ruohan smirked.

Jiang Cheng spoke, "Look down at the water and concentrate on finding them. You're letting your imagination run wild again."

"Cultivation and riding on swords also used to be just wild dreams," Wei Wuxian responded, teasingly.

Swallowing nervously, Jiang Cheng thanked his other-self for bringing the topic away from his brother's insane theories (that, as it turned out, weren't as improbable as they all thought).

The slight annoyance that flickered across Wen Ruohan's expression only increased his gratitude.

Bookmarking his thoughts for a later date, Wei Wuxian's eyes drifted to the impeccable form of Lan Wangji.

The Second Jade turned away, refusing to think too deeply on it.

Wei Wuxian's gaze grew in intensity, and his smile shifted into the serious expression they had only seen on him a few times before. Then-

"Hey, Lan Zhan!" he shouted, jumping up and down. "Look at me! Look at me!"

"Wei *Ying*!" Jiang Cheng hissed in embarrassment, now several meters away from Jin Zixuan. To distract himself from his annoyance at the peacock, Jiang Cheng focussed all his energy on being exasperated at his brother.

Reacting in kind, the virtual Jiang Cheng gaped in shock, then facepalmed tiredly. After rubbing his temples for a moment, anger took over.

"Hey! Wei Wuxian! Can't you be serious for once!"

The tension which had been built by the previous fight dispersed in an instant.

Both Sect Leaders and heirs found the interactions hilarious, but, despite his smile, Wen Ruohan's eyes remained coldly fixated on the to-be Yiling Patriarch.

Still snickering to himself, Wei Wuxian pushed his boat closer to Lan Wangji. Finally, when they were only a few meters apart, the Second Jade turned his gaze on Yunmeng Jiang's head disciple.

With a *crack*, Wei Wuxian's pole collided with the water.

"What the-"

“Hey!”

The watchers who had approached the pair unconsciously jumped back to avoid the enormous splash, several shrieking as they did. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Nie Huaisang panicked so much he lost his footing and fell back onto the invisible floor beneath the watchers.

The enormous wave splashed into the air, nearly doubling the height of the boats, and collapsed down. Hastily, Lan Wangji pulled his sleeve away from the water and jumped to his brother’s boat.

“What is he *doing*?!” Jiang Cheng demanded, turning to his sister for answers.

”You-” Lan Wangji protested, but paused when Wei Wuxian flipped onto the roof of his own boat and used his pole to launch Lan Wangji’s boat in the air.

On the flipped-over bottom of the boat, several gnarled hands latched on.

Nearly everyone present wore expressions identical to those of the simulation’s Twin Jades. Eyes widened; mouth’s agape; attention focussed entirely on what was revealed to them under the boat.

“Oh.”

”Water spirits,” Lan Wangji realized.

And, indeed, three to four drowned corpses landed with the boat, getting purified immediately by Lan Wangji.

“How-”

“He got lucky,” Wen Chao declared, faking the confidence his father had weaponized against the other sects.

Xichen smiled warmly, saluting Wei Wuxian once.

“Wei-gongzi, how did you know that they were on the bottom of Wangji’s boat?”

Wei Wuxian landed excitedly, then turned to the Lan brothers with a smile full of exuberant cheer.

Lan Zhan swallowed.

”Easy,” Wei Wuxian declared, tapping his boat twice with the pole. “Its displacement in the water was wrong. There was only one person on the boat, but it had sunk in deeper than a boat with two people, so there must have been something at the bottom of the boat.”

Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan re-evaluated the worth of the investment before them. They had already realized his value as the Yiling Patriarch, and had added in his inventive mind,

analytical ingenuity, and general book smarts. However, they had not realized that, on top of everything else, he was *also* unusually experienced.

With every segment, Wei Wuxian became an increasingly more tempting prize.

”An expert indeed, Young Master Wei.”

To support his future-self’s words, Lan Xichen saluted Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu in respect. While the Jiang Sect Leader saluted back warmly, Madam Yu’s was significantly more forced.

If this continued, the world’s most powerful cultivators would associate the Yunmeng Jiang Sect with *Wei Wuxian* before they noticed her son.

She gritted her teeth angrily.

"Lan Zhan! I didn’t mean to splash water on you,” Wei Ying apologized. “Water spirits are crafty. If I had said anything, they would have heard me and run away. Hey! Can you hear me? Lan Zhan? Lan-”

A single hand was raised by the one he was calling out to, silencing Wei Wuxian’s shouts.

A brief flicker of disappointment stung at Lan Wangji’s heart, but he quickly suppressed it. He was not upset that Wei Wuxian stopped shouting his name, nor was he annoyed at the simulation for focusing on the ghouls rather than his relationship with Wei Ying.

He was *not*.

When Wei Wuxian turned to look at whatever had caught Lan Wangji’s attention, his smile vanished. A dark shadow was spreading across the water, creeping closer to the boats and making the lake turbulent.

Both Nie brothers were silently grateful Nie Huaisang stayed in Caiyi town.

In an instant, Wei Wuxian playful grin returned.

“It’s coming!” the boy relayed.

The water molded itself into the shape of arms, before striking out at the Twin Jades’ boat. Simultaneously, two gleaming white swords left their sheathes.

Stepping out, Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen circled around each other, allowing their flowing white robes to spread out around them. Icy blue spiritual power made the blades glow like jewels, before it was launched towards the dark shadow. The resentful energy was thrown back.

Lan Qiren nodded once at his nephews, pleased with their timely reactions and power.

Wangji followed up with several more powerful slashes, cutting through the ones on the left and leaving only disembodied palms with fingers digging deep into the wood. Then, as he turned to face the house-high wave of arms on the right, a red light flashed past, and Wei Wuxian's sword was already back in its sheath.

Jin Zixuan blinked, eyes widening as an unusual trickle of awe began eroding away at his mind. He had known Wei Wuxian was infamous for his skills — it was common knowledge every *other* member of the top five most coveted young masters was an heir to a great sect, and carried with them their inheritance — but it was still astounding to see it in action.

(A sting of guilt struck him once again, but, when he glanced up at the still-turned-away Jiang siblings, all the courage he had mustered up was flushed away in an instant.

No apologies left his lips.)

"Nice sword," Lan Wangji complimented tonelessly, "What is it called?"

"Oh, no," Jiang Cheng whispered.

"Whatever," Wei Wuxian carelessly responded, levitating the sword and preparing it to strike again.

Even Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow at the implied disrespect.

"Your sword has a spirit, it deserves a proper name," Lan Wangji lectured, directing Bichen to follow after Wei Wuxian's blade. In response, however, Wei Wuxian just lightly chuckled.

"When Uncle Jiang gave me the sword, I came up with more than 20 names, but I wasn't satisfied with any of them. I figured I could let Uncle Jiang name the sword for me, so when he asked I just said "Whatever." Who could've guessed, when it came, it would really have "Suibian" inscribed on it!" the blade returned, snapping into its sheath at a lightning fast speed. "See? I didn't lie to you."

Lan Qiren couldn't help raising an eyebrow at the lightly chuckling Jiang sect leader, while Nie Mingjue gave a hearty, bellowing laugh. None of the other sects had expected that, having always seen Fengmian's near-passive calmness that seemed to oppose the nature of his sect, but never noticing the truly Jiang-style mind he had.

Wen Ruohan was quite pleased at how much the simulation was teaching him.

Meanwhile, amidst Jiang Cheng's heavy eye roll, Lan Wangji's outraged confusion, and Jin Zixuan's befuddled blinking, Nie Huaisang snickered and muttered "Wei-xiong, you truly are a gift."

"Ridiculous," Lan Wangji declared, insighting further laughter.

"Why's that? It's a nice name. People like you are always easy to trick with this."

Surprising even himself, Wen Ruohan found the continued banter between the pair was accompanied by a wave of understanding. Wei Wuxian was a prodigy when it came to cultivation, surpassing nearly everyone he came across and easily maintaining his title of Yunmeng Jiang's head disciple. How many people could match him — especially people his own age? Their first fight had obviously been surprisingly challenging for both, and was most likely the reason behind Wei Wuxian's initial fascination with the Second Jade of Lan. Since then, their bond had only grown.

But, as much as Wen Ruohan understood an absence of equals, he was displeased by the observation. If Wei Wuxian was both talented and invested in righteous cultivation, it would probably be extremely difficult to convince him to switch his focus to cultivating resentful energy.

At least the simulation would give him further instruction on how to make that happen.

Tendrils crept through the depths beneath the boats, then slowly broke through the surface. As they rose with the darkness, the watchers found themselves staring at Jiang Cheng's back, facing away from the danger.

With swift, sharp steps, Yu Ziyuan walked towards her real son as if that would protect the virtual one from danger, and Jiang Fengmian felt his heart skip a beat. His only consolation was that the simulation already confirmed Jiang Cheng would survive the next twenty years.

~~Thinking that only served to reminded him of his children who didn't.~~

Luckily, the slight sloshing of water alerted Jiang Cheng to the presence behind him, and, with careful movement, he brought his hand to the hilt of his sword.

He swung; the shadows dodged.

They sunk underwater again, unwilling to engage in battle.

It was a little heartwarming how many people breathed out sighs of relief. Not only did his family relax, but Nie Huaisang, Lan Xichen, Madam Jin, and even (surprisingly) Jin Zixuan calmed down.

(Neither he nor Yanli had forgiven Zixuan for what he said about their brother, but Jiang Cheng was starting to wonder if he had overreacted.)

"Be careful," Jiang Cheng warned. "There's something in the water!"

Something shook his boat, and Jiang Cheng gasped slightly as he regained his balance. In the next instant, the watchers were underwater again, following the tendril's journey.

Huaisang blinked and looked around himself, seeing the water exactly as expected but not having any trouble breathing. Air was the same temperature, and no feeling of cold, wetness, or darkness landed on his skin. His clothes also remained dry, regardless of how they were technically under a lake. It was bewildering; whoever made this was a genius.

(Or a terrifying resentful spirit, but Huaisang was leaning more towards the former option as time went on.)

By now, every ship was shaking heavily in the water, imitating what had happened to the boats in the previous segments. The passengers now might be cultivators, but there was no telling whether these boats would also be swallowed.

Their vision fluctuated, then focused on the faces of Lan Wangji, Jin Zixuan, Wei Wuxian, and Jiang Cheng.

"What was that?" Jin Zixuan demands.

In response, Lan Wangji spun his sword through the air and took control, expertly directing it into the unseen depths. After a moment of struggle, the shaking disappeared and the blade resurfaced.

With it, came a glob of dark tendrils, almost resembling hair.

"Is this…?"

Cutting him off, a disciple on the other side shouted "It's back," similarly drawing their sword and directing it toward the dark shadow.

However, after his sword went under, it disappeared from their line of sight. The disciple tried pulling the sword back, but nothing was retrieved from the water. It was as if his sword had been devoured by the lake, vanishing without a trace. The disciple paled to a pasty white.

Xichen stepped closer, recognizing the man at last.

He was slightly surprised his other-self elected to include Su She given the man's skill, but supposed his options had been limited with his uncle at the conference.

An older disciple beside the boy spoke, "Su She, right now, we still haven't determined what the thing inside the water is. Why did you act on your own and send your sword underwater?"

Somewhat flustered, Su She replied indignantly "I saw that Second Young Master also-"

He cut off, realizing belatedly how illogical his defense was, and turned red with embarrassment.

With a slight scowl, Jiang Cheng looked away. He knew all-too-well how it felt to try to follow someone's example, and only ever end up a pale imitation. Although, he had to admit, he was far from foolish enough to try what Su She had done, especially when Lan Wangji had already tried.

The sight of Jiang Cheng's inner turmoil caused the whispers in Jin Zixuan's mind to grow unbearably loud.

‘Just apologize! Help them, like they helped you.’

‘*The Jin heir should do everything he does with pride,’* his mother’s voice responds. ‘*Never show weakness in this household.*’

"Pull up the net,” Lan Xichen ordered.

Boats spread out and raised the net, but, aside from a few of dark strands, there was nothing on it.

‘*Hm?*’ Xichen thought, scrunching his brow in confusion. ‘*There were obviously water ghouls trapped in the net. What happened?*’

A flash of something a little like guilt once again burrowed into Wen Qing’s mind. With a single, calming breath, she redoubled her resolve to hide all traces of anger from Wen Ruohan.

(Honestly, Lan Wangji was her *brother’s* age! *How* was he so good at hiding his emotions?)

As the silence stretched out, an ominous shadow spread across the lake.

Now seemed like a good time to hide again, so Huaisang swiftly stepped over to Nie Mingjue and phased through, resting calmly in his intangible older brother’s chest. Here, at least, he couldn’t see anything that was happening. And besides, with Jiang Cheng having gotten into a fight with Jin Zixuan, it seemed the temporary friendship they had formed wouldn’t make it.

Sad, but Huaisang was no where near as friendly as Wei Wuxian, and he didn’t think he was really qualified to try and repair the 10-minute long alliance.

”Hey, Lan Zhan, something’s not right,” Wei Wuxian reported.

Frowning for a moment, Lan Wangji looked down at the water. Then-

“Turn around.”

“...What?” his brother asked.

“We need to go back. It lured us here.”

‘*Insightful,’* Madam Jin found herself acknowledging as she swallowing nervously. So far, the only thing they had actually *felt* was the calming effects of Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation against the Ghost General.

It stood to reason, then, that the cause of the sudden unnatural tension in the viewers was the growing resentful energy of the abyss below them. If the memories they were trapped in truly came from ghosts, Madam Jin was sincerely glad they weren’t somewhere like the burial mounds — polluted by enough resentful energy to suffocate even the strongest of cultivators. She had no doubt such a vile place would bring them to their knees.

The sound of water crashing against wood grew louder and louder as the waves grew progressively more and more violent.

A moment later, cyclones of water burst from the lake, twisting around the boats and tearing the flimsy wood to shreds. The two cultivators within screamed as they were hurled into the air, swirling around the tornado.

“It’s a waterborne abyss!” Lan Xichen realized, worry bubbling over.

From his hiding spot in his brother, Nie Huaisang noticed the other shift forward, trying to place a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder. They weren’t able to touch, of course, but Huaisang gave him points for effort.

Five slices of spiritual energy attacked the cyclone, glowing blue, red, purple, and yellow in turn. The attacks by the Great Sect Heirs (and to-be Yiling Patriarch) made the cyclone to back off, dropping the two victims (and what remained of the boat) back into the water.

Some part of Wen Qing kept asking her how many people were going to die because of ~~her~~ the Wen sect.

Luckily, Su She and the older disciple burst out of the water soon enough. The older disciple quickly joined the others in the air, but, lacking his sword, Su She had to choice but to make his way to one of the intact boats.

Above, the heirs flew swiftly, and Xichen spoke.

“This kind of evil is more than we can handle. Focus on getting out safely."

Seeing the slight tension in the Lan heir, Jiang Fengmian made eye contact with Lan Xichen, trying to convey his agreement with the command.

(Madam Yu huffed, wondering when he would start worrying about his *own* heir.)

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng flew through, then the former suddenly jerked back. Dark vines burst into the air, reaching up towards them like tentacles. The two dodged expertly, showing speed and experience that far outclassed nearly everyone else their age.

What had Jin Zixuan told them? ‘*If you lay down with dogs, you’ll end up with flees,*’ wasn’t it? And yet, based on what he saw before him, he couldn’t deny that spots four and five on the list of young masters were just as capable as spots one, two, and three. And Wei Wuxian didn’t have the title of Sect Heir pushing him up — *his* placement was all from skill.

’Have pride in your position,’ his mother’s voice reminded him.

The pair of Jiang disciples moved expertly, but they continued to be chased. Seeing this, Wei Wuxian made a sudden dive towards the water. When he emerged, he began hovering only just above the lake, practically surfing on the turbulent waves around him.

He was approaching Su She, who remained stuck on the boat.

“Ah,” Xichen turned to Jiang Fengmian, “Thank you. You have trained your disciple quite well.”

“No thanks needed. Without your leadership and judgement, this would hardly have been possible.”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, “I’m just glad Suibian specializes in speed. That idiot’s being way too risky.”

Despite that, Wei Wuxian began evading by smaller and smaller increments as the darkness began closing in. With an abrupt jump back, he narrowly avoided the upward snatching motion of the darkness’ surprise attack.

Jiang Yanli squeezed her hands together nervously.

Within half a second, Wei Wuxian reached and snatched Su She, only for the darkness to tear the boat to shreds an instant later. They had made it out by a hair’s breadth.

“Now he’s carrying *two* people!” Huaisang squeaked, having peaked out of his older brother when he heard sighs of relief. At those words, Jiang Cheng glared to cover up his nervous edge. Su She had *literally* become dead weight for his brother! His sympathy for the man was rapidly running out.

Now, Wei Wuxian’s expression was significantly less playful, and darkness got closer to catching him with every attack.

Soon, Wei Wuxian’s body was twisting in an unpredictable loop, yet still dodging by only a scant few centimeters.

He tsked, “Waterborne Abysses are so difficult to handle.”

However, when he looked down at the boy he was carrying, he clenched his fists with newfound resolve.

Lan Xichen sighed. Su She was going to owe Wei Wuxian quite a bit when this was over.

”Wei Wuxian! This way!” Jiang Cheng yelled from above, rapidly approaching to lend support.

Wei Wuxian’s face relaxed into a divine smile.

Lan Wangji’s utter humiliation at getting distracted by something like *that* in the middle of a fight made him add an additional three copies to his mental list of punishments for when they got out.

Wei Wuxian flew up, his hand reaching out to Jiang Cheng’s own outstretched one.

However, at that moment, the the darkness broke through the water, wrapping around Su She's outstretched leg.

"Stupid dead weight!" Jiang Cheng couldn't resist hissing.

"Gah!" Wei Wuxian yelped, his outstretched fingers just barely missing Jiang Cheng's as he lost balance and toppled off his sword.

"Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng shouted.

"Wei Ying!" came a terrified gasp. It took Jiang Cheng an extra moment to realize who said it, because, when he turned, all he saw was the emotionless Lan Wangji.

Who was the only person who called his brother "Wei Ying."

Underwater, the dark tendrils blanketed the floor like seaweed, and Wei Wuxian gradually sank down towards them. Soon, they slowly meandered up, wrapping around his arms and legs and *face* until they could enter his mouth.

Trying to *tear him apart* from the inside out.

Slowly, in the artificial calm generated by the muted sounds, Wei Wuxian cracked his eyes open.

Yanli gasped in relief.

"Don't you dare die," Jiang Cheng whispered.

Instead of rushing to the surface like Jiang Cheng hoped he would, Wei Wuxian's eyes looked down to where Su She was being carried away by the abyss. He reached out as the Lan disciple disappeared from sight.

Unnoticeable to all except his brother, Lan Wangji's breathing was becoming sporadic with worry.

The abyss drew him in, and he entered the calm underneath the cyclone, where an enormous mass of resentful energy churned. Soon, the cloud of darkness expanded and surrounded him.

Even Jin Zixuan was starting to tremble with worry (though no one was shaking as much as Huaisang). Even if he'd never actually met Wei Wuxian, it was impossible to *not* grow attached to him.

And, even worse, there was an unmistakable chill filling each and every one of their bodies. The spirits which empathy was based off could sense the area's overwhelming resentful energy, snaking around them and drawing them in just as it was doing to Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian's eyes bounced around the cloud, searching desperately for Su She's unconscious body. Then, in the echos of a memory, they heard his voice.

‘*Resentment and wrath are energy too. Why can’t we make good use of them? If we could, then many places that gather resentment wouldn’t be forbidden anymore.*’

“No,” Lan Qiren hissed as horrified realization sank in. Clicking her tongue, Madam Yu couldn’t help but agree; she had always known the boy would be the fall of the Jiang, and the opening narration had confirmed it. Was this the beginning of his descent into darkness?

They should have left him on the streets to *rot.*

***’Resentment*,’ Wei Wuxian thought, forcing his eyes open again. Slowly, he extended a hand, trying to reach through the massive whirlpool of darkness surrounding him.**

Attempting something else, too:

Demonic cultivation.

Of course. Because Jiang Cheng had been too-slow, too-weak, too-*hesitant* to lift him up, his brother was starting to genuinely consider using resentful energy. Because he hadn’t been able to help, Wei Wuxian thought his only choice was to rely on the demonic.

He forced himself to relax. Surely, his other-self realized this and would support Wei Wuxian from now on.

~~But then why did he die at twenty one?~~

Sound remained completely cut out by the water, and, slowly, light was beginning to fade as well, leaving Wei Wuxian in an empty void.

The tendrils crept closer, but there was a notable shift in the energy.

He hadn’t figured it out yet, but Wei Wuxian was trying.

Smirking, Wen Ruohan stepped forward until he was less than a meter from Wei Wuxian, lifting his hand as if to caress the other’s cheek. It phased through, but still allowed Wen Ruohan to stare directly into Wei Wuxian’s eyes.

Jiang Fengmian felt his heart stop.

“W*ei W*uxi*a*n!” a faded voice shouted, obstructed by the water.

Then, louder, “Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng’s voice screamed.

Blurred by the haziness of water, the watchers saw a mass of white jump in after Wei Wuxian. It was only when they saw the two separate strands of the Lan Clan's ribbon that they realized who it was.

A hand reached forward, grasping Wei Wuxian’s collar.

Finally, his face was pulled above water, and he gasped in the breathable air. Lan Wangji stared down calmly, still holding onto Wei Wuxian’s collar.

“Thank you, Second Young Master Lan,” Jiang Yanli spoke softly, still visibly shaken by the danger her brother had been in even as she bowed. It was apparent from the beginning that Wei Wuxian would survive, but that attempted use of resentful energy was the first in the chain of events that had led to his death.

Fear gnawed at her heart.

Still coughing , the soaked Wei Wuxian blinked up at his savior and disbelievingly muttered, “Lan Zhan?”

There was no response.

Jiang Cheng turned away, trying not to feel resentful over the fact that *Lan Wangji* had been the one to save Wei Ying.

(Lan Wangji, who had been so adamant about avoiding Wei Wuxian’s splash before, and yet had dived into the lake to save him.)

“...Why are you holding me by my collar? I can’t breathe,” he informed the other boy, smiling weakly.

“I don’t touch strangers.”

‘*But you were perfectly fine grabbing Wei Wuxian’s wrist and dragging him back to the Cloud Recesses?*’ Lan Xichen thought with a knowing smile, momentarily forgetting that *that* was the future.

A laugh, “We’ve known each other for a while. How are we still strangers?”

“We don’t know each other.”

Where before those words would have been read as the expected behavior of the Second Twin Jade, Lan Xichen’s earlier comment put it into perspective. How many of Lan Wangji’s actions were emotionally driven, but undetectable due to his eternally calm expression?

Jin Guangshan chuckled slightly, and Lan Xichen found himself belatedly wishing the simulation hadn’t shown any insight into his brother’s true emotions.

The scene on the water faded out, and the sun zoomed forward until it was sunset. Before them, Wei Wuxian was sitting on the edge of a boat, gazing solemnly down at his reflection in the water, holding out the hand he had attempted to use to manipulate the resentment. For a brief moment, the surroundings returned to that scene.

Wei Wuxian was pondering his own actions.

“Not good enough,” Lan Qiren hissed.

Several people turned their gazes on him, surprised by the level of hate in the man’s words.

“...Pardon?” Nie Huaisang asked.

In response, Lan Qiren turned his gaze upon Jiang Fengmian and spoke furiously, “I certainly hope you understand what he tried to do. Something like this cannot simply be written off.”

Laughing slightly, Jin Guangshan fired back “Although he might be a Jiang disciple, he’s only attempted such things under *your* righteous Lan Clan’s guidance. Perhaps that says something-”

“We are not here to point fingers,” Jiang Fengmian responded.

“Why *not*?” his wife demanded, and Madam Jin nodded in agreement with her friend. “You heard what they said at the beginning. That *son of a servant* is going to *annihilate* the Jiang family because he can’t keep his hands to himself and continues to dabble in dangerous arts. At this point, the best option for *everyone* would be removing him from the sect.”

“Mother! He-”

“You can’t possibly be trying to *defend* that monster!” Lan Qiren cut Wanyin off, glaring with rage built atop fear. “He almost manipulated resentful energy for *no reason!*”

“As I recall,” Jiang Fengmian countered coldly, “He did it to save *your* disciple.”

“Oh, *of course* you defend him-”

“*My Lady*-”

“*Nothing* excuses demonic cultivation,” Qiren disagreed.

“But… would doing nothing not break our rules? Save the innocent; protect the weak; it was his responsibility to try *something*, wasn’t it?” Xichen asked back, making eye contact with his brother. For the first time in many years, the Twin Jades found they both disagreed with their Uncle.

(That hadn’t happened since their mother-)

“Perhaps external assistance will be required,” Jin Guangshan suggested again.

Smirking, Wen Ruohan added, “I’m sure our troves have a few items that could incapacitate the boy *without* killing him, if that’s what you desire.”

Madam Yu huffed, “No need. If it comes to that, we’ll end him *ourselves* first.”

Both Jiang siblings did a double take, turning to look at their mother with abject horror.

“...I believe that may be something of an overreaction,” Nie Mingjue spoke.

“Well, there’s a surprise,” Wen Xu responded, mockingly. “I thought the Nie were the best when it came to fighting against evil.”

“His intentions were righteous,” Mingjue disagreed, to the relief of his younger brother. But Nie Mingjue had to believe that, for his own cultivation was far more similar to demonic

cultivation than that of the other clans. He trusted his clan with the power because they were fighting for the right reasons, why would the same not apply to Wei Wuxian?

“That still doesn’t-”

“I agree with Sect Leader Nie, father,” Jin Zixuan said, openly opposing Jin Guangshan for what might be the first time in his life.

Jiang Yanli’s surprised eyes landed on him.

He coughed, “I-He was trying to save someone, and he didn’t even succeed in manipulating the energy. He… seems like a righteous cultivator. At the very least, waiting to decide couldn’t hurt.”

Both Jiang siblings relaxed at once, gratitude flooding them. It wasn’t an apology — not even close — but, for now, it was enough. They walked to stand by him, and Zixuan tried not to show the frantic cheering going on in his mind.

Wen Ruohan gave an amused huff, but allowed the discussion to stop.

As Wei Wuxian continued to sit in contemplation, Lan Wangji, from a nearby boat, turned to face the wreckage. Planks and logs that were once ships had been left in the abyss’ wake.

“Brother,” he began, “The Waterborne Abyss is still there. The local people will suffer.”

Straightening up, Lan Xichen continued to survey the survivors and responded “Waterborne Abysses are extremely difficult to handle. We must seal it in the Emerald Lake temporarily, and make further plans once Uncle comes back.”

Lan Xichen frowned minutely, understanding the logic but nonetheless frustrated. Seeing this, Nie Mingjue walked over and whispered, “You made the right call.”

Blinking once in surprise, Xichen turned to the sect leader hesitantly, before regaining his usual warm smile and nodding in thanks.

(Nie Huaisang was so proud of his brother! He was finally learning social skills!)

On a different boat, Wei Wuxian continued to stare into the river, not noticing Jiang Cheng’s approach. Suddenly, Suibian was thrust forward.

“Here, your sword,” Jiang Cheng announced.

After a moment, Wei Wuxian managed to shake himself out of his contemplative state and grab Suibian, thanking Jiang Cheng as he did.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” Wei Wuxian responded. “Just that Waterborne Abyss.”

Jiang Cheng frowned, not pleased that Wei Wuxian was hiding something so important.

”That kind of monster needs a lot of shipwrecks to form so much resentment. Everyone in Caiyi town can swim. There’s no reason for a Waterborne Abyss to form here.”

“...That’s right,” Xichen confirmed.

“Unless every single drop of water is taken out, and all the people and goods that sank are fished up, *and* the abyss gets exposed to sunlight for a few years, it’s impossible to exterminate. However, there’s an easier way to solve the problem: chase it away to somewhere else.”

“Clever child,” Wen Ruohan muttered, softly enough that, even with advanced hearing, only those sitting in the Wen section heard it. Wen Qing clenched her teeth, refusing to shudder.

”Brother,” Lan Wangji turned towards Xichen, his frown deepening. “Do you know of anywhere that has seen a Waterborne Abyss recently?”

“Mn,” Xichen grimly nodded, then, silently, pointed to the setting sun before them.

The Wen sect.

Scoffing slightly, Wen Chao huffed, daring the Lan Clan to raise a fuss over it.

”That’s outrageous,” someone muttered. “They couldn’t take care of it themselves, so they just chased it here and allowed it to harm others!”

Wei Wuxian sighed, “Since it’s that sect, it’ll be useless to accuse them.”

Jiang Cheng nodded, “First, they won’t admit it. Second, we won’t get any compensation regardless.”

Wen Ruohan glanced at Jiang Cheng, as if mockingly congratulating him on his intelligence. Frowning slightly, Jiang Fengmian stood between Wen Ruohan and his son, then continued to watch the simulation as if he hadn’t noticed what he had done.

Madam Yu, standing by Madam Jin, turned to her husband and stared in surprise.

”But if we keep letting them get away with things, there’ll be a disaster sooner or later!”

Lan Qiren sighed, feeling the matter was far more complicated than Wei Wuxian was making it out to be.

”Let it be,” Xichen ordered. “Wei-gongzi makes a good point, but we should head back first. Let’s deal with it after Uncle returns.”

“Ha, it’s easy for Wei-gongzi to say,” a Jin disciple declares scathingly. “If they can’t stand being pushed around, why not just fight back. Why drag other clans down with them?”

Madam Yu straightened up, feeling vindicated by the words, but, as always, her husband showed no sign of being willing to punish the boy. What was wrong with him? Hadn't the introduction said the Jiang's destruction was Wei Wuxian's fault? Saying things like this was exactly the reason why! He was a destructive, self-fulfilling prophecy.

Everyone else, however, felt Wei Wuxian more closely resembled a *cautionary* prophet, knowing now that the "Sunshot Campaign" would happen. It was hard to tell what had sparked such a conflict, but no one could say Wei Wuxian was wrong in his assessment.

To everyone's surprise, the simulation's Jin Zixuan disagreed with his disciple: "If everyone only worries about saving themselves, then I'm afraid that it won't be long before all clans are serving the Wen clan."

Yanli turned to Zixuan with a beaming smile, realizing her fiance would have been mature enough to observe objectively even without anyone to show off for. At the sight of that, and Jiang Cheng nodding once in thanks, Jin Zixuan found himself overjoyed in a way Zixun and his other cousins had never been able to make him.

Unlike his real counterpart, Jiang Cheng was frowning as he walked to Wei Ying, reminding "The arrow hits the person who takes the lead. Don't ever say anything like that again."

'Break their legs? Haven't I told you? When dealing with those without honor, just kill them and feed them to your dog.'

What on earth had happened to them? It seemed like nothing could break their bond.

'*He finally realized the truth about Wei Wuxian,*' Madam Yu thought.

"I know, I know. Just mind my own business, right?" Wei Wuxian replied, laughing. "But, even if I don't say anything, someone else will."

"For heaven's sake-"

"Young man, take it!" was shouted from the side. Wei Wuxian turned, and caught a basket full of loquats which had been thrown at him by the loquat seller he had saved earlier.

"It's not much," she called out, "but it's a small token to thank you for saving us!"

"Thank you so much!" Wei Wuxian replied, then winked. "If it's given to me by Sister, then I definitely want it! You're as sweet as the loquats!"

A dark hunger he *refused* to identify as jealousy gnawed at Wangji's heart.

Ignoring Jiang Cheng's disbelieving expression, the girl replied, "But not as sweet as you are!"

Neither Lan Xichen nor Lan Wangji could keep themselves from blushing slightly at the scene, so unused to this way of interacting with others. Even outside of the prudish Lans, no

one could deny it was quite an experience to see Wei Wuxian talking and smiling like that. Nie Huaisang even gave an appreciative sigh.

Among the most coveted young masters, Lan Xichen kept a polite, untouchable distance, Lan Wangji kept a frigid, untouchable distance, Jin Zixuan kept an arrogant, untouchable distance, and Jiang Cheng kept an angry, untouchable distance. Perhaps partly due to his lower status, Wei Wuxian was the only one in the top five who was *willing* to flirt.

Lan Wanji changed his mind; he was never bringing Wei Wuxian there, regardless of how much the other wanted ice cream.

Jiang Cheng scowled, "Flirting again?"

'*Again?*' Lan Wangji mentally shouted.

As always, Wei Wuxian only laughed at the accusation, turning around carefreely. However, as he did, his eyes landed on Lan Wangji and abruptly turned mischievous.

"Oh, no," Jiang Fengmian whispered softly, laughing slightly as he did.

"Miss, don't you think he's good looking?!" Wei Wuxian shouted, pointing at Lan Wangji.

"Yeah! He's even more handsome!" several women responded, the Gusu dialect ringing like wind chimes in the watchers' ears.

"Then don't stop flattering him," Wei Wuxian whined playfully as Lan Wangji turned away from them and Jiang Cheng facepalmed *again*. "See? Isn't he much sweeter? Can he have one? If you only give these to me, I'm afraid he might become jealous."

Matching his counterpart perfectly, Lan Xichen smiled at the teasing, and Nie Mingjue couldn't help but feel respect for Wei Wuxian's unparalleled shamelessness.

"What a force of nature," he muttered, getting a laugh out of his brother.

"Lan Zhan, I like the Gusu accent," Wei Wuxian continued. "Can you teach me how to say 'ridiculous' in it?"

His only answer was a ferocious glare, causing Wei Wuxian to shake with laughter. Turning away, Lan Wangji sighed and muttered softly in Gusu dialect.

"Ridiculous."

Between Nie Huaisang's delighted snickers, Jiang Cheng's amused eye-roll, Jiang Yanli's pleasant giggles, and Jin Zixuan's unexpected snort, laughter bounced around the room. Normally, Jiang Cheng would have responded like his simulation-self — with sighs and facepalms and insults and headaches — for the embarrassment placed upon the Jiang sect by Wei Wuxian continuing to bother someone who hated him.

(Madam Yu certainly felt that way.)

However, thanks to Lan Xichen's words earlier, he was starting to get a better reading on Lan Wangji. If Wei Wuxian was actually creating connections (and only Madam Yu was annoyed), then there was no reason for him to not laugh at the ridiculous scene.

(Lan Qiren, who had initially been against Wei Wuxian, was conflicted. While it was true that Wei Wuxian was making his younger nephew socialize with his piers for the first time, the boy was a *demonic cultivator.*

And yet, *both* his nephews had stood up for the boy against him.

He had a lot to think about.)

Despite his decisive words, Lan Wangji's eyes continued to drift to the loquats in the Jiang brother's hands.

"Wangji, do you want a loquat?" Xichen asked privately. "We can buy a basket of them."

"I *don't.*"

Xichen turned to his brother, lifting an eyebrow in doubt, and received a frigid glare in response.

The segment ended, and their surroundings faded to white.

With a moment to simply collect their thoughts, it should have been far more relaxing than watching their potential future. Instead, the tension in the room multiplied.

The Sunshot Campaign wasn't a sudden action, it was built up; they were seeing the beginning of that here. And, despite the massive insult and endangerment of human lives, the Lan Clan could do nothing in response.

'All these years, and the Lan Clan still hasn't changed. Why bother being so polite? Hilarious!'

It was *different,* Xichen told himself. Sizhui and Jingyi had been falsely accused, so, while their lack of retaliation was the expected response, Wei Wuxian's involvement had been fine. Informing Madam Mo that she was shouting baseless accusations was likely the correct reaction, even if he hadn't been especially polite while doing so. His own silence at the Wen Clan's audacity was also correct, as they couldn't risk bringing such a powerful sect's rage down on the Lan Clan. Offending a non-cultivating Madam was vastly different from offending the Chief Cultivator.

'But if we keep letting them get away with things, there'll be a disaster sooner or later.'

But it was *different.* The Sunshot campaign was not due to the reaction (or lack thereof) of any Clan, it was simply the fruition of Wen Ruohan's ambitions. There was no better option for any of the leaders to take. Even Nie Mingjue — who hated the Clan — couldn't act rashly.

They *all* made the right decision given the circumstances.

(Right?)

Right.

After nearly a minute had passed, the silence was broken by Nie Huaisang's nervous laughter.

"A-ah, that was quite exciting. And it was nice to see a bit of Caiyi town," he prompted, then paused, waiting for the people around him to respond. Without all the information, it wouldn't do for people to start analyzing everything too deeply. They would get their answers in time; worrying now, when they could do nothing, was pointless.

"Ah, yes," Jiang Fengmian nodded, realizing what the Nie heir was trying to do. "Thank you for bringing them with you, Lan Xichen. It seemed like a valuable learning experience, despite the… unforeseen circumstances."

Lan Qiren rose up, growling "The demonic cultivation-"

"Can be fully judged at a later date. Thank you for your kind words, Sect Leader Jiang," Lan Xichen interrupted. Again! They might not be in the Cloud Recesses (actually, he had no idea where they were), but his nephews were gaining a previously-unfound rebellious streak. And all because of Cangse Sanren's son. Lan Qiren felt his blood begin to boil.

"Of course," Jiang Fengmian responded, nodding once. No one commented on how everyone was skirting around the origin of the Waterborne abyss.

The Chief Cultivator's eyes roamed the crowd, as if daring someone to bring it up.

An awkward silence stretched out.

"A-ah, well…" Huaisang stepped into his brother again, but forced himself to speak. "Zixuan-xiong, do you have any ice-cream like that back at Lanling?"

Also eager to move the conversation away from the abyss, Zixuan hurried to answer, "Not quite the style they have in Gusu, but we have a few additional options flavors-"

As Sect Leader Jiang Cheng explained what he had seen, Wei Wuxian fiddled with his hands, his mind surpassing the speed of light as he considered the different possibilities.

If what Jiang Cheng had seen was true, then someone had broken into Wei Wuxian's lab and used his inventions. And he hadn't even *noticed*.

Even more than his other theories, Wei Wuxian had kept a tight lid on the number of people who knew about his research into time travel. As far as he knew, the only one he had told about it was Lan Zhan (Wei Wuxian had a tendency to mumble his barely-coherent theories while half-asleep). Due to the delicacy of the project, he'd been careful to keep the people who knew about it to just the two of them. With Lan Xichen still in seclusion, Lan Zhan was the only person whose permission he needed to begin research.

(Naturally, he got it.)

It was only after he confirmed that the "minor concerns" of erasing-people-from-existence and tearing-reality-apart were impossible that he'd relaxed his secrecy. But he still couldn't think of anyone else he might have told-

"Xian-gege?" Lan Sizhui asked.

"A-Yuan, is that you? Come in, come in! I've got something to show you!"

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan spoke, breaking through Wei Wuxian's train of thought.

"Huh? Oh!" He blushed slightly, turning to ~~his brother~~ Sect Leader Jiang. "Sorry, I… I just got a little lost in thought."

Unfortunately, Jiang Cheng only narrowed his eyes in suspicion, "I've seen you with that look before. What did you figure out?"

Having noticed the same, Lan Wangji remained unsurprised as he set his attention on Wei Wuxian and waited for the answer. For a moment, Wei Ying considered denying it.

Then he remembered he would never be able to beat his fiance in a game of patience.

"...I may have a theory."

Instantly, both Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji's expressions turn pensive and grim, noticing Wei Wuxian's hesitance. Really, they were so different in so many ways, but they undoubtedly knew Wei Wuxian better than anyone else. His unspoken words were heard clearly.

He knew the most likely suspects, and they wouldn't like his answer.

"...Lan Zhan, the kids are in the library right now, right?"

"Mn. If nothing's happened."

"Great, let's head over," Wei Wuxian suggested, beginning the trek without waiting for a reply. Without hesitation, Lan Zhan followed, and Jiang Cheng joined them shortly after.

The tension between the three was palpable. Jiang Wanyin glared at the others with a million emotions buried beneath rage; Lan Wangji remained expressionless, his indifference masking the annoyance he felt for one brother and the adoration he felt for the other; Wei Wuxian led the trio towards the library, doing everything in his power to ignore the mess of emotions swirling like a tornado behind him.

As that tornado grew in magnitude, the energy in their surroundings responded in kind. Twice, Wei Wuxian caught himself decomposing nearby flowers mid-step when the resentful energy under his command flickered out. Similarly, slight sparks and frost crystals formed behind them.

The silence wouldn't last much longer.

"...Wei Wuxian."

Swallowing slightly, Wei Ying forced himself not to jump at the words, having expected them eventually.

"Yes?"

"If it really can't change anything about our current timeline, why bother?"

After several slow, calming breaths, Wei Wuxian managed to ask, "Does it matter?"

"Shouldn't it? What do you get out of working on something that won't help? Just curiosity?"

"Is that a problem?"

"We both know how well that's worked out."

When the temperature dropped abruptly, Wei Wuxian was torn between gratitude and terror. While his Lan Zhan's protectiveness was appreciated, Wei Wuxian was too sleep-deprived for a fight right now.

"It was never just curiosity," Lan Wangji reminded, as if *Jiang Cheng* could have forgotten his own involvement in Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation. At the reminder of his ~~brother's~~ golden core, the purple lightning around Jiang Wanyin momentarily flickered as bright as a star.

"Ah, well, it wasn't just curiosity anyways. I was wondering if it would be possible to set up a communication between our dimension and an alternate one. The key to most advancements is a collection of ideas from different people, so being able to easily contact a greater number of people will allow for a much broader cultural exchange — especially once any changes made start resulting in different people being born," Wei Wuxian explained, as if he hadn't single-handedly created every cultivation advancement in the last millennium (for even the others, like Xue Yang's nails or seal, were simply pale imitations of the creations whose instructions Wei Wuxian had not written down).

"...I suppose that's acceptable," Jiang Cheng decided.

If he was able to read Lan Wangji's expression, the '*Wei Ying doesn't need your approval*' would have been unbearably loud. Small mercies.

(Since when was *Wei Ying* the one who de-escalated situations?! This wasn't the role he was meant to be in! The fates had made a grievous error!)

Luckily, by then, they had reached the library.

"A-Yuan? Are you in here?"

“Xian-ge?” Lan Sizhui whispered back, looking around nervously despite their group being the only ones in the library. “What are you doing h-”

He cut off, eyes widening, and Lan Jingyi dropped his book. As it clattered on the ground, Zizhen and Jin Ling both gaped at the pair who followed behind their senior.

Sandu Shengshou, Hanguang-jun, and the Yiling Patriarch faced them, presenting as a united front. Even if they had felt fluctuations of power earlier, no one could have expected *this*.

“Jiujiu!” Jin Ling snapped out of his shock first, standing up. “What’s going on?!”

“Hanguang-jun?” Jingyi couldn’t resist gasping. “Why are you here?”

“Is something wrong, Senior Wei?” Ouyang Zizhen added.

Smiling far too mischievously for them to relax, Wei Wuxian sauntered forward and leaned over their table.

“I think I should be the one asking you that. You see, a little while ago, *someone* broke into my lab. If they didn’t set off or break my alarms, they must have been people I already told it to recognize. I don’t suppose you four saw anything?”

“No?” Jingyi squeaked out.

“I certainly hope not. There are quite a few things in there that could really injure someone who didn’t know what they were doing, don’t you agree?”

“...Of course,” Sizhui mumbled, looking down.

“Not to mention the economic crisis that’d occur if my ideas were stollen.”

“You don’t care about having money anyways!” Jin Ling protested. “Didn’t you say that as long as you had enough money to live, my sect’s ‘stupid luxuries’ were-”

“*Jin Ling*,” Jiang Cheng growled, silencing the juniors. Combined glares from Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji turned Wei Wuxian’s already devastating mind into an even sharper blade.

“And even ignoring the economic implications, we’re all aware of how dangerous my inventions can be. In fact, one of them *rips apart time and space*, remember?”

“I thought that wasn’t an issue!”

“And you think my mysterious thief knew that?”

“Thief? We didn’t steal anything!”

Wei Wuxian watched in silence as Jin Ling’s words slowly dawned on the juniors.

“Wait-”

“I mean-”

“We didn’t-”

“I’m sorry!” Sizhui caved, unable to keep up the act anymore. “You said nothing would go wrong, so we didn’t think about the consequences!”

“““*Sizhui!!!*””” three outraged teenage voices yelled.

Jiang Cheng snapped.

“Jin Ling! Why would you do something so stupid?!”

“He said nothing was going to happen!”

Hanguang-jun frowned, “Sizhui?”

“I’m sorry!” the boy repeated helplessly.

“We were just-”

“Messing around with things that could kill you?”

“There are things in there that could have *killed us?!*”

“The problem is that you have to *ask* that!”

Thoroughly chastised, the quartet sank down into their chairs. Nothing Wei Wuxian said was wrong.

“Has…” Sizhui clenched his fists, looking terrified of the answer. “Has something gone wrong because of what we did?”

Wei Wuxian shrugged, “Nothing except a parallel dimension’s Great Clan main branches falling unconscious simultaneously.”

“Eh? Well, not for that long, right?”

"Of course not. By my estimate, it'll only be a few *weeks*."

“...Is it supposed to take that long?”

“Well, you’d know the answer to that if you’d *asked me* first, wouldn’t you?”

“Sorry, senior…” Zizhen mumbled, trying to melt into the floor.

Seeing they had all begun to realize the gravity of their error, Wei Wuxian breathed out and relaxed his glare. The most important thing to do was figure out how big of a mess this was and hope Jiang Cheng didn’t kill him for allowing his inventions to mess everything up *again*.

(Stupid, stupid, sleep deprived brain.)

“So, what, when, who, and why?” he asked causing the juniors to glance up.

“Oh, um, we sent back some information on the causes of the sunshot campaign and what made everyone turn on you. To… around twenty years ago, I think?” Sizhui began.

“You think?”

“We got some help,” Jingyi explained. “A bunch of nearby spirits and some people who’d been alive then but died were willing to help you out. They said they agreed with what we were trying to do. Which was send the information back to a young Hanguang-jun, a young Zewu-jun, a young Sect Leader Nie, and young Sect Leader Jiang, etcetera.”

“And my parents,” Jin Ling added. As always, both his maternal uncles flinched slightly at the mention of his mother.

“As for why,” Zizhen added, “We just… we felt you all deserved *better!*”

“My Mom and Dad, and the three of you, and Sect Leader Lan, and the Nie brothers shouldn’t have had to go through that. If everyone knew from the beginning-”

“They’d what?” Wei Wuxian interrupted. “Hunt down and kill the teenage versions of Jin Guangyao, Su She, and Xue Yang? What exactly would that accomplish? You think I care about revenge? It’s not perfect, but I’m happy with the life I have now. Why create an alternate dimension where you change that? You want revenge that much?”

“It’s not about that!” Jin Ling protested, mentally sighing over how much easier this would be if Wei Wuxian carried grudges about slights against himself like a *normal person*. “My… Jin Guangyao may have lied about a lot of things, but he was right about one thing: it probably would have happened regardless.”

Sizhui nodded, “Everyone feared you, and, by then, the cultivation world was too used to war. If it hadn’t been because of him, someone probably would have acted against you eventually. But that’s why this is so important! Your greatest enemy wasn’t Jin Zixun or Su She or Jin Guangyao or Xue Yang or even Jin Guangshan, it’s everyone’s willingness to judge without all the information. The collective’s fickleness and mob mentality, not any one person’s. All those people just used you because everyone hated you anyways!”

“The smaller sects can’t move against a great sect without another great sect backing them up,” Zizhen added, thinking about the smaller sects rallying behind the Jiang sect at the burial mounds. “We didn’t send it over to get people killed, we did it to teach the cultivation world’s leaders how easily they get manipulated and tricked! Because, above all else, the *public* has always been your greatest enemy.”

For several moments, the juniors were greeted by the rare sight of *Wei Wuxian* being stunned silent.

Then, he nodded once, and spoke: “I see your point my little radishes, and I’m very proud of all of you. Which is why you’ll be writing *every* rule twenty times each.”

“What?” Jingyi shrieked.

“Senior-”

“But you said-”

“That’ll take *months!*”

“Thinking the political situation through means nothing if you don’t realize that this idiot's inventions are *dangerous*,” Jiang Cheng nearly shouted. “You shouldn’t have been in there at all!”

“You can’t punish me,” Jin Ling protested, looking away from his furious uncle to stare at the shorter one. “*I’m* a Sect Leader.”

“And I’m your uncle… three times over through Shijie, Mo Xuanyu, and Lan Zhan whose brother was sworn brothers with your uncle. So, through adoption, blood, and marriage, yes, I *can*.”

“I… that doesn’t count.”

“It does,” Lan Wangji refuted.

“And even if it didn’t, you’re not escaping *me*, brat!” Jiang Cheng added.

“You’re not *my* uncle,” Ouyang Zizhen muttered.

“Get married to one of those three and I will be,” he teased, causing all four to flush into a cherry red. “Anyways, no. That was very dangerous, and you’re all doing the punishment regardless of family ties or lack thereof. Right, Lan Zhan?”

“Mn. Wei Ying is always right.”

“*Lan Zhan!*”

Jiang Cheng just sighed, wondering when things like *time travel* became a normal part of his life.

(‘*When Wei Wuxian returned,*’ his mind helpfully supplied.)

Chapter End Notes

Note: Don’t you love the Cornetto adds? I was writing everything I saw until I realized it was about ice-cream and thought ‘*They had ice-cream in ancient China?*’ And then I saw the brand name. By the way, it turns out the earliest record of something similar to ice-cream was second-century B.C., so way, *way* after the time period this story takes place in. But it’s not like they had flying swords in ancient China either, so whatever.

Bunnies Justify Everything

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After a day full of tension, interrogations, and punishments, there was something truly *special* about getting to relax. The warm bath was only made more seductive by Lan Zhan continuously running his fingers through Wei Ying's hair, brushing it to a silky sheen.

Unable to help himself, Wei Wuxian curled up into a ball, wrapping his arms around his legs so he could sink deeper into the water. After Jiang Cheng had left with Jin Ling (finally ending the deafening shouting match between the two), Wei Wuxian hadn't wanted to think about anything. Not the time travel, not the risks, not the consequences, and certainly not his fractured relationship with Jiang Cheng. Unfortunately, he also knew from experience that if he didn't fix it, no one would.

"...Lan Zhan?"

"Mn?"

The soothing rumble of Lan Zhan's voice served as a reminder Wei Wuxian desperately needed. He wasn't alone; his husband could help. Smiling faintly, Wei Wuxian glanced up, unable to turn his head completely while Lan Zhan continued combing his hair.

"How big of a problem do you think this is?"

"...For us?"

"For them. How much have we changed?"

The steady rhythm of combing paused, making Wei Wuxian turn his head completely to look at his frozen husband. Golden eyes gazed down at him with a warmth and kindness that was far more obvious than should be possible with his unsmiling lips. Then-

"Not your fault."

Wei Wuxian laughed, "It kinda is, Lan Zhan."

"No. *Uncle* wanted you to explain your inventions to more people. *I* suggested you allow the juniors access to your lab. You are trying to fix it because you are good, not because it's your fault."

And his words were true. Paranoid over Wei Wuxian's continued production of inventions (unlike the other elders, who greedily welcomed the Yiling Patriarch once they realized the benefits), Lan Qiren ordered him to allow several other disciples free access to the lab. Wanting to preserve some of Wei Ying's privacy, Lan Wangji had suggested Sizhui and Jingyi be the ones given permission. Even Lan Qiren couldn't suggest that Lan Sizhui was unrighteous, so he agreed.

“It’s still *my* invention. I didn’t specify that ‘no risk of tearing reality apart’ didn’t mean ‘you can go behind my back and do whatever you want with it.’ And I mean, I didn’t think I *had to*, but still.”

“You were using a Lan lab. It wasn’t just *your* responsibility to monitor the invention.”

Wei Wuxian hummed skeptically.

“What Xue Yang did with the Stygian Tiger Seal wasn’t your fault either.”

Here, Wei Wuxian had to laugh. Even before he knew the name Xue Yang, the waiter they interrogated about the Chang family’s massacre had blamed it on the Yiling Patriarch. He had been *dead*, and people still considered his inventions to be his fault, not caring he’d died trying to *destroy* the seal.

His husband was truly too kind.

Finally, the combing resumed, and Wei Wuxian’s bitter laughter ended. He hummed, relaxing into the rhythmic sensation and wondering if he could create a device that replicated the effect for Zewu-jun. Upon returning from his visits to his brother, Lan Zhan always seemed disappointed by the lack of progress. Presents might help with that!

What would Jiang Cheng say if he heard about this? If it was the Jiang Cheng from ~~seven~~ twenty years ago, he would have known. The fifteen year old Jiang Cheng was his brother through and through. Now, all he knew was that interacting would hurt *both of them* more than it would help.

“Wei Ying, don’t worry,” his perfect husband spoke. “We can fix this. You don’t have to, but you can.”

“You sound awfully sure about that for someone who hasn’t given me an answer. So, how much of a problem is this?”

“Help me understand, and I’ll tell you.”

“...I guess it depends on how much the people over there figured out. It’s a little hard to tell when this is all second hand information, but… I’m not sure the past-me realized this is the future.”

“What do you mean?”

“He made no mention of it, and didn’t give any indication that he knew what the kids sent over. Jiang Cheng only guessed it was time travel because he recognized the voices. The difficult part with the device was creating the parallel dimension, but, since I wanted to use it for communication between dimensions, it was supposed to be easy to send a message back along the existing connection. If he just sent it along that, I’m not sure he would have realized the time-characters do anything more than change the subject’s perception of time.”

“Is that a problem?”

“I’m not sure. If they haven’t realized it’s the future, I’d rather keep that from them. Maybe the Sect Leaders will decide the vision was created by a resentful spirit.”

“If they don’t realize it’s real, it won’t be a problem. How likely is that?”

“With my luck? Zero. But ‘high hopes, low expectations’ is the key to a happy life~”

Lan Wangji frowned. Recently, the elders had been putting more pressure on Wei Wuxian to earn his place in the Lan sect, as if he hadn’t already done more for the cultivation world in a few months than every sect put together. While teaching the juniors. And dealing with the occasional night hunt. *And* studiously worked on his core until it was almost as strong as *Sizhui’s*. As always, Wei Ying hid his exhaustion under blinding smiles to keep people from seeing anything else.

In some ways, Lan Zhan thought it was nice that Wei Ying didn’t feel like he needed to hide his exhaustion with him. In other ways, he hated that it existed at all.

Silently, Lan Wangji wrapped his arms around Wei Wuxian’s shoulders, pulling him close. Perhaps they would get to their “everyday” later; for now, nothing was more important than reminding each other they were not alone. Soon, the rest of the world faded, leaving only the two of them.

Then, Wei Wuxian started to laugh.

“Well, that’s enough whining from me. What do you think, Lan Zhan? Should we go check on the kids’ punishments and see how far they’ve gotten? They’re always so cute when they’re trying to copy your one-armed handstands.”

“I doubt they will appreciate that.”

“I only tickled them *once*, Lan Zhan. And you can’t blame me! They were trying so hard to keep their balance that I just couldn’t help myself!”

“You made Jingyi knock over a priceless vase.”

“I caught it, didn’t I? It’s fine! Pleeeease?”

The two made eye contact, Wei Wuxian’s fake tears glistening brightly, making his already-silver eyes shine like diamonds. Mentally, he counted down.

‘*Three… two… one….’*

“Fine.”

“Thank you, thank you. Lan Zhan is very good to his Wei Ying, isn’t he?!”

“Mn.”

When the world switched from bright white plains to a river at midnight, Nie Huaisang breathed out a sigh of relief. Even after his repeated attempts to maintain conversation, the tension in the area was nearly *physical* in its intensity. If he didn't know for a fact they all had their cultivation sealed, he might have suspected Wen Ruohan was artificially causing them to feel like they were carrying a mountain on their shoulders.

"Waterborne Abysses come from the resentment brewing in water. It is hard to eliminate once it takes shape," Lan Wangji's voice reviewed, and the watchers were brought inside to where he was denoting the information into a letter.

The writing then paused, and two golden orbs turned to his right. A light tap of movement from outside was followed by a slight falter in Lan Wangji's breath.

"Huh. I think I'm starting to figure out how to read him," Jin Zixuan whispered. Jiang Cheng remained silent in equally surprised agreement, while Huaisang giggled slightly at the purposefully blank look shot their way.

Lan Wangji was not amused.

Outside again, they were brought along the Cloud Recesses' hallways, following the mostly-shadowed figure of Wei Wuxian. In his hands, two jars of Emperor's Smile dangled.

Simultaneously, Madam Yu and Lan Qiren glared at the boy. He had already gotten in trouble once, why was he breaking this rule again only a few months later?!

(Truly, the spawn of Cangse refused to be tamed.)

Wei Wuxian smirked at his success, dipping nimbly through the pillars and remaining hidden in shadow, his footsteps muffled by the light rain. Then-

"Stop."

Wei Wuxian jerked to a halt, turning around to see Lan Wangji, who stood only a handful of meters from him. To combat the rain, a small umbrella was held over his head, giving him the aura of a traveling immortal.

It really wasn't fair that Huaisang was trapped in here without his canvases and brushes! How was he supposed to remember these things properly if he wasn't allowed to paint them? Or, better yet, Wei Wuxian could use his phenomenal art skills to depict it. They could call it '*Wandering Lover Awaiting His Soulmate: Part Two.*' Though, this time, they would add a camellia (for longing) instead of a peony.

As if reading his thoughts, Lan Wangji turned a cautious glare on him, causing Huaisang to hide behind Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan again.

Wei Wuxian froze for a moment, then gave a nervous laugh and hid the jars behind his back, greeting "Lan Zhan! What a coincidence!"

“Disciples who break curfew too many times must go to the Lan ancestral hall to receive punishment.”

Even though he couldn’t see from where he was hiding, Huaisang squeaked in exaggerated fear at the threat. When Nie Mingjue sighed, both Jiang Fengmian and Lan Xichen had to hide an amused smile.

”Eh? Seriously? I thought we were friends!” Wei Wuxian protested. “Can’t you spare me just this once?”

While Jiang Yanli and the rest of the older siblings were laughing slightly at the “just this once,” Lan Wangji was desperately trying to ignore how “friends” played on repeat in his head.

Jiang Cheng facepalmed, unable to watch any more.

An intimidating scratch of metal rang through the air as Lan Wangji unsheathed Bichen, allowing its ice-like gleam to shine though the darkness.

“Hey, why are you doing this? We’re the only ones here! If we both stay quiet, no one else has to know, right? It won’t happen again, I promise!”

“Trying to collude with the enforcement?” Lan Qiren growled, mentally tallying up how many rules Wei Wuxian had broken in this conversation alone. By the end, it seemed likely he’d get to twenty.

Wei Wuxian tensed slightly, noticing Lan Wangji refused to sheath Bichen. The two made eye contact through the pouring rain.

Lan Wangji attacked.

Metal clanged as Wei Wuxian responded in kind. A moment later, he jumped out of the hallway, effectively reversing their previous positions, and slid to a stop across the wet grass. Within moments, his hair was drenched from the rain into an even silkier shade of ebony.

Uninterested in fighting, Wei Wuxian turned and ran to the other side, trying to escape. However, because he carried the delicate jars of Emperor’s Smile, it was too dangerous for him to use his full speed. In the next instance, Bichen had swung around to rest against the pale expanse of his throat.

If Lan Wangji’s mind didn’t stop making such inappropriate observations, he was going to turn around and ignore everything shown in the simulation. Part of him couldn’t understand how he was getting so attracted to a rude, demonic, needlessly vivacious, informal, undisciplined, ~~talented,~~ rule breaker.

(The other part of him kept focusing on how brilliant Wei Wuxian’s inventions were, how unhesitantly he defended Lan Sizhui and Jingyi, how he courageously returned to save Jin

Ling despite the great risk of Jiang Wanyin, and how little he cared about his own destroyed reputation. Wangji did his best to quiet that voice.)

Rain continued to fall, soaking the pair's clothes further in the momentary pause. The trickle of rainwater sliding down Wei Wuxian's exposed neck reminded several of seeing Wei Wuxian drink Emperor's Smile the *last time* he snuck it in.

And that settled it; Lan Wangji's brain obviously couldn't be trusted to watch this. He closed his eyes and began religiously reciting rules backwards.

"I don't believe you," his virtual counterpart declared, responding to the "it won't happen again" promised earlier.

Wei Wuxian gulped nervously as rain drops landed on the blade.

"Alright, alright, alright," he rushed to say. "You're the one with a sword, so what you say goes. As you wish."

Lan Wangji nodded once and removed the blade from his neck.

While she was glad to see the blade move away, Yanli couldn't help but feel skeptical.

Seeing the blade get retracted, Wei Wuxian blinked once, then smirked.

"Oh, no," Jiang Fengmian sighed, trying to hide his smile.

With a playful hop, Wei Wuxian darted forward. Lan Wangji did a double take.

"You-"

He neglected to finish his sentence and began chasing after Wei Wuxian, who twisted through the hallway's pillars with the grace of a dancer. Once he got to two adjacent ones, he threw one jar into the air and jumped up the pillars. Once he reached the top, he flipped onto the roof.

He landed, both jars in hand, only to see that Lan Wangji was already waiting for him. The umbrella shadowed his glare until it was a terrifying glower. In under the steady fall of rain, they made eye contract for a moment.

Then, Wei Wuxian fled.

"Run, Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang whispered, cheering his friend on.

Once again, Lan Wangji managed to circle ahead of Wei Wuxian, but every time he tried to grab him, Wei Wuxian slipped through as if his body was made of air. They twisted around each other, only barely avoiding contact each time (either hindered by the delicate jars or the obstructing umbrella they carried).

To be so fast despite holding liabilities spoke wonders of their skill; Wen Ruohan made eye contact with Jin Guangshan, both silently communicating their interest.

“Hey! I already promised you that it won’t happen again! Why are you being so stubborn?” Wei Wuxian demanded as he backed off.

Lan Wangji again ignored the question, continuing to chase after the other.

As the near-misses piled up, the watchers began to sympathize with Lan Wangji. Wei Wuxian’s fighting made him resemble a trick of the light: visible, but not tangible. They had faced similar frustrations trying to make contact with each other in the simulation-realm.

In the back of his mind, Lan Wangji remembered the look on his older-self’s face when he had grabbed the Yiling Patriarch’s arm. Hope, shock, and disbelief, as if finally catching something which had escaped his reach for the last twenty years.

Wei Wuxian continued to slip around the other until he was forced to jump over an attack, leaving him momentarily suspended in the air. Instantly, Lan Wangji’s hand reached the ground, and Wei Wuxian was forced to block a ridiculously high kick.

One jar was knocked out of his grasp.

“Lan Zhan! Don’t be so harsh! We’re friends; if you let me go this time, I’ll return the favor next time!”

The only response from the Second Jade was a slight huff of refusal.

Lan Xichen’s lips twitched slightly, but he managed to stop himself before a laugh escaped.

“You…. Alright,” Wei Wuxian’s annoyance shifted into a crafty smirk, and he threw the other jar into the air. Freed from both hinderances, Wei Wuxian went on the offensive, slipping past Lan Wangji’s defenses and knocking the umbrella from his hand.

Glaring, Lan Wangji tried to grab him again, but Wei Wuxian ducked and-

“What the-”

“He-”

Wei Wuxian had jumped froward, wrapping his arms around Lan Wangji’s waist and pushing them both off the roof onto the grass outside the Cloud Recesses.

The umbrella clattered on the ground.

Lan Wangji had *broken a rule*. He clenched his fists.

Forced or not, he hadn’t done that in years. And, between this and the abyss, his perpetually pristine clothes were constantly getting soaked because of Wei Wuxian. Everyone described him by his impeccable appearance and rule-following. Some people thought that was all he was.

How was it possible for *one person* to change him so much?

As the rain began to pour, Wei Wuxian slowly moved up so that he was kneeling, rubbing his head in pain and ignoring the water soaking his clothes. Before him, Lan Wangji sat up.

"Hey, Lan Zhan, you're out too," Wei Wuxian informed him with a smirk, panting slightly. "We'd both have to be punished."

The Wen brothers cackled slightly, and even Wen Ruohan lifted an eyebrow at the Lans, wondering what they would do now. It was much easier to be "righteous" when your favorites were never tempted to break the rules; would they stick to their honor before their prized jade?

Nie Mingjue rolled his eyes at their reaction; it was more than obvious Lan Wangji was not at fault here, and that Wei Wuxian was only doing this as another attempt to tease the Lan. No one — not even Wei Wuxian — would expect Lan Wangji to get punished for being *pushed* off the roof. Making eye contact with Jiang Fengmian, he saw that the other sect leader was in complete agreement.

Immediately, Lan Wangji stood up, glaring down at Wei Wuxian and forcing himself to breathe deeply. It was clear the dam holding back his rage would only take a few more taps before it broke completely.

Then, in an impressive show of restraint, Lan Wangji forced himself to calm down and turned away, making a sound that vaguely resembled amusement.

As Wangji walked back to the Cloud Recesses, Wei Wuxian stood up and assured "But don't worry! I won't tell a single soul. The only ones that know are the sky, the earth, and the two of us!"

In response to both the secretive phrasing and the beaming smile Wei Wuxian sent over, Lan Wangji copied his virtual-self in taking slow, deep, calming breaths.

Meanwhile, Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng were begrudgingly impressed; there was no way Wei Wuxian would get punished for breaking curfew now!

(Or they'd double the punishment for making someone else break curfew.)

The floor of Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng's room was littered with corpses. Everywhere, knocked out teenagers clutching empty bottles slept, making it nearly impossible for someone to walk to the door without tripping over a body.

Jin Guangshan found Wei Wuxian's popularity to be an unsurprising but pleasant addition to his list of the boy's qualities. Besides, it was amusing to see Lan Qiren *vibrating* with rage and mumbling curses of "never in my fifty years has-" and "that Wei Wuxian!"

Only three people were still awake: Jiang Cheng, Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian. Simultaneously, all three gulped down a cup of Emperor's Smile.

Subdued, Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang kept their eyes to the ground, not willing to make eye contact with their infuriated brother/mother, nor their amused sister/father.

“Wei-xiong,” Nie Huaisang sighed in bliss. “This liquor is *really* good.”

“Of course. Here in Gusu, we shall drink Emperor’s Smile; fragrant and mellow, refreshing yet not aggressive, smooth and powerful.”

“As expected of a master of the six arts, right Wangji?” Xichen asked, noticing his brother's reaction to the poetic description.

Lan Wangji, who had up until that point used Wei Wuxian’s crassness and inelegance to maintain a mental distaste of the boy, refused to answer his bother’s question.

”Just drink the liquor,” Jiang Cheng complained. “You make it sound like you’re describing a person.”

“Jiang-xiong, I disagree,” Huaisang returned. “I think Wei-xiong is making an excellent point. As a wise man once said, fine beauty is just like great wine.”

“Wei-xiong’s language only enhances the experience,” Huaisang added on quietly, nodding in agreement with himself. “Good wine should always be accompanied by a bit of verbal art!”

“And of course *you* know all the best ways to drink wine, do you?” Nie Mingjue asked, raising an eyebrow. While it wasn’t frowned upon for a young lord to appreciate alcohol, to see him drink it *in the Lan sect* when he was supposed to be *studying* made Nie Mingjue more furious than a raging storm.

His brother could only laugh nervously.

”If what you say is true, you’d be able to find your destined partners by following the smell of liquor,” Jiang Cheng pointed out skeptically.

Lan Wangji very carefully did *not* think about how he and Wei Wuxian met.

Wei Wuxian chuckled, “I’ll be fine, as long as I have wine.”

Jiang Cheng promptly coughed out the sip he just took.

Unconsciously, Jin Zixuan’s lips curled up into a tiny smile at brothers' interactions. Seeing it, Jiang Yanli smiled as well. When they made eye contact, they both snorted and began to genuinely laugh.

”I don’t know how the Gusu Lans can put up with you,” Jiang Cheng decided.

“Hey, I’m adorable!”

~~Lan Wangji did not agree. At all.~~

”It’s you who’s going to have trouble. No one can match your standards.”

“...What standards, Wei-xiong?” Nie Huaisang asked.

“Oh don’t you *dare, Wei Wuxian!*”

“There’s nothing we can do to interfere right now, Jiang-gongzi,” Lan Xichen pointed out.

“But-”

”Wei Wuxian-”

“Beauty!” he loudly declared. “Natural beauty.”

“Hey!” Jiang Cheng stood up, pointing at his brother indignantly. “Wei Wuxian!”

Wei Wuxian bounced to his feet and moved to the opposite end of the table, maintaining distance even as he was chased to continue, “Virtuous and caring. And-”

“*Wei Wuxian!*”

“And comes from a good family.”

“Stop it!”

“Should not be too chatty, and should have a gentle voice-”

“Stop running, Wei Wuxian!”

“Be careful!” Nie Huaisang recommended.

“But not too capable. And there’s more: shall not burn through money, shall be — ah. Ah!”

Humiliation burned in Jiang Cheng’s cheeks as half the people present collapsed on the floor in laughter. Even more than simple embarrassment, *shame* flooded through him when he saw how amused the Wen brothers were at his ridiculous requests.

Seeing this, Lan Xichen was reminded again that the simulation would reveal information that didn’t belong to the general public. He hoped such instances would be rare from now on.

Just then, the door opened, and another guest disciple walked in.

Then froze.

Before him, Wei Wuxian lay on his bed, getting strangled by Jiang Cheng as Nie Huaisang tried to pull the latter away from their mutual friend.

In the two seconds over which the disciple remained frozen, all three boys immediately got into a proper seated position on the bed next to each other.

(Nie Huaisang even pulled out his fan.)

The disciple slowly walked back out the door and closed it behind him.

Now, even Nie Mingjue was struggling not to laugh.

”Kneel!” a man shouted as Wei Wuxian was slammed to the floor the next day.

“What?!” Jiang Cheng demanded, startled by the sudden scene change.

On the other side of the room, Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang hid behind pillars, watching closely. For a brief instance, the scenery changed to match the simulated heir’s memories, showing nearly thirty disciples in Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian’s room, all lying on the floor in a heap, dead to the world.

Based on the empty bottles and “picture books” around them, it was obvious this was the next morning.

Madam Jin was mostly just grateful that her son hadn’t been involved in that mess.

On the other hand, said son was somewhat regretting he hadn’t gotten to join in.

The door was abruptly slammed open and Lan Wangji entered the room. Everyone inside was still fast asleep, but the frigid chill of his enraged aura began to shock them awake.

Ignoring the dozens of other rule breakers, Lan Wanji walked straight to Wei Wuxian and pulled him up by his collar. Not yet awake enough to know what was going on, Jiang Cheng mumbled a “be quiet” and threw a book in Wei Wuxian’s direction.

One of the rarest “picture books” Nie Huaisang owned.

The Jiang heir flushed bright pink and looked down, refusing to meet his family’s eyes. The looks on the Wen heirs' faces made their thoughts clear as day.

Finally, as several of the corpses on the ground began to wake up, one of them realized the origin of the noise. He blinked in confusion and spoke.

“What’s happening? Where are you taking him?”

Lan Wangji turned his head, speaking one word at a time. “To. Receive. His. *Punishment.”*

Lan Qiren nodded with, Lan Xichen noted, far more pride than the Lan Sect typically allowed.

They were brought back to the punishment as the Lan servants prepared to begin.

Even as he was being held down by them, Wei Ying didn’t hesitate to look back and coyly demand, “Lan Zhan, are you really going to punish me? That’s not fair.”

“Woah,” Nie Huaisang gasped. “Wei-xiong truly has some nerve. He’s even able to laugh in a situation like this!”

Jiang Cheng scoffed slightly, responding “He could laugh even if the sky was falling.”

No one could disagree with the observations, and Wen Ruohan even smirked slightly, pleased that the boy had a stronger spirit than his sons.

(It was easier to permanently mold someone when you didn’t have to worry about breaking them.)

Madam Yu, on the other hand, glared with the rage of someone who had failed countless times to tame the boy’s wild ~~Yunmeng Jiang~~ spirit.

”According to Rule No. 530 of the House rules of the Lan Clan, ‘No impartiality,’” Wei Wuxian reminded Lan Zhan, speaking the thoughts of most of the watchers. “I wasn’t the only one who broke curfew last night. If you try to play favorites, then-”

His mocking threat cut off abruptly as, before Wei Wuxian’s astounded expression, Lan Wangji swept his robes back and knelt down beside Wei Wuxian.

“What?”

“Is he-”

“He couldn’t be-”

”Wait, wait, wait,” Wei Wuxian rushed to say. “I take that back, I’m sorry! I accept this! I accept this!”

Ignoring the protest, Lan Wangji remained staring straight ahead and commanded, “Strike.”

“...Of course he is,” Lan Qiren refuted, trying to hide his overwhelming pride. It wasn’t proper to brag before the gathered crowd, but he could rest assured that this, at least, hadn’t changed.

(It didn’t matter what the future had implied, his younger nephew was *not* going to follow Qingheng-jun’s footsteps. Not while Lan Qiren still lived.)

”A-ah, hey! I was wrong, Lan-” the rest of the apology was cut off as the wooden slab was swung down.

“...Quite impressive,” Jiang Fengmian nodded once. “I see your famed righteousness was not exaggerated.”

A single salute was Lan Wangji’s only response, showing the proper respect to a sect leader without any further acknowledgement. The teenagers were stunned; it was one thing to hear of the Jade’s reputation, another to see Wei Wuxian start to crack the facade, and yet another

to realize how the rumors were true regardless. This was far beyond what any of them had expected.

Though Lan Wangji had to admit, some quiet, disgusting part of him was secretly happy that Wei Wuxian only started panicking when he realized it was going to happen to Wangji as well.

As the beatings continued, Nie Huaisang and Jiang Cheng's expressions gradually grew pained, seeing the violent punishment being administered. While it was not so far as to be outside of the Lan Clan's rights, it was still unbelievably severe for a relatively minor infraction.

Although she wanted to be pleased, Madam Yu knew from experience that this wouldn't be enough to change Wei Wuxian's behavior. On the other hand-

"Isn't that a little… excessive?" Nie Huaisang asked Lan Wangji, far less scared now that he had seen the jade shell crack to show the human within.

(Slowly, everyone was starting to see what had made the future's Lan juniors like their "Hanguang-jun" so much.)

"...Punishment should be remembered," Lan Zhan responded.

"But, even leaving aside Wei Wuxian, that was the first time *you'd* broken the rules, right?" Jin Zixuan asked. "And even for just him… it was just curfew."

Normally Lan Wangji would leave his uncle to answer the question, but, thinking ahead, the heirs had gotten close enough to whisper to him, not including anyone else in the conversation. But what was he supposed to say? That his own punishment was likely more for the thoughts in his head than breaking curfew? Obviously not.

So, instead, he simply glared at them until they cautiously backed off.

The punishment stretched on and on, and even Lan Wangji was forced to clench his teeth in pain, sweat dripping down his forehead. Wei Wuxian's dramaticized cries of "Easy!" were ignored as well, the servants having no reason to listen to a rule-breaker's request.

Wen Chao flinched slightly, having been dazed with boredom until the loud noises shocked him awake.

(Wen Qing would never be ashamed of her family, but she had to admit she was somewhat regretful being a Wen meant being grouped with *him*.)

Groans of pain stretched out across the otherwise-silent hill, and the simulation got into focus so the watchers could see Wei Wuxian being carried by Jiang Cheng. Reaching out, Nie Huaisang began delicately fanning Wei Wuxian's sore back.

"Slow down, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian whined. "I'm about to fall off!"

“You should be grateful I’m carrying you!”

An offended huff, “I didn’t ask you to.”

“If I hadn’t carried you out, you’d end up lying there all day long. It’d be embarrassing! Lan Wangji got 50 more strikes than you, yet he could still walk on his own.”

“Seriously?!” the real Jiang Cheng demanded, awed despite himself. He made eye contact with Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang, all three silently communicating their shock.

It was… nice, to not have to worry about appearances. They might be with the other sects, but it was only the other heirs and leaders, less than twenty people combined. With everyone’s secrets getting broadcasted anyways — including Jin Guangshan’s death and the Wen clan’s defeat — it seemed pointless to try to keep up public appearances.

Once again, Jiang Cheng wished his brother could have come.

”How can you act this way?” Jiang Cheng continued. “Get off me. Walk by yourself.”

Seeing that his brother was straightening up to allow him off, Wei Wuxian only squeezed on tighter. “No way, I’m injured.”

Lan Wanji was definitely not jealous. Not at all.

”You…” further arguments were silenced as the trio turned to their lefts, staring at the pair seated two dozen meters away from them.

“Mister Lan is back,” Nie Huaisang observed.

At the table, Lan Xichen poured Lan Qiren another cup of tea, showing all the grace expected of the heir to the Lan sect. He spoke.

“Uncle, you must be exhausted after such a long journey.”

“It wasn’t too bad, but I’m afraid it will be much harder in the near future.”

“Because of the Wen Clan?”

Wen Ruohan raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

”At the meeting in Qinghe, all the Sect Leaders were afraid to speak their minds. During the journey, I heard hundreds of complaints about how members of the Wen Clan talked black into white and acted wildly. I also heard about the Waterborne Abyss in Caiyi Town.”

Overcome by a sudden surge of anger, he slammed his cup onto the table, allowing the tea to slosh slightly.

“They have gone too far.”

The problem with viewing private conversations was how easily it could spark tensions between the speaker and the subject. When Wen Xu turned a deadly glare on the Lan Clan, Lan Xichen bowed once in an empty apology. Being wrong about the younger Lan had doubled Wen Xu's desire to remind everyone of the Wen Sect's power. They hadn't been beaten yet.

(If they learned the cause of their downfall, they never would be.)

"The Wen Clan has too many followers," Lan Xichen reminded calmly. "We have no choice but to put up with it. The Waterborne Abyss will be hard to get rid of, I'm afraid I'll need your help with it."

"Human life is our top priority, we have no time to lose. I'll go with you today."

As the pair's conversation shifted to the practical means of dealing with the abyss, Wei Wuxian, Nie Huaisang, and Jiang Cheng sneaked closer, peaking at them from behind bushes.

Lan Qiren glared at the duo who were present, reminding "Eavesdropping is forbidden."

"Do not speak ill of others," Wen Xu fired back, forcing everyone to pause. It was no secret that the Wen Clan was unpopular among the other sects, but, in the current situation, talking poorly about the Wen Clan was necessary to prepare for future conflicts. It didn't count.

The rules weren't so omnipotent as to not depend on the circumstances.

(Wen Ruohan, seeing how shaken they were, smiled to himself and decided to return to silence. While he wanted them to forget he was there, it wouldn't do for them to disrespect the Wen Clan.)

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. I caught some walking corpses to help with training the disciples. Have Wangji associate with their spirits first, see if they had any wishes before they died."

"Understood, I'll tell him about it," Xichen replied.

"Just now I heard the disciples say that Wangji got punished because of Wei Wuxian," Qiren growled, obviously confused by Wei Wuxian's unchanging behavior despite his many punishments.

Yanli's mouth formed into a genuine smile, and she turned to Zixuan to whisper "He's like this at home too. The only thing that can get him to cooperate is when I offer my soup. Punishment never works."

"Really? Even the Violet Spider can't make him cooperate?"

"Not for a lack of trying," JIang Cheng muttered, causing Huaisang to snort.

At the reminder of the Second Jade, Wei Wuxian curled in on himself, trying to hide his entire body behind the bushes. "I… oh no, oh no, I've already had an earful."

Both Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang gave Wei Wuxian pitying looks.

A sigh, ”Truly, just like his mother.”

Wei Wuxian did a double-take, standing up.

Jiang Fengmian tensed slightly, making eye contact with Lan Qiren at those words. When she saw this, a black bite of jealousy slipped into Madam Yu’s heart.

Xichen paused, turning in the direction of the sounds he heard, only for Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang to hurriedly pull yelping Wei Wuxian under the bushes again.

Neither Nie Mingjue nor Jiang Fengmian could resist laughing at the innocent display of friendship.

Rather than punishing the three eavesdroppers, Lan Qiren simply huffed and walked away, leaving Lan Xichen to talk to them.

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian asked. “What does that mean?”

Jiang Cheng frowned, equally confused about the “mother” comment, then responded “He didn’t even want to lecture you. Guess he’s already given up on you.”

‘*Is that why you fell to demonic cultivation?’* Lan Qiren wondered. ‘*Would I have been able to stop you?*’

”Stop hiding there. Come out,” Xichen ordered, making both Jiang disciples do a double take.

In the next instant, all three were standing before Lan Xichen.

Nie Huaisang jumped slightly at the instantaneous change. It was one thing to keep moving between scenes, but it was weird to skip forward in time while their surroundings stayed the same.

The spirits had put quite a bit of effort into making the simulation.

Wei Wuxian’s arm was wrapped around Jiang Cheng (helping himself stand), and Nie Huaisang looked like he was considering hiding behind his fan.

“Hi, Xichen-gege,” he greeted.

“Hello,” the Lan heir returned, then noticed Wei Wuxian’s back and nearly did a double-take. “Is Young Master Wei still able to walk? What happened? Was this the punishment done by Wangji?”

There was an awkward pause as the teenagers internally debated what to say. Of course, Jiang Cheng didn’t dare claim it was Wei Wuxian’s fault. Thinking back, the whole group had ured Wei Wuxian to buy liquor. Each and every one of them should have been punished.

As a result, he only said, “It’s fine, it’s fine, it’s not that serious! He can walk, right, Wei Wuxian?”

Lan Wangji could admit that only punishing Wei Wuxian was, perhaps, not entirely fair.

”I can’t walk,” Wei Wuxian refuted, raising his swollen, red palms. “Zewu-jun, your younger brother is so cruel!”

Lan Xichen examined the hands, agreeing “Yes, that punishment is quite severe, indeed. It’s likely the swelling will not subside for the next three or four days.”

“Why would you do that?!” Nie Huaisang couldn’t help asking, backing up in horror. Although Mingjue was temped to turn this into a lesson for his brother, even he was astounded by Lan Wangji, who had given himself *fifty* more strikes than Wei Wuxian.

The boy they were asking simply glanced back once, then turned away, refusing to answer.

(Wen Xu huffed, wondering again what it would take to shatter the prideful Jade of Lan.)

“What? That serious? Their legs and back were hit as well! That’s too harsh!”

Jiang Cheng nodded in agreement with his-other self, stunned by the information. He had thought Wei Wuxian was simply playing up the extent of his pain like usual — to be fair, that was probably part of it — so he hadn’t realized it was so genuinely serious.

(Lan Wangji nodded once to himself. If his simulation was thinking the same things he was, he more than deserved the beating.)

Jiang Cheng breathed out in disbelief, forgetting himself for a moment and allowing resentment into his voice as he growled “How could he-”

Wei Wuxian secretly smacked his head to shut him up.

Seeing the slightly forlorn expression on her son’s face, Madam Jin momentarily wondered if Zixuan would have enjoyed a sibling.

(But she refused to sleep with her husband again, and the children of whores weren’t good enough to be Zixuan’s siblings. She rejected the idea immediately.)

Lan Xichen graciously ignored the slight, continuing, ”But don’t worry too much. Young Master Wei, I know of a good way to recover in just a few hours.”

“Huh?”

“Really?” Wen Qing couldn’t resist asking, mentally reviewing the possibilities. The damage was quite severe. A day would be impressive, but a few hours was unbelievable.

Just as Xichen was about to point them in the right direction, Wei Wuxian interrupted, “Zewu-jun?”

“Yes?” Xichen turned back to them.

“...My mother.”

“Oh, Wei-gongzi, back in the day, Cangse Sanren was a classmates with my uncle. My uncle’s behaviour was strictly mannered, and your mother…. How should I say this… she was just like you.”

As Jiang Cheng snickered at the description, Wei Wuxian stared in wonder.

Remembering his old friends, Jiang Fengmian couldn’t resist a small smile.

“It is true my uncle is being unusually harsh against you, but I hope you will not hold a grudge against him.”

Qiren sent his nephew a look that was clearly meant to communicate how little he cared about Wei Wuxian’s opinion of him, but, as he couldn’t reasonably say those words aloud, it was easy for Xichen to pretend not to see it.

The sky was encompassed by the ebony of night, as the watchers were brought to a vacant mountain trail lit only by a handful of lamps. They moved forward, and were taken to a wide spring surrounded on all sides by towering cliffs and trees. They were brought even closer, their invisible floor keeping them suspended just above the water as if they were standing on it.

Inside the pool was Lan Wangji.

Flushing slightly, Jiang Yanli hurried to turn around. Wen Qing was a doctor, and Madams Yu and Jin had sons his age, so she was the only one left to feel flustered by the naked figure of the second most sought after young master. Even if it wasn’t much, facing away from the boy made her feel better. Jin Zixuan was very, *very* grateful that, if no one else, his fiance had turned around.

(Although, after seeing the man’s expression, Zixuan was starting to wish his father had turned around too.)

”Lan Zhan!” a voice called out, and the Second Jade turned to see an enormous splash of water. Once it settled, he was able to see Wei Wuxian standing before him.

Silently, ignoring his wife’s contemptful gaze, Jin Guangshan approached Wei Wuxian, cataloguing the body’s shape and strength as if the boy was an animal he was contemplating buying.

Without even truly thinking about it, Jiang Fengmian moved to stand between the other Sect Leader and his adopted son.

(Madam Yu, seeing her husband once *again* step in to defend the boy, felt fury surge through her.)

Wei Wuxian, meanwhile, curled in on himself and began rubbing his arms, shaking at the low temperature.

“It’s so cold,” he complained.

Past Jiang Fengmian, Jin Guangshan could see Wei Wuxian’s muscles and back easily. Both he and the Second Jade were impressive, even for cultivators.

A sudden chill swept over Lan Wangji, causing him to momentarily wrap his arms around himself. He forced them down again immediately after, but the sickening feeling remained.

”How did you get here?” Lan Wangji demanded.

“Zewu-jun told me to come!” Wei Wuxian sang, then, horrifyingly, began to move closer.

Lan Wangji’s heart skipped a beat.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“It seems warmer over there.”

“It’s not,” he corrected.

“Lan Zhan, it’s not fair for you to heal yourself in the Cold Spring without telling me.”

Lan Wangji turned away.

Internally, he praised his simulation-self’s restraint. Externally, Lan Wangji couldn’t force himself to look away from Wei Wuxian’s figure next to his own.

~~He was so beautiful and his hair was so long and they were *naked* and next to each other and Wei Wuxian’s waist looked impossibly small and his eyes seemed to glow in the moonlight and he was *getting closer* and Lan Wangji could just turn around and *capture him* so easily and then he’d-~~

Why on earth did his brother think it would be a good idea to send Wei Wuxian here?

”I came here to cultivate, not to heal myself,” the simulation’s Lan Wangji answered, still turned away. With his back facing Wei Wuxian, the latter had a clear view of the dark, maroon bruises the punishment had left the Second Jade with. He grimaced slightly, guilt momentarily flashing across his expression.

The illogical, undisciplined part of Lan Wangji wanted to turn around and ~~kiss~~ remove the frown from his face.

Hesitantly, Wei Wuxian began rubbing the back of his neck, displaying a rare level of embarrassment.

“Honestly, Lan Zhan, you really impressed me back there. I can’t believe you punished yourself as well. Being as serious and stubborn as you were isn’t something I could do,” he laughed. “You’re so cool.”

Nie Huaisang sighed dreamily, momentarily contemplating to himself. If he could capture even a fraction of their combined beauty in a painting, what would he call it? The Temptation of Water Spirits? Beauties in Moonlight? Stubborn Idiots Who Don’t Seem to Realize How Much They Like Each Other?

Decisions, decisions.

”Hey, Lan-er-gongzi, let’s be friends,” he offered, tapping Lan Wangji’s shoulder twice. Lan Zhan just moved farther away in response.

“I don’t think that’s how you should behave around your friends,” Lan Xichen teased. When Lan Zhan saw that his glare wasn’t enough to make his brother stop, he resolutely walked towards the Jiang, Nie, and Jin heirs, standing halfway between his family and peers.

”Don’t give me the cold shoulder,” Wei Wuxian whined. “There are many benefits to being friends with me. I can take you to Yunmeng to pick lotuses and catch pheasants. It’ll be fun!”

Huaisang sighed again, imagining how much fun that would be. Seeing that, Jiang Cheng glanced at Nie Huaisang, the interested Jin Zixuan, and the still-expressionless but attentively watching Lan Wangji, and wondered if they would accept an offer from *him*.

But he was the heir to YunmengJiang. As his mother had always told him, he couldn’t just make empty promises like Wei Wuxian tended to.

~~He missed his brother.~~

”I won’t go,” Lan Wangji refused.

Adopting an exaggeratedly contemplative expression, Wei Wuxian began pacing back and forth behind Second Young Master Lan. Then, as if unable to come to a solution, turned to glare at Lan Wangji.

“Stop saying ‘no.’ Girls don’t like it,” he nudged Lan Wangji. “You’re going to be all alone forever.”

“...That’s fine,” Lan Wangji responded.

Ignoring the overly-pitying looks Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang sent him was more difficult than Wangji would have expected.

At the shockingly lonely statement, Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji in disbelief.

“...Hey, is every member of your clan so vapid? If your father is as vapid as you, your mother must be so bored!”

Although the other clans didn't know the specifics, it was impossible to miss the way the Lans all flinched at Wei Wuxian's teasing. Nor how the Lan Clan's official statement regarding the Sect Leader had several holes which everyone was discouraged from filling in.

Another pause as Lan Wangji remained facing away, before he spoke, "I don't have a mother."

"That's impossible. You can't have been born out of thin air," Wei Wuxian began, then paused as the implications began to sink in.

It should have been a good thing. Xichen should be happy that, despite everything, Wei Wuxian had become someone Wangji felt comfortable talking to. Even pressed, Wangji would never have admitted anything about their family's history to someone he wasn't close to.

So why did *Wen Ruohan* and *Jin Guangshan* have to be here to listen to it?

The previous joyful air had been switched out for a much more subdued melancholy. Lan Wangji remained facing forward, completely blank, but Wei Wuxian shook his head and forced himself to smile.

"My parents died when I was four," he revealed.

Jiang Fengmian flinched.

"You might think I'd remember them, but I don't. I don't even remember what my parents looked like."

Several people frowned, and Jiang Cheng was shocked. His brother was always so obnoxiously *happy*. Even when Jiang Cheng's parents fought, he had never brought up his own.

And yet, here Lan Wangji was, getting closer to Wei Wuxian by leaps and bounds in only a few months. Looking at Lan Wangji's still-blank face, it was impossible to tell if the other realized how momentous this was.

(Xichen saw the shock on his brother, and knew he did.)

"But there's one thing I do remember," Wei Wuxian revealed. "I was riding on a donkey with my mom beside me, and my dad was right in front of us. I think my mom cracked a joke, making my father laugh."

A memory of Cangse Sanren that even Jiang Fengmian didn't have. Given how Wei Wuxian had learned better than to talk about his parents in the Jiang household, it was no surprise that he hadn't heard this story.

However, to get it by (unwillingly) spying on a private conversation left a bad taste in his mouth.

Madam Yu wanted to reignite their usual argument at the reminder of her enemy, Cangse Sanren, but, seeing the general mood in her children and husband, hesitated.

Perhaps she would let it go just this once. In Wei Changze's memory, if nothing else.

Shaking his head, Wei Wuxian smiled, nudging Lan Wanji with his shoulder, "Let me tell you, girls in Yunmeng are very pretty — different from the sort of pretty here in Gusu."

Several people had to do a double take at the fast transition. On the other hand, Jiang Yanli was unsurprised. She hadn't expected Wei Wuxian to mention the memory, but covering up his feelings with childish playfulness was an art he had long since mastered.

Doubling the teasing nature of his smile Wei Wuxian winked.

"You sure you won't come?"

His smirk clearly marked the offer as a deal with the devil.

Lan Wangji hesitated, then replaced his melancholy blankness with annoyance.

"I'm *sure*."

"...He doesn't *seem* to tolerate Wei Wuxian," Nie Mingjue observed skeptically, watching the youngest Lan's furious gaze. He turned to Xichen, and saw Jiang Fengmian glance over as well. After observing both his real and simulated little brother's expression carefully, Lan Xichen shook his head confidently.

"He's happier than I've seen him in a long time."

And indeed, it seemed that Wei Wuxian's double-attack of companionship and teasing had broken Lan Wangji out of his momentary depression, returning his expression to its usual one of annoyance. It was notable, however, that this annoyance was a far cry from the empty indifference he showed everyone else. Perhaps that wasn't a surprise; who else could cause this but a boy who, no matter how many times he was refused, thrown out, or punished, kept coming back?

The three heirs turned to glance at the boy next to them, who was, once again, glaring at his brother. Upon closer inspection, however, they noticed the red covering his ears. For the first time, they saw what Xichen saw.

"...You like him, don't you?" Nie Huaisang blurted out.

Lan Wangji spun to stare at them, wide-eyed, but couldn't deny it in the face of the red rapidly spreading to encompass his neck. It made Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli, and Jin Zixuan blink in awe, finally understanding.

On the other hand, Lan Qiren turned so pale he was almost translucent.

(Wen Ruohan hummed in interest.)

Instead of continuing the conversation, Lan Wangji soon stalked off to a deeper end of the pool. Seeing that, Wei Wuxian ~~adorably~~ pouted.

Hearing a splash behind him, Lan Wangji finally turned around.

He glared and growled, "What are you doing?"

On land, Wei Wuxian snatched his folded outer robe and threw it over his shoulder, "You always refuse me, and I don't like it. Enjoy your bath, Lan-er-gongzi."

With a flip of his hair, he began to walk off.

Lan Wangji couldn't decide if he found the action more infuriating or attractive.

"Give it back."

"Ha. And what if I don't?" he asked, giggling teasingly as he looked over his shoulder, giving him an appraising gaze. "Lan Zhan, you're in really good shape."

"*Shameless,*" he hissed, to Lan Qiren's approval. Everyone else, however, saw the red on his and his virtual self's ears and recognized the emotion as embarrassment rather than annoyance.

(Xichen was, once again, regretting the simulation's focus on his brother. The people present could only read his strongest emotions, but that was still a huge step up from the nothing of before.)

While Wei Wuxian began laughing, Lan Wangji turned away.

"You-"

The shuffling and groaning of a group of gui made both boys freeze.

"Huh?" Wei Wuxian paused. "What's that sound? It… sounds like walking corpses."

Lan Qiren's eyes widened with horror, remembering the walking corpses his virtual self mentioned catching. If they had escaped....

Neither Wei Wuxian nor Lan Wanji had their swords.

Confirming Qiren's thoughts, Lan Wangji explained "My uncle brought back a few fierce corpses and asked me to lock them up in the Mingxiang Tang. How would they have come out?"

Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes, "Neither of us has our weapons. This is gonna be hard."

"Of course it is!" Jiang Cheng hissed out, scoffing slightly at the understatement to hide his nervousness.

Wei Wuxian turned and began to run, only to be stopped by Lan Wagnji's "Wei Wuxian! Wait!"

"What?"

Lan Wangji stepped out of the pool, glaring "Give me back my clothes."

Beads of water slipped down his chest, and his soaked pants clung tightly to his body.

"Wow," Huaisang murmured, unintentionally repeating his reaction to Wei Wuxian drinking Emperor's Smile an hour ago. He got a glare from Lan Wangji, but, as the jade was used to it, no further fuss was raised.

In the next second, the group was brought along a path, as a Lan disciple led Jiang Cheng after the fierce corpses.

"I'm sorry. We weren't paying attention and let them escape," he explained. "Master Xichen and Master Qiren are not back yet. We must find Lan-er-gongzi as soon as possible."

Jiang Yanli couldn't help sighing slightly; could this get any worse? Noticing her displeasure, Jin Zixuan tried to show support by stepping closer to her. The grateful smile he got in response was blinding.

Hearing the groans of the corpses, the pair skidded to a halt, made terrified eye contact, and leapt off the path to dart through the trees in the direction of the sound.

On another path, Lan Wangji ran past flowering trees, still bereft of his sword. With his pure white ribbon and robes, it was easy for the watching cultivators to be drawn to his figure.

Which is why it took them an extra second to notice the corpse frantically crawling after him.

"No," Lan Xichen whispered, eyes widening in terror as he momentarily lost control of his expression. "No, no-"

"Xichen, he'll be fine," Nie Mingjue whispered, the only one close enough to hear Xichen's worry. "We saw him in the future, remember? Not a scar on him."

"But he doesn't have Bichen."

"He'll be fine," Nie Mingjue assured yet again.

(Huaisang was so *proud* of his big brother!)

Though, worryingly, Wei Wuxian wasn't there.

The creature moved closer and closer, matching Lan Zhan step for step on the stone path. Then, with a grand twist of his snow-white robes, Lan Wangji spun on his toes

mid-step and grabbed a nearby branch.

With a swing, he sent a torrent of spiritual energy towards the beast, using the leaves as a conduct for the attack. The creature was thrown back.

Only for two more to take its place.

Normally, Jin Zixuan couldn't have cared less about what happened to the second jade. They had already seen he would survive, and it wasn't like they'd ever had a personal conversation.

But, somehow, after hours and hours of getting to see genuine emotional reactions from the boy, something in him decided it didn't want to see Lan Wangji get hurt.

Lan Wangji dodged the attacks that followed, remaining close enough to engage the pair in hand-to-hand combat. Despite remaining unharmed, it was clear the attacks were beginning to wear on him, as he moved significantly slower than usual.

Lan Qiren reluctantly admitted he wished cultivators could fight without needing their swords. Talismans were their best option, but most talismans weren't useful in unexpected situations because of the time it took to draw them out.

The only ones he had seen actually be effective were Wei Wuxian's-

(But that was demonic cultivation, and therefore not an option.)

"Lan-er-gongzi!" someone shouted. "Your Guqin!"

He looked up, and saw the Guqin Wangji sailing through the air. Without a second thought, Lan Wangji jumped and caught it mid-air. He spun to face the resentful creatures.

~🎵~

A pause.

Then a shockwave *slammed* into the creatures.

Madam Yu frowned slightly, witnessing the unquestionable power of an heir to a rival clan.

Now, Lan Wangji moved parallel to the corpses, falling to the ground as they were flung into the air. When they landed, their bodies splattered against the ground motionless, resentful energy purified.

Jiang Cheng ran forward and looked around nervously.

"Where is Wei Wuxian?" he demanded.

"We got separated."

A heavy frown formed on Jiang Fengmian's lips.

A ravenous smile appeared on Wen Ruohan's.

Lan Qiren clenched his fists, fearing the boy was seaking out a corpse to test his demonic theories on.

In a different part of the forest, the watchers were dragged through the trees at a staggering pace, barely giving them time to react to the change in scenery.

Huaisang fell over trying to dodge a tree that he just phased through anyways.

Following Wei Wuxian, two fierce corpses moved in sync, jumping over bushes and under branches just as deftly as he did. Just as he arrived at a clearing, another fierce corpse circled around before him.

"No!" Jiang Yanli yelled.

'*Thank God,*' Lan Qiren thought, seeing that the boy wasn't secretly experimenting.

Without slowing his pace at all, Wei Wuxian simply bounced off a nearby tree to jump *above* the fierce corpse, landing on its back and kicking it into the other two. Just like during his mock-battles with Lan Wangji, his environmental awareness and ingenuity were starkly on display.

Despite having been knocked down, the corpse rose again a moment later. With Suibian gone, Wei Wuxian had nothing he could use to purify the resentful energy powering the corpse's movement; he had no choice but to keep running.

At first, Wei Wuxian maintained high ground, using the trees as his escape route from the approaching monsters. However, seeing that it hadn't granted him any advantage, he swiftly jumped down to grab a branch as thick as his forearm off one of the trees and chucked it at the corpses.

Though their approaches differed based on their unique styles, Lan Wangji couldn't help but feel bubbly when he saw the similarities in their strategies.

(Excessive pride and irrelevant comments were forbidden. He added an additional repetition of the rules to his punishment.)

The corpse the branch hit was pinned to a tree, but the other two were left unhindered. By this point, Wei Wuxian was starting to breathe heavily, having sprinted through trees for almost 10 minutes.

For a brief moment, Jin Guangshan pondered how they would find Wei Wuxian once they got out. Would it be a political agreement the Jin and Wen clans could pressure the Jiang Clan into? Or would they be forced to send an army to chase him down? It was inefficient, but he was sure Wen Ruohan would agree taking time to cut off Wuxian's weapons, allies, and resources would be worth it so long as *he* was the prize.

One more shaky exhale, and Wei Wuxian's brows tightened in determination. Facing them fully, Wei Wuxian prepared himself for their attack.

When the corpse lunged, Wei Wuxian immediately ducked under its grasp and slammed his fist into its cheek. The corpse skidded several meters back, jaw dislocated by the punch.

...Perhaps Jin Guangshan would need to recalibrate his prediction, especially considering this was shortly after Wei Wuxian's punishment, a few minutes in the spring or not.

The next corpse proved to be more troublesome, forcing Wei Wuxian to dodge its attacks. Then, with an overextended lunge, it gave Wei Wuxian the opportunity to tug on its arm and pull its body close, delivering a *bone-shattering* back kick.

A normal human's ribs would have been crushed by the attack.

While nothing Wen Zhuliu couldn't do, Wen Ruohan found himself impressed. Despite not having access to their swords, both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had done exemplary — especially given their age. In the current generation, the two were unrivaled.

(Looking at Madam Yu, it was obvious to him that she had noticed the exact same thing, and was far from pleased at the observation.)

Just then, the corpse Wei Wuxian had hit with the branch returned, and began hobbling towards the cultivator. Wei Wuxian swallowed nervously.

Half the gathered watchers swallowed in synch.

"This is stressful," Nie Huaisang murmured, moving toward his brother.

The trio of corpses remained as powerful as ever, approaching Wei Wuxian simultaneously. Now, the boy's labored breathing was even more noticeable, and his determined gaze was laced with wariness.

"They're still alive?"

Protocol or not, Jiang Cheng was going to give his brother the tightest hug ever once he got out of the simulation. At this point, Wei Wuxian was truly running out of options.

'*Please,*' he silently prayed. '*I don't care what you have to do, just get out of there alive.*'

After a few more shaky steps, the corpses broke into a run. Just as they were about to make contact with him, the viewer's surroundings changed.

"What?!"

"Don't cut off *now*!

Jiang Cheng turned toward the noise.

“Over there!”

“Oh, thank god,” he whispered.

Instantly, the watchers returned to the fight, only to see Wei Wuxian flug back and slammed into a tree. He gasped and coughed, the air knocked out of him.

This incident was not the Wen Clan’s fault, but, surprising even herself, Wen Qing couldn’t help but clench her fists in worry. It made no sense — she didn’t even *know* Wei Wuxian — but she felt it regardless.

Perhaps, some small, insignificant part of her associated the childish yet kind and protective boy with her younger brother. Personality-wise they couldn’t be more different, but internally-

She silently berated herself for temporarily forgetting that Wei Wuxian would most likely grow up to kill her little brother.

Gulping once, Wei Wuxian turned to hide behind the tree he had been thrown into. In the second’s pause he had, the only sound in the clearing was his own breaths.

‘*Without my sword, there’s no way for me to kill them all.*’

Unconsciously, Lan Wangji stepped forward, worry gnawing at his heart.

Wei Wuxian was truly out of options.

He turned to his right, trying to peek past the tree at a corpse.

It attacked from behind.

Both Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang screamed slightly at jump scare, and Wen Chao looked faint.

Wei Wuxian narrowly dodged yet again, and immediately jumped up a tree to one of the higher branches. Below him, the corpses followed.

Unlike his graceful leap, the fierce zombie climbed the tree like an animal. It groaned and dug its nails into the bark, uncaring of how its climbing destroyed its fingertips. The other two wrapped their arms around the trunk, trying to shake Wei Wuxian off.

Right before the climbing corpse reached him, he jumped out of the way. Then, an enormous shadow covered the ground around him.

Wei Wuxian looked back.

The uprooted tree crashed down.

“Look out!” Jiang Yanli shouted, trying to push him out of the way. However, her hands passed through his body like air, and her shout remained unheard. They could do nothing to

help.

The tree slammed into the ground, kicking up an enormous cloud of dust. When the air cleared, the watchers were allowed to see Wei Wuxian's body flat against the ground.

The Jiang siblings rushed to his side, and Nie Huaisang and Jin Zixuan follow shortly after. When he moved slightly, all four nearly collapsed in relief.

He was still alive.

(Of course he was. His death wouldn't happen for another seven years. Because that was *so much* better.)

While he managed to avoid serious damage, the fact remained that he had been forced to the ground. The three corpses began to approach.

It was undeniable: Wei Wuxian was out of options. In fact, he practically *couldn't* have fewer options! There wasn't a single thing he could do to escape them.

Jiang Cheng prayed his virtual self would come.

Shakily, Wei Wuxian stood up, pushing off the tree for additional support. Hearing several soft pats to his right, he turned to look.

"...A rabbit?"

The corpses attacked, perfectly willing to crush everything in their way. Wei Wuxian dodged, then turned and ran towards the rabbit.

He picked it up mid-stride.

"What is he doing?" Lan Qiren asked, expecting the worst. Was he going to attempt demonic cultivation by sacrificing a live animal? Throw it at the corpses as a distraction?

Xichen blinked once and answered, "I think he's trying to save it."

Many of the watchers, especially Huaisang and Yanli, loved rabbits and would go out of their way to help them whenever they could. That said, *while getting chased by three fierce corpses* wasn't really the time. Yes, the rabbit would probably be crushed during the chase, but he had been running for nearly twenty minutes; he wouldn't last much longer if he gave himself a handicap.

'*Idiot,*' Jiang Cheng thought. '*No one's going to thank you for that.*'

Lan Wangji's frown deepened.

As expected, trying to remain alive with a liability was nearly impossible — especially given how tired he was. This time, when he dodged an attack, he got three parallel scratches on his arm as a reward.

Subconsciously, both Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji moved closer to the running Wei Wuxian, wishing there was more they could do to help.

Stumbling slightly, Wei Wuxian momentarily sank to his knees, only for another corpse to attack his open back.

"No!"

He raised an arm up to block.

And the corpse stopped.

"...What?"

Torn between elation and confusion, the watchers were stunned silent by what they saw.

Slowly, Wei Wuxian blinked his eyes open, then harshly flinched back.

"It's…"

"He didn't even realize," Wen Ruohan observed quietly.

The corpse had frozen *centimeters* away from his hand, its groaning shifting to resemble cries of pain as the energy powering its body was sucked out.

The excess swirled around Wei Wuxian.

"...Resentment?" he realized.

The abyss had been the confirmation of a theory. When given no other options, he had tried anything he could, causing him to recall an insane idea he had thought up months ago.

This was an instinctual reaction developed by that experience. At this point, he was practically forced to act.

Because the Lan sect failed, he felt his only choice was demonic cultivation.

(Xichen was probably thinking too deeply. Just because that was true this time, didn't mean his eventual use of demonic cultivation was justifiable.)

A heartbeat rang in their ears.

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened as he gasped, trying to move his arm, but was trapped. Resentment crawled up the limb, closer and closer to his body and he tried pulling away but was *stuck* and his skin paled to deadly white and then the veins in his neck bulged out and he was trying to fight but couldn't fight and then-

"A-Xian!"

Their surroundings switched to a dark void, only illuminated by a beautiful golden orb.

“Isn't that his-”

“Core?” Jiang Cheng asked, eyes widening in horror. Wei Wuxian was one of the most talented young masters of their generation; unlike Huaisang, he had no reason to develop demonic cultivation. But if something happened to his core-

Wei Wuxian doubled over, clutching his chest in pain. Pained gasps escaped him, and he fell to a knee; the veins on his face began to bulge as well. Tremors wrecked his body, and his breaths became thinner and thinner. The resentment was spreading.

Silently, Lan Wangji walked closer to Wei Wuxian, and kneeled next to where the Jiang, Jin, and Nie heirs sat. They turned to him in surprise, but he only had eyes for the ethereal boy who never stopped trying to talk to him and was *dying* because of his sect-

”Wei Wuxian! Your sword!”

Suibian hit the ground shortly after, and Jiang Cheng flew down from the sky. He landed and dealt with one corpse easily, but Wei Wuxian remained motionless on the ground.

”What?!” Jiang Cheng demanded. “Are you too scared to hold your sword?”

The collection of heirs, still kneeling on the ground, frowned slightly.

Wen Ruohan scowled at the reminder that — regardless of whether he had Wei Wuxian — inventing demonic cultivation was far less easy than the opening narration made it out to be.

The trembling increased, but Wei Wuxian reached forward regardless, unconvincingly declaring “Non… nonsense.”

Jiang Cheng narrowed his eyes, then widened them. He knew what had happened.

“You-”

The fierce corpse, which had been frozen, woke up, turned, and *attacked*. It was subsequently purified in the blinding blue light accompanying a guqin note. On a far away hill, Lan Wangji stood with his guqin in hand, watching them calmly.

The real counterpart of the Second Jade relaxed, incomparably relieved that his other-self had helped. In some ways, this had all happened because he got separated from Wei Wuxian. It would have been safer if he had kept the boy in his sight-

He shook his head, recognizing where those thoughts were leading. He would not become like his father; Wei Wuxian would not be trapped like his mother. He wouldn’t allow it.

”Lan-er-gongzi, the remaining three zombies are all here.”

“Bring them back,” he responded as Wei Wuxian forced himself to stand up. “Do not make any mistakes.”

Suibian shook in Wei Wuxian’s grip.

Jiang Cheng couldn't decide whether he was grateful Wei Wuxian's core was unharmed. On one hand, he didn't want his brother to be hurt. On the other, it meant Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation was probably only due to his curiosity.

Seeing the still-bulging veins on Wei Wuxian's hand, Lan Wangji frowned slightly and turned as if to approach, only for Jiang Cheng to step between him and Wei Wuxian.

“Thank you for your help. It is too late right now; I will have to thank you properly another time.”

After hesitating a moment, Lan Wangji turned away with a simple “No need.”

Lan Wangji told himself it was well within Jiang Cheng’s rights to privately confront Wei Wuxian about what he saw. The stinging in his heart remained despite the reminder.

Turning around, Jiang Cheng marched towards his head disciple, grabbed his collar, and slammed him into the tree.

“Wei Wuxian! Tell me, what the hell was that?! Did you really….”

Wei Wuxian’s lack of response was answer enough.

“You… are you out of your mind?! It’s the dark arts! If other people found out, you’d be expelled by every clan!”

Was there *anyone* Jiang Cheng would want to hide this from more than the gathered clan members? Slowly, cautiously, Huaisang turned his gaze on the fascinated Jin and Wen sect leaders.

“Wei Wuxian! Can you hear me?!”

Despite all the yelling, Wei Wuxian simply allowed himself to get repeatedly slammed into the tree, behaving no different from a corpse.

His skin certainly matched the color of one.

Jiang Cheng clenched his fists. He knew why his other self was acting that way — Wei Wuxian always made the most *idiotic* decisions — but also knew what sort of response his other self was anticipating. The shouting was meant to force Wei Wuxian to understand the gravity of the situation, teaching him that manipulating resentful energy wasn’t a joke he could mess around with.

Virtual-Jiang-Cheng thought Wei Wuxian wasn’t responding to his words because the other boy didn’t *care*.

But the real Jiang Cheng had seen what actually happened. It wasn’t a predetermined action or even a split-second decision; Wei Wuxian hadn’t even realized he’d done it until he was already feeling the effects. And, if he hadn’t taken action, he might have *died*.

Yanli glanced at both her real and simulated brother, understanding the former's anger and the latter's guilt. Yes, for this situation, the problem wasn't Wei Wuxian's inability to comprehend the severity of what had occurred, it was his lack of other options.

If Jiang Cheng wanted to make sure Wei Wuxian never did that again, he should be helping their adoptive brother find a way to carry talismans at all times or force him to always carry his sword. Now, especially after experiencing the effects of resentful energy, Wei Ying didn't need to be told of the danger.

~~So then why did he end up becoming the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation?~~

The two brothers stood across from each other, Jiang Cheng ferocious and heaving furious breaths, and Wei Wuxian calm and pliant — almost dead inside.

Then, Wei Wuxian whispered.

"I know."

Jiang Cheng looked up in surprise, shocked by the muted and severe way Wei Wuxian spoke. No jokes or surprise attacks followed, only uncertain acknowledgment of the crime.

"How could I dare to use such awful dark arts?" he whispered.

Lan Qiren wanted to be pleased that the severity of the incident had been understood, but, if the future scenes were correct, then obviously Wei Wuxian was just lying to get his brother to stop lecturing him.

"It won't happen again," Wei Wuxian promised.

Wen Chao snorted in disbelief. As much as they wanted to, no one could truly disagree with him.

(But it looked so genuine.)

Just then, his robes began to shift, and the bunny he had rescued popped its head out.

Several people flinched at that, having forgotten it. Nie Mingjue frowned, sternly reminding himself that the outcome and intentions didn't change the morality of what Wei Wuxian had done. The Nie might use something similar to resentful energy, but, with the exception of qi deviations, they could use it as an effective weapon. Wei Wuxian realized he couldn't control resentful energy; any further application of it couldn't be excused.

"The next day," Lan Sizhui recited.

Within the Cloud Recesses' library, Lan Wangji continued to practice caligraphy. The watchers, however, were situated just outside the study, given a perfect view to watch Wei Wuxian climb up a tree, grab onto a high branch, and hop forward to leave his entire body hanging onto the windowsill.

“Lan Zhan, I’m back!” he shouted. “How’ve you been without me copying scriptures next to you? Did you miss me?”

Did he miss perhaps the only person his age who saw him as a human rather than a piece of jade? If asked, Lan Wangji obviously would have said “no.”

Similarly, his fake-counterpart responded, “Leave.”

“If I don’t, will you throw me down?” Wei Wuxian asked, his eyes glistening like pearls. Combined with his ebony-black hair and blinding smile, the image was enough to leave women from all corners of the world speechless.

Huaisang had to admit that, while no one would have expected the Second Jade to be a cutsleeve, it wasn’t hard to see why Wei Wuxian was the one to turn him that way.

After hesitating a moment, Lan Wangji slammed his hands onto the table and stood up.

“Don’t be so scary!” Wei Wuxian requested. “I’m here to apologize by giving you a present!”

Without thinking twice, Lan Wangji responded “No.”

When Nie Mingjue raised an amused eyebrow with Lan Xichen, the latter couldn’t resist chuckling slightly. Both Lan Wangji and Lan Qiren looked betrayed by his reaction.

“You really don’t want them?”

Smirking, Wei Wuxian reached into his robes, then, as if performing a magic trick, dramatically revealed two adorable rabbits.

“Aw,” Jiang Yanli couldn’t help cooing, making Jin Zixuan mentally review which merchants he could contact to order a thousand bunnies.

Belatedly, Lan Wangji wondered how *many* presents this version of Lan Wangji would get. First the drawing, now the rabbits.

~~It wasn’t *fair*.~~

In addition to the white one he had saved, he had also found a nearly identical black one to complete the set. Still smiling, Wei Wuxian hopped over the ledge he had been hanging off to hold them normally.

“It’s really weird here,” he observed. “There aren’t any pheasants, but there’s a ton of wild rabbits. They aren’t even scared of people! So how about it? They’re fat, aren't they? You want them?”

Several seconds passed as Lan Wangji made perplexed eye contact with the bunnies. As Wei Wuxian held them by their ears, it seemed like he was holding two round, chubby snowballs. As he lifted then in front of Wangji’s eyes, they even kicked their legs around.

“Fine. If you don’t want them, I’ll give them to someone else.”

Xichen gleefully noted how his brother flinched slightly at the suggestion.

”...To whom?”

“Whoever’s best at roasting rabbits!”

“No killing in the Cloud Recesses!”

Huaisang flinched at Lan Qiren’s shout, momentarily getting flashbacks to his previous year at the Cloud Recesses. In some ways, though, it made him happy.

If he was reading the Lan’s expression correctly, Lan Qiren was still viewing Wei Wuxian as a student, rather than a demonic cultivator.

”Killing is forbidden in the Cloud Recesses,” Lan Wangji stated, unknowingly parroting the real Lan Qiren. “It is the third rule on the Wall of Rules.”

“Fine, then I’ll go down the mountain, kill them outside, and bring them back to roast.”

There were many things people had (and would) say about Wei Wuxian, but no one would try to argue that he wasn’t a creative problem solver.

”You don’t want them anyways. Mind your own business.”

A pause.

“...Give them to me.”

“Ha! You want them now?” Wei Wuxian observed cheerily. “Look at you! You’re always like this!”

Despite the mocking words, Wei Wuxian set the rabbits down and allowed them to hop over to where Lan Wangji sat. The white one moved slowly, eating a spare lettuce leaf calmly, while the black one imitated a cricket and bounced around the desk, leaving a trail of tiny footprints after it stepped on Lan Wangji’s ink-stone.

Abruptly, Lan Qiren’s eyes widened in horror as he remembered the last “future” scene before being brought to the present. In it, there were several scenic glimpses of the Cloud Recesses, one of which included a hill of bunnies which had not existed before then.

But his nephew was *not* in love with a demonic cultivator. Lan Qiren wouldn’t allow it.

~~He hadn’t managed to stop his brother, but he *would* stop his nephews.~~

Then, the two rabbits began rolling around and climbing on top of each other, wresting like children. Or, if you have a mind like Wei Wuxian’s-

“Hey, Lan Zhan, look! They’re piling up,” he stared down contemplatively, then brightened up. “Are they-”

“Both rabbits are male!” his voice rose in indignation.

“Nothing wrong with that so long as they’re *faithful*,” Madam Jin bit out. Thankfully, no one was looking at Lan Wangji to see his ears turning a cotton-candy pink.

“Male? How befuddling,” he picked them up. “They really are male!”

Now, Lan Wangji had turned away from Wei Wuxian, trying desperately to ignore his wildfire presence.

“Male then, male,” Wei Wuxian allowed. “Though, speaking of it, I’m the one that caught them, and even I didn’t notice their gender. Where exactly where you looking-”

“Get lost!” Lan Wangji turned as if to stand, but Wei Wuxian had already turned and sprinted out of the window, not giving the other boy a chance for retaliation. He cackled madly while in free-fall.

Before Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji had never lost his composure. Now, it seemed like he was shouting “Get lost!” every other day. Lan Xichen silently cheered at his brother for, despite his best efforts, getting his first friend.

Seeing that Wei Wuxian had already left, Lan Wangji simply brought a hand to rub against his temples, elbow on the table. If you looked closely, however, his face seemed to have gained a slight pink complexion.

“The next day, certain that Wei Wuxian was a basin full of jet-black die out to stain his favorite pupil, Lan Qiren told Wangji to stop attending classes with them.”

While most people huffed laughs of shock at the overreaction, Lan Wangji nodded to himself. After his first ~~thrilling~~ encounter with Wei Wuxian, he must have wanted to ~~get to know his equal and~~ punish the troublemaker. Now, seeing that his efforts proved futile, it was time to return to secluded meditation. His uncle had obviously made the correct call.

“...Well, that was exciting,” Huaisang declared.

“Bit of an understatement, don’t you think?” Jin Zixuan sarcastically responded, and Nie Mingjue rolled his eyes as his younger brother’s antics.

“*Quite* an understatement,” Lan Qiren confirmed grimly. “Considering how quickly he committed heretical cultivation again, *I’m* surprised Lotus Pier is still standing.”

“What else could he have done?” Jiang Cheng demanded, momentarily forgetting who he was speaking to. “He tried everything *else* first. He only used it when he had no other options!”

“There are always other options.”

“But he didn’t even realize he’d done it,” Huaisang pointed out. “It was just a reflex to avoid getting his arm chomped off, wasn’t it? I don’t really know, what do you think, Da-ge?”

As the Jiang siblings flinched at the reminder of what had almost happened, Nie Mingjue spoke, “Until now, he didn’t truly understand the danger of demonic cultivation or how it influenced the mind. Before it was excusable, but now that he does know there’s no excuse for him to continue considering it.”

“And yet,” Jin Guangshan hummed, “the far future events showed that he could use demonic cultivation to great effect *without* letting it influence his mind.”

Nie Mingjue shook his head, “The only way he could have figured out how to do that would be further experimentation, and, with what he now knows, that can’t be excused.”

It took all of Nie Huaisang’s self-control to not sigh; he loved his brother dearly, but Nie Mingjue tended to see in only black and white.

“We haven't seen what leads to that yet,” Lan Xichen pointed out, and his brother also nodded.

“Mn. ‘Do not make assumptions without evidence.’”

“Well of course you think that,” Wen Chao scoffed, either ignoring or (more likely) not seeing his father’s glare. “You fell in love with him.”

“He did not!” Lan Qiren growled, raising his voice higher than he had in years. It made even Lan Wangji flinch slightly, and when the youngest Lan felt his uncle’s glare, he clenched his fists and forcefully schooled his expression.

“...I did not,” he agreed. Although his tone was its usual perfect deadpan, no one except the in-denial Lan Qiren believed the statement.

Sighing slightly at the man’s unwillingness to judge objectively, Madam Jin said “If, hypothetically, there was anything between them, I don’t believe that would be a problem.”

As Lan Qiren glared at the Madam, Madam Yu muttered under her breath, “At least then the brat would have something to offer this family.”

“*My Lady,*” Jiang Fengmian frowned, but, as usual, didn’t know how to properly disapprove of the comment.

Jiang Yanli frowned. The Yunmeng Jiang sect had hundreds of members, many of whom were raised above their previous station by the chance to become cultivators. None of them were treated like Wei Wuxian — like family — but she disliked that, every once in a while, her parents made the love the Jiangs gave Wei Wuxian sound *conditional*.

Wanting to get the topic away from his nephew’s nonexistent emotions as soon as possible, Lan Qiren coughed and added “Regardless, as Sect Leader Nie said, nothing will excuse demonic cultivation now.”

“You don’t think he was justified here?”

“Of course not-”

“I admit his intentions, at least, were righteous,” Nie Mingjue allowed. “We’ll see if that stays true from here on out. If his curiosity brings him back to demonic cultivation, allowing it to corrupt his mind and leading him to kill Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan, then it’s a very different story.”

Both families flinched at the reminder of the coming deaths and who was responsible for them.

Lan Qiren paused, then, “It is especially inexcusable for someone with so much talent in righteous cultivation to use — to create — the demonic path. However, I can admit he *was* once righteous.”

Madam Yu rolled her eyes, but both Jiang Fengmian and Yanli smiled at the admission.

“Then, as we decided in the beginning, our goal will be to use this information to make sure he stays that way, correct?” Lan Xichen asked with a diplomatic smile. From every Sect except the Wen, he got a nod of agreement.

(Internally, Wen Qing wanted to agree. Externally, she knew the importance of not attracting attention.)

Leaning toward his sister, Jiang Cheng frowned and whispered to her, “Is Wei Wuxian improving or ruining the sect’s reputation?”

Reassuringly, his sister just laughed, “A-Cheng, the ancestors of the Jiang Clan were rogue cultivators, advocating frank actions and unrestrained minds. That’s exactly A-Xian’s personality. You don’t need to worry too much. They’re seeing his righteousness; right now, all we should worry about is how to prevent A-Xian from… becoming the Yiling Patriarch we saw at the beginning.”

The terrifyingly indifferent expression he had while taking on an enormous battalion of Wens was not their A-Xian. The single man who the army of Wens was *scared of* was not the person they grew up with. It was their job to keep him from happening.

Besides, if anything, seeing Wei Wuxian’s righteousness and fighting talent was *increasing* the prestige of the sect, rather than harming it.

“Regardless, it’s nice to see Wangji becoming so close with someone his age,” Xichen commented, trying to return the conversation to more positive observations.

Only for Jin Guangshan to again pipe up, “And yet Wei Wuxian felt like he had to *run away* from the adult version of Lan Wangji.”

Like a bucket of ice water had been poured on the crowd, a frigid silence reigned. Watching from the side, Wen Ruohan smirked; learning the cause of such a massive change in

relationship would be very telling of the kind of people both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were.

“At least… we don’t think Lan Wangji was going to hurt A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli tried, to the enthusiastic nods of her brother and fiance. Seeing Nie Huaisang’s obvious relief at the words, Mingjue momentarily had to glance away. No matter what he did later, Wei Wuxian was once righteous.

(So what could have changed that?)

After a full day of teaching, investigation, and planning, there was something truly *special* about getting some time to relax. With the medical information on the coma-ridden leaders Wei Wuxian had sent over, the other clans had finally stopped panicking and started grouping together. Between the overjoyed Lan elders and the disheartened Jin heirs, all succession conflicts stopped at the announcement that the leaders would be back by the end of the month. No one knew what was happening in the Wen sect, but it was likely they were also reassured by the news.

Wei Wuxian was just beginning to wind down for the day, when A-Yue’s scream shocked him awake. Immediately, he burst out of ~~his~~ Uncle Jiang’s office and ran back to the medical hall.

Inside, A-Yue and A-Lu were knocked back onto the ground, staring in awe at the glowing red characters carved into the air. The resentful energy sparked like Zidian’s lightning.

A return message. They had gotten through.

A grin broke out on Wei Wuxian’s face. He turned and waved off the other concerned disciples who had gathered at the scream, sending them back to their work.

“All under control, nothing to see here!”

Even as their head disciple, the other Jiang cultivators were hesitant to listen to him. Outside of training and pranks, the things he did would usually spark a conflict between Madam Yu and Uncle Jiang, and they wanted to be careful not to pick a side.

Somehow, after four and a half days under his leadership, he’d managed to fool them into respecting him. He hoped they wouldn’t be too disappointed when they found out he actually had no idea what he’s doing.

~~Why isn’t Uncle Jiang waking up yet is he doing something wrong he needs help and Jiang Cheng and Madam Yu and *Shi-jie* and what if he somehow made it worse and he doesn’t know what to *do*-~~

If anyone could see past his confident smile, they didn’t show it. As all the unrelated disciples obediently shuffled out, Wei Wuxian internally breathed a sigh of relief.

“A-Yue, can you explain what happened?”

“It wasn’t my fault!” A-Lu rushed to declare, earning himself a furious glare from the sister he interrupted.

Wei Wuxian held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, “I’m not blaming anyone, just trying to figure out what happened. Okay?”

“It wasn’t my fault either,” A-Yue insisted.

“That’s fine, can you tell me what happened?”

Both kids still looked hesitant, reminding Wei Wuxian yet again that he couldn’t replicate Uncle Jiang’s calm, uncritical aura whatsoever. Only one option left then.

With a dramatic flip of his hair, Wei Wuxian knelt down before them and lowered his head, declaring, “Young maiden, young sir, have no fear! I swear by my honor as the Jiang Sect’s substitute sect leader that I and the entirety of the Jiang sect *wholeheartedly* believe your innocence in this endeavor!”

A-Yue glared, trying to cover up her smile, “That isn’t a real position!”

“What? But of course it is!” he turned to A-Lu. “You agree with me, don’t you?”

A-Lu nodded frantically, a grin splitting across his face.

“He doesn’t actually agree!”

“Yes I do!”

“Well of course he’s telling the truth. I already told you I have the *upmost faith* in your innocence!”

“We can’t *both* be telling the truth.”

“Sure you can. And I’ll definitely believe the person who explains to me what happened.”

Both rushed to speak, “We were just standing here-”

“And then there was a red light starting to glow-”

“Above the talisman we recorded that message on-”

“And then we ran to get you-”

“But it *followed us*-”

“And we couldn’t get away-”

“And then I fell-”

“And then you showed up.”

Wei Wuxian paused for a moment, trying to interpret the sloppily thrown-together story, before nodding his head and drawing out an, “Okaaay. Are Uncle Jiang and Jiang Cheng and everyone else okay?”

The two nodded.

Cautiously, Wei Wuxian turned to face the characters again, observing them closely. Just like he suspected, it seemed to be a return message.

~~Unless he’s wrong but he’s usually right but he’s *fifteen* and not ready and what if it’s a trap but he can’t wake up the Jiangs on his own-~~

Taking a deep breath, Wei Wuxian reached a hand out and touched the characters 接受, for “accept,” sending it the slightest bit of spiritual energy to activate it like a talisman.

The instant he made contact with it, the world around him rushed away and was replaced by a barren, white field. He looked around, but A-Lu and A-Yue were nowhere to be found.

“Hello,” came from behind him.

Wei Wuxian spun around and jumped back, hand resting on Suibian, ready to draw at a moment’s notice. Appearing before him was a man slightly shorter than himself, with similarly silver eyes but a Jin nose and Lan-styled robes (which, oddly enough, were the same black-and-red color scheme as his own).

“Who are y-”

“Unfortunately, I won’t be able to respond to you since this is all pre-recorded, but I’ll do my best!” the man grinned and winked in a way that actually reminded Wei Wuxian of himself. “My name is Mo Xuanyu. I invented the orb which caused your sect leaders to fall unconscious, but, as you guessed, that isn’t the original purpose. It’s supposed to send information, and was used without my permission to contact them. Rest assured, the culprits were punished appropriately when we received your message.”

So at least Wei Wuxian had done one thing right.

”I don’t know the details of what the sect leaders are being shown, but you don’t need to worry about it. It’s probably just lies or a fantastical story that won’t hurt them in any way; none of it’s true.”

That made sense. Wei Wuxian would be sure to tell the sect leaders that once they escaped.

”No need to worry though, I can get them out. I’ve developed a way for them to leave even before the simulation ends. I’ll make the instructions on how to design it as detailed as possible, so please pay attention. It’s fine if you can’t remember all of it, just contact Wei Wuxian and tell him as much as you can-”

Wei Wuxian blinked. Did he just get volunteered for something?

”-I’m sure, so long as he receives my instructions, he’ll be able to create the escape-array.”

Now, Wei Wuxian was actually getting a little annoyed. While he appreciated the help and the implied compliment, he wasn’t sure why this “Mo Xuanyu” was specifying him specifically. How could someone he had *never met before* know so much about him?

Were they being watched?

A shiver ran down his spine.

Chapter End Notes

It’s super hard to combine three different interpretations! I wanted to have the Drama's party, but the donghua never shows it and the drama only has three people, while the novel says there were dozens. Or when I want to include lines from Jiang Yanli, who isn’t in Gusu in any other other versions. By the way, in regards to the easy acceptance of LWJ’s crush (minus Qiren), at this point only WRH views WWX as a "little Yiling Patriarch," and https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J236v07n01_08?journalCode=wzgp20 explains that in Ancient China homosexuality was (while not necessarily respected) *tolerated*.

Thank God for Wen Chao (Wait, What?)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Waking up to the sound of crying children was rarely a good sign.

Granted, it wasn't exactly unusual for Wei Wuxian (a head disciple who hundreds of children felt comfortable coming to after nightmares tended to experience it a lot), but it still wasn't *pleasant*.

"A-Yue," he mumbled. "What's wrong?"

"I-I'm *sorry!*" she cried, sniffling heavily and rubbing her eyes. To her right, A-Lu was bawling and mumbling incoherently.

The genuine terror in their eyes shocked Wei Wuxian awake.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked, forcing himself to sit up.

"Y-you touched the red, and-and you just *fell* and you wouldn't wake up and you were *just like Sect Leader Jiang* and Madam Yu and we-we thought you were *gone* and we-"

"Hey, shhhh," Wei Wuxian whispered, pulling both preteens close and squeezing tight. In hindsight, perhaps he should have guessed his body would react the same way the sect leaders' had.

Jiang Cheng always said he needed to take more time to think things through.

(If "Mo Xuanyu" was telling the truth, Jiang Cheng would tell him that again in just a few more hours. He and Madam Yu would probably lecture him for days on end about his carelessness while Shijie gave him a heart-stoppingly disappointed look and Uncle Jiang tried to figure out whether he was amused or disapproving.

If Mo Xuanyu's words were a lie-)

On the bright side, it seemed like he hadn't been unconscious long enough for other people to notice; if they had, Wei Ying had a feeling the Jiang sect would've become almost as chaotic as the Jin sect.

(On that note, maybe he should send more supplies over. They still hadn't really recovered from the arson a third-cousin did on a second-cousin's room.)

Wei Wuxian looked down and wiped the two sets of tears away, smiling reassuringly.

"I'm fine, see? I was just getting some more information on how to get the sect leaders out. It's all going to be okay now, I've got this," he explained confidently.

A-Yue, still sniffling, gave him a highly skeptical look, but didn't voice her concerns. Wei Wuxian couldn't shake the feeling that he was being patronized by a child.

Hiding a mounting headache, Wei Wuxian directed the two kids off to get supplies for him. After a few more sniffles, he finally got a "yes, Da-shixiong" and was left alone.

He understood the basics of what Mo Xuanyu had told him, but he didn't feel comfortable *testing* the stranger's invention on any of the Jiangs.

Maybe he could test it on the peacock.

(No, no, if anything happened to him, Shijie would be sad. Shoot.)

He sighed, realizing his only choice was to try to replicate the coma's cause in a controlled environment, and test it on that. It would be significantly harder and more time consuming, but every person under the device's effects was a clan member of the Great Sects.

~~They would never allow the son of a servant to touch them.~~

Well, so long as he left more duties to his third shidi, he should be able to work on it around 19 hours a day, provided he avoided sleeping for a while. It wasn't like he had ever *expected* help from the other sects.

Frustration momentarily struck Wei Wuxian, surging through him at the reminder of how the clans weren't helping but whined and complained and expected him to wake everyone up and he had the Jiang sect but no other connections to help and why wasn't Uncle Jiang or Shijie here and Jiang Cheng was heir and even Madam Yu had the respect of the other sects-

He took a deep breath.

The facts were that the other clans didn't trust him and he didn't have the Jiangs; no amount of complaining would change that. Slapping his face twice to wake himself up, Wei Wuxian forced himself to smile got to work reading through a trade deal for the sect's rice supply as he waited for A-Lu and A-Yue to return.

If nothing else, he could still take consolation in the fact that Yunmeng Jiang was still doing the best among the great sects. Yunmeng's citizens had minimal complaints, night hunts were still occurring, and its wealth had even *increased* because of how long it took the other sects to contact the merchants again. Once the sect leaders were awake again, he was going to lord it over the other sects — cough, the peacock, cough — until the end of time. Bragging rights were always the best reason to do something.

Shijie and Jiang Cheng would disagree with that statement, but they could complain all they wanted ~~if~~ when they got out.

First, the sounds of gossiping disciples appeared. Then, their bone-white surroundings switched to the Cloud Recesses' walkways as Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang passed by.

Closing his eyes, Nie Huaisang slipped into silent prayer that the simulation wouldn't show any more of his precious spring books. His Da-ge already knew about some of them, but the more explicit ones had been kept hidden for years; he would not appreciate the simulation ruining that!

"...The cold spring was truly a work of wonder," Wei Wuxian explained whimsically, as Nie Huaisang excitedly took in the information.

"And then you ran into those two fierce corpses," Jiang Cheng reminded crossly. "Pay more attention next time!"

"That must have been terrifying!" Huaisang whimpered.

'*It was*,' several people mentally confirmed for Huaisang's virtual self. Although his face had remained impassive, Lan Wangji was certain his heart-rate had quadrupled while watching Wei Wuxian's escape.

"Scary?" Wei Wuxian repeated, exaggeratedly considering. "I suppose one part was a little scary…. Do you want to know?"

"Yes, yes."

Wei Wuxian cleared his throat, "It was a dark night, shrieking with howling wind. Then, suddenly, a *hand* stretched out of the cold spring, and dragged us into the pool!"

Remembering the fully-clothed state he had found both his brother and the second jade in, Jiang Cheng gave a heavy roll of his eyes.

Jiang Fengmian felt himself smiling at the interactions between Jiang Cheng and his best friend's son.

"Guess what it was," Wei Wuxian ordered.

"Wh-what?" he asked, as Wei Wuxian leaned in close.

"A *Shé-Yao!"* Wei Wuxian shouted, all but jumping onto a shrieking Nie Huaisang as Jiang Cheng caved in and brought his hand up for a facepalm.

Watching the playful teasing, Nie Mingjue was once again displeased at Wei Wuxian's incoming fall from grace. There weren't many people in the Nie sect his brother was close to, made worse by his reluctance to train.

That confirmed it; he would do anything he could to keep Wei Wuxian from resorting to demonic cultivation.

"Do you want to know what he looked like?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Ah, d-don't tell me!" Huaisang rushed to respond, nervously stepping away from his friend. "I'm scared of snakes. Just keep the experience to yourself."

He turned to leave and took several steps, before turning slightly to walk backwards while facing the pair.

“Oh, and don’t forget the lanterns tonight!”

“Just go, just go,” Wei Wuxian instructed, waving Nie Huaisang off.

Neither Jin Zixuan nor Jiang Cheng could resist perking up slightly at the final comment. Despite Yanli’s slight giggles, their enthusiasm at the chance to see the lanterns remained potent.

An empty field took over, and small clusters of guest disciples sat around in groups.

“No, the wind doesn’t go that way. Just do as I told you,” the disciples murmured among themselves.

“Look at this. It’s not stable.”

“Do it like this. Wrap this up first.”

“You’re such a slow learner.”

“Give me that.”

“Ah, you’re so smart.”

It was slightly off-putting to Nie Mingjue to be surrounded by so many softly muttering disciples. At Qinghe Nie, they would first have never tried delicate craftsmanship, but, moreover, would spend their construction time shouting at each other from across the city.

Soft, delicate mumbles were usually a hint that Huaisang had conned them all into helping him skip training; *never* a good sign.

Somehow, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had ended up working on their lanterns next to each other. After a few seconds of hesitation, Wei Wuxian spoke:

“Lan Zhan, shall we set a lantern together to make a wish? We’ve risked our lives together several times, haven’t we?”

“...I’m used to being alone.”

Huaisang gave a dramatic gasp of sympathy and immediately moved to stand next to Lan Wangji. The other boy glared, but, unlike what Huaisang had been expecting, didn’t move away.

He may not be Wei Wuxian, but it seemed the shared experience was wearing even *the Second Jade’s* walls down. Huaisang gave a mental cheer.

“You can change such habits at any time. Besides, my lantern was especially made for you. Look.”

On it, a beautifully painted rabbit sat upright.

Lan Wangji stared in shock for a moment, before his mouth crept up into a minuscule — but undeniable — smile.

As Huaisang and Yanli mimicked him in admiring Wei Wuxian's gorgeous art, Lan Xichen found himself incomparably grateful. Wangji had finally found someone who would keep being friends with him no matter how unsocial his brother seemed.

Similarly, Wen Qing was suddenly realizing that Wen Ning would have loved to join in. It was unfortunate that the Wens no longer took part in the disciple exchange.

'*No, no. Don't forget, Wei Wuxian kills A-Ning to turn him into the Ghost General. You must remain vigilant.*'

Noticing the small smile, Wei Wuxian began to laugh joyfully, teasing "You smiled!"

Lan Wangji frowned at the verbal observation, then reached for Bichen.

"Ah, ah, I'm sorry!" Wei Wuxian blurted out, scrambling back and laughing.

Once again, both Lan Wangjis' faces had returned to being perfectly blank, but the gathered crowd were steadily breaking through. Even if they weren't able to read him, they would never again mistake his blankness for anger or apathy.

Wei Wuxian's laughter lit up the evening up as the first lanterns were released. Before the setting sun, all the gathered disciples sent the lights into the air, the beautifully-painted bunny lantern among them.

Watching them soar higher and higher, Lan Wangji did not notice Wei Wuxian's considering gaze falling on him and returning back to the lantern.

If the gathered watchers hadn't realized Lan Wangji's true feelings thanks to the simulated Xichen's words, they would have thought Lan Wangji didn't care.

In some ways, that made Wei Wuxian's continued attempts at friendship all the more impressive.

Several of the guest disciples excitedly pointed into the air at their floating lanterns, but the majority quickly clasped their hands together, closing their eyes in silent prayer.

"Please let me graduate successfully so I don't have to come back here again," Nie Huaisang whispered.

He got a highly unimpressed look from both his brother and Lan Qiren at that. Instead of pointlessly reminding them that *he* hadn't made the wish, Huaisang shuffled closer to Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng for moral support.

"Please allow my family to live happily," someone else murmured.

Madam Yu nodded once, pleased at the Jiang disciple's filial piety.

"I, Wei Wuxian, wish to always stand with justice, and live with no regrets."

Lan Wangji blinked once, then turned to him in surprise.

The more he saw, the harder it was for Lan Wangji to come up with reasons to avoid thinking about the kind, clever, *beautiful* person before him.

On the other hand, Yanli giggled slightly at the wish, feeling a strange sense of melancholy. Really, it had only been a few hours since she last saw Wei Wuxian, but everything she had learned made it feel like it had been years.

Seeing her slightly-forced smile, Jin Zixuan turned to her bowed once, complimenting "Your brother — Wei Wuxian, I mean — is… truly righteous. It's pretty rare to find someone like him."

Swallowing back bitterness, Jiang Cheng nodded and responded with an only partly-sour "Of course."

"Thank you Young Master Jin. I think he'll be a… good uncle for Jin Ling," she finished hesitantly. Instead of the disgust she had somewhat feared, Jin Zixuan blushed deeply and nodded in clear agreement.

As Madam Jin smiled proudly at her son, Lan Qiren, Wen Ruohan, Jiang Fengmian, Jin Guangshan, and Wen Qing contemplated Wei Wuxian's promise. If it was truly as genuine as it seemed — and it most likely was, given Wei Wuxian's actions around the abyss and escaped fierce corpses — then what could have happened to turn him into a monster capable of killing 5,000 cultivators in a single night?

Lan Wangji continued to silently watch Wei Wuxian, as the world around the watchers twisted into a mess of colors, refocusing on a classroom the next day.

Lan Qiren's voice read aloud, "The founder of the Lan Clan grew up in a temple as a devoted Buddhist. He was clever, gifted, dedicated, and extraordinary. His sermons attracted people from far and wide. Many admired his wisdom and piety. At the age of twenty, he resumed secular life, changed his surname to "Lan," and becoming a musician, writing and playing music."

A soft, dreamy sigh escaped Huaisang at the idealistic, art-filled life being described. He was sure the Lans would take offense to the comparison, but it was a nice daydream nonetheless.

"He transversed the world cultivating," Lan Qiren continued, staring at the pictures carved onto the wood before him. "When he arrived in Gusu, he met 'The One' and got married. Together, they established the Lan Clan. After his wife died, he returned to the temple and died there. These four pictures depict the life of Lan An, the founder of the Lan Clan."

"Hoh?" Wei Wuxian muttered leaning towards Jiang Cheng.

“They show him as a monk, a musician, a husband, and at the end….”

Apparently, the students or spirits these memories were based off were no longer interested in Lan Qiren’s lecture, as his voice was drowned out to allow the watchers to focus on Wei Wuxian.

Wei Ying grinned, “So, Lan Zhan’s ancestor was a monk? No wonder they have so many rules here. Though, come to think of it, he ventured into the mortal world to meet one person, and, as she went, he went as well, leaving nothing behind on this earth. Why would a person like him produce such unromantic descendants?”

Lan Wangji’s heart erupted into a panicked flutter, torn between elation at Wei Wuxian’s focus on him and dejection at the “unromantic” adjective. Then as Lan Qiren’s frown deepened, shame was added in too. It would not be appropriate for him to forget the dangers of the Lan Clan’s love.

“Lan An looks like an angel from heaven,” one disciple observed. “I wonder how exceptional ‘The One’ really was.”

His eyes drawn over by the voice, Wei Wuxian nearly did a double-take when he saw Jin Zixuan standing between him and the one who had spoken.

Flushing slightly, Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli made eye contact, then quickly looked away from each other.

“Do you guys *ever* pay attention?” Nie Mingjue grumbled at Huaisang, who promptly raised his hands in surrender despite the virtual-him not having spoken. Lan Qiren grumbled, privately annoyed by the undeniably true observation but unable to lecture when it hadn’t technically happened.

“We’re not short of beautiful or refined ladies now, are we?” someone reminded. “Zixuan-xiong, who do you think looks the best?”

An uneasy chill swept over Jin Zixuan. Now, after getting to see Jiang Yanli’s bravery and kindness first hand, he would never try to call her “boring.”

But *that*-him didn’t know her.

Instead of answering, Jin Zixuan made a careless noise of indifference and walked away.

Despite having expected it slightly, Jiang Yanli felt her smile falter seeing the act. In addition, it made Jiang Fengmian frown deeply.

From what he had seen so far, Jin Zixuan took more after his mother than his father. That said, if he got any indication that Jin Zixuan would take after Jin Guangshan, he would do everything in his power to end the engagement. Being forced into a marriage wouldn’t require him to take after his father, but it certainly brought him closer to the Jin’s marriage (and his own) than Jiang Fengmian preferred.

Arranged marriages almost always led to either miscommunication or mistreatment. He would not allow that to happen to his daughter.

One of the boys he had been talking to scoffed slightly.

“Do you even need to ask? He’s engaged. He would have to pick his fiancée.”

Jin Zixuan’s lips momentarily dipped into displeasure.

“He is?” the other boy asked. “What sect is she from? She must be extremely talented.”

Jiang Yanli flinched slightly, knowing full well what her reputation was.

“Drop it,” Jin Zixuan ordered.

“What do you mean, ‘drop it?’” a voice demanded. Jin Zixuan turned toward the speaker with a disdainful glare, and everyone else looked over in surprise.

Usually, Wei Wuxian had an unchangeable grin on his face. He had never become angry, even when he was scolded or punished. And yet, there was an obvious look of hostility on his face. In addition, Jiang Cheng, who usually scolded him for his actions, remained darkly silent.

Yanli’s eyes glistened, her face switching between despair, surprise, gratitude, and fear, then landing on determination-

“A-Xian, don’t,” she warned pointlessly, her lips pursed into a false smile as she clasped her hands tightly enough to bruise. It wasn’t like she hadn’t known what Zixuan thought, but it still hurt to hear.

Glaring, Jin Zixuan continued “Is the phrase ‘drop it’ too difficult to understand?”

“The phrase itself isn’t hard to understand. Rather, it’s hard to understand how on Earth you’re unsatisfied with your engagement to my Shijie.”

Wei Wuxian crossed his arms and smiled cockily, yet maintained a decidedly dangerous aura.

“Stop making trouble,” Madam Yu whispered, but, for the first time, couldn’t draw up any genuine anger. He really should know better than to offend Zixuan.

~~But were his reasons really wrong?~~

“Huh?” one Jin boy turned to whisper to the other, not noticing Jin Zixuan’s hand curl into a fist. “So it’s that plain Jiang Yanli.”

“I suppose she’s a bit unsuitable.”

“It’s all because their mothers are friends.”

“No wonder Jin Zixuan-”

Jiang Cheng moved forward as if to attack, but Wei Wuxian held him back.

Then, finally-

“Wouldn’t it be better to ask what about her I *could* be satisfied with?!” Jin Zixuan fired back.

Yanli bit her tongue so hard she tasted copper in her mouth.

Wei Wuxian calmly walked forward so that he was standing eye-to-eye with Jin Zixuan, fists clenched, and spoke:

“Think you’re pretty satisfying, don’t you? Where did you get the guts to be so *choosy*?”

“If she’s unsatisfied, tell her to get rid of the engagement!”

“*You-*”

“*What?* Am I wrong? If you like her so much, why don’t you talk to her father? If you want her, I don’t think he’d object. Doesn’t he treat you better than his own child or something-”

Before he had even finished his sentence, Wei Wuxian rushed over and punched him to the floor.

He immediately struck back.

“Hey-”

“They’re fighting!”

The scene cut away, but the watchers were silent.

On one side of the room, the Nie brothers backed away awkwardly, feeling as if they had gotten a glimpse into something they weren’t supposed to have seen. Neither Zixuan’s feeling on the engagement nor Jiang Fengmian’s relationship with his ward were secrets, but it still felt inappropriate to see it displayed so openly.

Wen Ruohan and his sons varied between an amused smirk and full blown cackles, finding the pathetic situation a sect heir was stuck in hilarious.

The Lans were infuriated both by the fighting taking place, and the unrighteous words Jin Zixuan had used to provoke Wei Wuxian’s attack. While Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji knew the rule forbidding fighting was an important one, they weren’t surprised Wei Wuxian broke it given the situation.

The Jiangs were standing defensively around Yanli as she tried desperately to swallow her cries. In the dimension they were in, there were no walls to hide behind or rooms to leave to. She had no where she could flee to.

And Jin Zixuan?

He had never hated himself more.

The simulation seemed to have known they would need time to process, as it simply spread out to different parts of the Cloud Recesses, not continuing the memories.

As the pause progressed, it rapidly became apparent that they weren't about to be distracted by anything else. That was good — great, even. It gave Jin Zixuan time to correct the misunderstanding.

He just had to say he didn't mean it-

But he had. But he-

He didn't now. Now, he liked-

'The Jin heir must do everything he does with pride.'

He couldn't say that but he couldn't stay silent but she was crying but he couldn't help but it was his fault but his dad seemed pleased but Jin Guangshan hadn't liked the engagement anyways but he was sect leader but Mom was angry but the Chief Cultivator wasn't but his new friends were and he cared about them but all he could see was the way Jiang Yanli shook silently, trembling in her seat.

That kind, beautiful, cheerful, happy girl was choking back tears because of *him*.

"I-" he tried. "I don't-"

Jiang Cheng turned a furious glare his way, probably planning out what he'd do once they were able to touch each other again.

He had to apologize.

But he was the Jin heir. Showing weakness would allow the vipers to trap-

But these were his friends-

Not all of them-

He had to-

Couldn't-

Yanli was *crying*-

He-

A high pitched, mocking chuckle rang out over the crowd.

“Well,” Wen Chao purred. “That’s only to be expected, I suppose. Trying to pair the heir of the Jin sect with her was bound to end-”

“Such comments are forbidden,” Lan Wangji spoke sharply, and Jiang Cheng turned toward him in surprise. Wen Chao opened his mouth to speak again, but was interrupted.

“Please mind your words,” Jiang Fengmian requested. Madam Yu rubbed her hand, momentarily forgetting Zidian wouldn’t work. They had to be careful; Wen Chao was of the Wen Clan, and Wen Ruohan was watching them all. While Wen Ruohan might be willing to treat arguments among the children as isolated incidents, Jiang Fengmian’s involvement could be an excuse to make it a political issue.

Unaware of the possible implications but determined to impress his father, Wen Chao continued “Oh, so even her own *parents* can’t deny it. We all know someone like her isn’t suitable for a great sect-”

“Do we?” Huaisang sang with false ignorance. “Given who you spend *your* time with, I’m not sure I trust your judgement.”

“Oh, don’t pretend.”

“Be silent!”

“We all know it was doomed to *fail*, right?” Wen Chao asked, interrupting Madam Yu. “The engagement was set up because Jiang Fengmian’s too *weak* to resist the wife who trapped him in marriage. But I supposed it all worked out. Otherwise, that weak girl couldn’t have gotten *any* husband. We’ve all hear the rumors about her. Can’t cultivate and spends all her time in the kitchen like a common *slave*. Even the son of a servant like Wei Wuxian would be far too good a fate for a useless, *ugly* bitc-”

“*Shut up!*”

It took Zixuan several seconds to realize *he* was the one who had spoken.

“What?” Wen Chao demanded. “You’re the one who said-”

“You’re wrong! *I* was wrong!” he disagreed, and, for the first time, all thoughts of his reputation and position were blinded by the memory of Jiang Yanli crying and-

“What-”

“That-me doesn’t *know* her. He’s-I’m just angry about the engagement and don’t know and it’s… she’s wonderful and kind and mature and happy and perfect and lovely and-a-and she deserves everything and I was blind and stupid and an *idiot* and I don’t deserve her but I’m not going to *stand here* and let a disgusting piece of *trash* like you talk that way about the most *amazing* woman I’ve ever met!”

Jin Zixuan stood, panting breathlessly after his speech, as what he just said slowly began to sink in. His audience was then greeted to the sight of his face turning pink, then red, then purple, then *blue*.

“Are…” Yanli began, wiping her tears as her smile began to turn genuine again. “Are you alright, Jin-gongzi?”

All the oxygen had left Jin Zixuan’s brain. So, he did what any sensible person would do.

Fled.

With energy multiplied by the adrenaline running through his veins, Jin Zixuan easily vaulted past his chair and ran though the people behind him, the no-touch system improving his escape. Within seconds, he had already bypassed the crowd and gotten nearly a dozen meters away from them.

Then, he vanished.

“Huh?” the watchers heard.

From the opposite direction.

They turned their heads and saw that Jin Zixuan had apparently teleported to the opposite end of the room. He turned and tried to run the other way, but teleported back to where he had originally disappeared from. The simulation physically prevented them from leaving the zone.

And there was no where to hide in an empty circle with a diameter of 30 meters.

The color of Jin Zixuan’s face was actually impressive.

He turned away, unable to face the avidly watching crowd he had just confessed his feelings in front of, and buried his face in his hands as if denying their existence would make them all go away. Most people were too shocked by the teleportation barrier to do anything — it certainly explained why their attempts to escape in the beginning’s darkness proved futile — but Jiang Yanli’s focus was entirely on Jin Zixuan.

Wiping the last of her tears, she stood up and walked over to him with the pride one would expect of Madam Jin. Hearing her approach, Jin Zixuan’s now-just-red face turned to meet her, his gaze fearful and tentative.

His apprehension met her blinding smile.

“Thank you, Young Master Jin,” she leaned close to whisper into his ear. “I love you too.”

His face returned to its purple hue as he gave a high-pitched squeak.

They had known of each other for years, but had only spent a few hours actually getting to *know* each other. Some might say it was too soon to call that love.

But, during that time, they had seen their once-would-be-not-yet son, and spoken in shared whispers of growing companionship. With the flash forward of them holding Jin Ling in the second segment, it was obvious that if their feelings didn't count as love yet, they would soon.

Jiang Cheng had been hesitant before, but, seeing both the way Jin Zixuan defended her and the forgiveness his sister gave him, nodded to himself and walked over as well. Huaisang followed along like a gossip-fueled duckling.

"If you ever insult her again, I'll never forgive you," Jiang Cheng growled, making Jin Zixuan nodded immediately. Both of them ignored Huaisang quietly pointing out that the *real* Zixuan hadn't said anything rude yet.

Silently, Yanli cast a glance towards Lan Wangji, the first person to speak up in her favor. She didn't even know him, but he had defended her all the same.

'*Hanguang-jun, indeed.*'

As the crowd of teenagers returned to their previous spots and the adults resumed conversation amongst themselves, Jiang Fengmian stepped forward to kneel beside his daughter.

"Are you alright?" he asked. She smiled at him and nodded.

Her mother, who had been watching with concern, lifted her head proudly at that, fears assured and confidence in her daughter's maturity taking over. Jiang Fengmian's expression remained conflicted as he tried tried to reconcile his anger at Wen Chao and Jin Zixuan with his gratitude at the latter. If the glimpse at the future was true, then it seemed Jin Zixuan was truly different from his father.

Perhaps he didn't need to worry.

He returned to his seat and began speaking with Lan Qiren.

Madam Yu stood next to Madam Jin, the pair watching their children interact. There were many things people could and *did* say about them — their jealousy, their spitefulness, and their dissatisfaction with their husbands were all common gossip — but no one could deny that they were fiercely protective of what they deemed as theirs. They would both gladly offer their children the world, and nothing would make them happier than knowing they were right about the engagement.

Lan Wangji glanced down, not feeling comfortable with the overly-affectionate scene before them. On the other hand, Lan Xichen made eye contact with Nie Mingjue. When Huaisang had left him to join Jiang Cheng, Nie Mingjue had unconsciously looked toward Xichen, and found the other staring back. They shared a smile, amused by the younger teenagers (and vindictively spiteful against the Wen brothers, who were being kept silent under their father's glare).

Separated from everyone else, Jin Guangshan watched Wen Ruohan speculatively. Normally, the Jin Sect Leader would have stopped his heir before he spoke out against (and offended) the Wens, but Wen Ruohan's expression had given no trace of annoyance or disapproval. Even when his son's arguments were refuted, the man treated the loss of face as little to no concern. It was quite unusual. It was true that the gathered people would likely learn everything about each other anyways, but he had prevented his sons from speaking before-

Ah. He wanted to see how watching the simulation had changed everyone. Gathering data on the future was pointless if everyone changed as a result. And, as he himself hadn't said anything, the only ones thrown under the bus where his sons, who didn't have much of a reputation to begin with.

How very like the man.

Wen Qing shivered, and did *not* watch the group of teenagers gathered around Jiang Yanli with envy. She had her brother, she didn't need friends from other sects.

Nearly two minutes later, the simulation began again.

Outside of an ancestral shrine, Wei Wuxian kneeled on the ground. Given Lan Qiren's presence beside him, this was undoubtedly punishment for the fight he had initiated in the previous scene.

Soft footsteps echoed lightly in the hallway as Lan Wangji approached, face as impassive as ever. Then, as if attracted by a flash of light, his eyes turned to Wei Wuxian. From the watchers' positions next to Lan Wangji, they could only see Wei Wuxian's back, but his downturned head implied a certain degree of regret.

A sting of guilt struck Jin Zixuan, but he was too emotionally exhausted to worry about it.

Nearby, Lan Qiren stood, glaring down at the boy's kneeling figure.

"You are truly unruly and ignorant," he lectured.

Even with the knowledge of *why* the fight had occurred, Lan Qiren remained stubbornly unwavering in agreement with the punishment. No matter the circumstances, if the rules were thrown away in favor of emotional decisions, everything would fall apart.

~~Maybe if he told himself that enough times, he would start to believe it.~~

"Kneel here and wait for Sect Leader Jiang to come," he ordered, not noticing his nephew duck behind the giant pillars. Then, with a huff, Lan Qiren left.

'*Wei Ying!*' Lan Wangji's thoughts gasped out as he stepped toward to the other boy. His emotions were still difficult to see, but with the thought's tone and slight furrow of his eyebrows, it was obvious Lan Wangji was far more concerned than he let on.

Simultaneously, Huaisang, Yanli, and Xichen had cover their mouths to avoid squealing at the adorable scene. Having just finished his own confession, Jin Zixuan silently cheered Lan Wangji on.

(To distract from what he had just done, if nothing else. Besides, his mom *and* fiancée seemed wholly in support of the relationship, so he might as well join in too.)

The scene was overcome by darkness, before a light shined to reveal Wei Wuxian's face before them. Fat, wet tears streamed down his face.

Instantly, the entire Jiang family did a double-take.

"What the-"

Wei Wuxian's defeated sobs rang out as he whined, "I was not only punished for fighting someone, but I also got Uncle Jiang in trouble!"

After this declaration, the whole image flew up, connected to Lan Wangji's head by two black dots. It was a thought bubble.

Lan Wangji's ears flushed bright red as he realized what was being shown.

The "that's so cute!" from Huaisang was neither necessary nor appreciated.

Then, one of Wei Wuxian's hands landed on the ground as if he was unable to sit upright. Lan Wangji stepped forward in concern when he saw.

This time, Lan Wangji's imagination showed them a Wei Wuxian clutching his stomach in pain as blood dripped out of his mouth.

Sweat rolling down his forehead, Wei Wuxian hissed, "Jin Peacock, how could you use your spiritual power?"

They were brought out of Lan Wangji's imagination again. With his nearly-blank face, it would be impossible to tell how concerned he was without further information.

To the people who had just seen his thoughts however, it was easy to tell what he was feeling.

"I wouldn't do that," Jin Zixuan denied, and was pleased to see Lan Wangji's ears turn bright red. Good; as childish as it was, it was nice to not be the only one embarrassed.

Lan Xichen was quietly happy with the bonding experience his brother was being dragged through.

Finally, Wei Wuxian leaned further down, his arms seemingly failing him.

His face truly displaying concern for the first time, Lan Wangji stepped out entirely and quickly walked over to the kneeling Wei Wuxian.

"Wei Ying," he called out.

"Hm? Lan Zhan, what are you doing here?" a perfectly-fine Wei Ying asked. "I thought you were mad at me."

This was perhaps the single most embarrassing day of Lan Wangji's life. It was undeniable: the creators of the simulation were pure evil. How was one supposed to defend their *thoughts*?

As *every single person* — even Wen Qing — laughed at Lan Wangji's surprisingly wild imagination, Nie Huaisang came to the realization that whoever put together the simulation was *obviously* a divine deity. Someone had blessed the cultivation world and decided to grant them unparalleled joy while also fixing all their relationships. How nice.

"Oh! Were you punished too?" Wei Wuxian lit up. "Hey, guess what? I found an ant nest. Here, let me teach you how to play with it."

Indignant, furious, and offended didn't even *begin* to describe the look on Lan Wangji's face. Normally, it wouldn't have surprised anyone, but the knowledge that he was angry at *himself* rather than Wei Ying gave the viewers a whole new perspective.

As Lan Wangji's eyebrow twitched with rage, Wei Wuxian turned back to the ant mound and explained.

"First, put bait in it."

The imagined crying Wei Wuxian appeared in a bubble to Lan Wangji's left and stabbed through his heart.

"Then, get a twig."

The hurt Wei Wuxian speared Wangji's chest.

Finally, stab the nest!"

The collapsing one did the same.

Jiang Cheng, Jin Zixuan, and Nie Huaisang were all rolling on the ground with laughter, and even the more reserved watchers were forced to wipe tears of joy from their eyes. While some, such as the Wen brothers, giggled in scornful mocking, Lan Xichen smiled at the plethora of good-natured amusement almost everyone else. His brother obviously didn't see it that way, but Lan Xichen brightened at the realization that his brother was finally gaining a few friends.

(His privacy had to be breached to get there, but, as Xichen was powerless to change that, there was no harm in looking at the positive side of things.)

"Isn't this fun?" Wei Wuxian asked, turning around with a blinding grin on his face. "Lan Zhan, give it a try!"

Giving a single, heavy sigh, Lan Wangji calmly turned around and began walking away.

"Eh? *Eh?*! Why did you go away? It's really fun…. Are you sure you don't want to stab it?"

Frowning, he looked back down at the ants.

'*What a shame. He didn't get to see my masterpiece.*'

Curious, Nie Mingjue tried to step closer to see the creation, but was only greeted by a large blur. It seemed the spirits who created the scene hadn't gotten to see whatever was being described.

Huaisang pouted, having grown a deep appreciation for Wei Wuxian's sense of humor *and* artistic ability.

In an instant, the bright day faded away to a clear night sky, well lit even with just the soft glow of the crescent moon above.

Hesitantly, as if at war with himself, Lan Wangji stepped closer to the hole Wei Wuxian had been playing with. He glared speculatively at the mound, but, ultimately, his curiosity won out.

Reaching a stick in, Lan Wangji poked around and scared the ants out. They quickly scattered, chasing after Wei Wuxian's bait into specifically chosen lines.

Lan Wangji stepped back from the ants nervously, but they were uninterested in anything besides the bait which had been left out for them.

Then, Lan Zhan's face switched into a scandalized scowl.

Wei Wuxian had recreated his "Lang Wang ji" wolf-and-a-chicken painting out of bait, so that the ants made that shape on the ground.

Lan Wangji's fists clenched at the sight and he turned away, ears red in embarrassment.

"Cheeky brat."

"Hey, Wangji-xiong," Nie Huaisang greeted, stepping far closer than he would have before the simulation. "...You're much cuter than you seem, aren't you?"

"...I'm not," he denied.

"Don't be like that!" Huaisang declared, channeling his inner Wei Wuxian shamelessness and waving the other two heirs over as well. "I still can't read you all that well, but your thoughts can't lie."

"Not mine."

"They belong to another version of you, at any rate," Jiang Cheng pointed out, stepping closer. Jin Zixuan followed along. If Lan Wangji wasn't willing to take the leap and join them, then their only option was to join *him*.

The second jade paused for a moment, obviously contemplating whether or not to leave, then simply nodded once and allowed them to stay.

He wouldn't join them himself, but he wouldn't object to their presence either. All three boys gave internal cheers.

Opposite them, Lan Qiren found himself conflicted. While seeing Wangji's thoughts (and having a Xichen translator) made Lan Wangji much easier to read, it was also undeniable that his nephew was showing far more emotions than he ever had before.

No, he was *experiencing* more emotions.

Qiren had always been proud of his nephew, but it had not escaped him that Wangji never seemed *happy*. He was content, but ever since the death of his mother he often seemed completely devoid of personal desire. It was always simply duty and obligation — the ideal Lan.

Why did Wei Wuxian have to be the person that ~~Wangji did *not* have a crush on him but~~ changed his nephew so much?

But, if Wangji was happier now than he had ever been before, who was Lan Qiren to stop him?

~~No, no, *that* was the mindset that allowed his brother to lock himself away from the world. Qiren had to remain vigilant.~~

Both Jiang Fengmian and Jin Guangshan appeared, sitting at tables across from each other as Lan Qiren sat at one in the middle.

"It happened quite suddenly," Lan Qiren explained. "Although it was just a quarrel between teenagers, it relates to the troth between your clans. I dared not make a decision on my own."

"To do that, I have to know the details of the affair," Jiang Fengmian responded, then bowed slightly. "Wei Ying is a troublesome boy, and has inconvenienced you several times. My apologies."

"Jiang-xiong, there's no need," Jin Guangshan rejected. "I know something of the incident. Rest assured, I will take care to scold my son for his words."

'*Not that you'd care if Maiden Jiang was anyone else's daughter,*' Jin Zixuan thought, surprising himself with the spiteful thought.

"You may do that privately. In accordance with the Clan rules, I ordered them to kneel," Lan Qiren explained. "Though, in regards to the engagement, you must think it though seriously."

'*It is thought through*,' Madam Yu thought, remembering her to-be grandson. '*And then Wei Wuxian messed everything up.*'

After considering Lan Qiren's words for a moment, Jiang Fengmian said, "A-Li's mother was the one who insisted on having this engagement in the first place, and I

didn't agree. Looking at it now, as neither of them are keen, it's best if we don't force it."

Here, Madam Yu gave a vivacious scoff, demanding "And you two can make that decision all by yourselves, can you?"

"That isn't-"

"Oh, I see how it is. It's because it was *my idea*, isn't it? Who cares that he obviously loves her now, all that matters is that *you* don't feel like another marriage is being forced-"

"Mother, please, that's not-"

"Are you really going to argue against me? Your fiancée just confessed to you and you think *now* is the time to support breaking off the engagement? You know you wanted the marriage, and yet he has the audacity to claim *'neither*' of you are keen?!"

Seeing her anger, Jiang Fengmian fell silent. While he knew his virtual-self had no reason to believe Jin Zixuan would treasure A-Li, the confession and glimpse into the future ~~and his *grandson*~~ allowed him to acknowledge that it might have been a little too hasty.

That said, Yu Ziyuan already knew why he thought Jin Zixuan would never value Yanli, so there was no point in arguing about it.

After a long, thoughtful pause, Jin Guangshan frowned and spoke, "What do the children know. They can play around however they want to. Fengmian-xiong, you and I don't need to pay them any attention."

Although Jin Zixuan had seen his father in action around the other sect leaders many times, it still made him slightly uncomfortable to hear himself talked about in such a way. Especially since the only reason his father was objecting was the power of the Jiang sect, rather than his or Yanli's wishes.

"Jin-xiong, although we can set the engagement for them, we can't carry out the marriage in place of them. After all, they are the ones who will be spending the rest of their lives together."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?!" Madam Yu demanded.

Standing with her friend, Madam Jin added, "Do you have a problem with their continued relationship?"

"Not at all," Jiang Fengmian refuted. "I believe that version of me didn't realize your son's feelings. My apologies. I meant nothing further by it, My Lady."

But his position didn't really need to be defended. While Yanli had been pleased with her marriage to Jin Zixuan, it was hardly her father's fault he felt their relationship wouldn't work out. She frowned again as her mother continued to glare, but, as Madam Yu had pointed out, she couldn't say anything that would leave Jin Zixuan with the impression that she didn't desire his affections.

Luckily, her fiancée noticed her conflict.

Getting out of his seat and saluting the adults, Jin Zixuan explained, “Thank you for your comments. If you will allow me to speak my mind I… don’t believe that version of me knew A… Yanli well enough to feel that way. I… do not believe Sect Leader Jiang made the wrong decision.”

Madam Jin seemed displeased with her son speaking out against her, but, when she considered her joy at her son finally appreciating Yanli, she let it go.

A truly angelic smile greeted Jin Zixuan as he sat back down, and Yanli leaned in to him to whisper, “You can call me ‘A-Li,’ if you want to.”

His face darkened to a deeper shade, but he whispered back, “I would… appreciate it if you called me A-Xuan as well.”

As weird as it was to see his sister worrying about romance, Jiang Cheng was too pleased by the peacock’s appreciation of her to care.

After some consideration, Jin Guangshan agreed to the offer.

Yanli and Zixuan took consolation in the fact that, despite this breakup, they did eventually end up together. Even better, it was most likely for love this time around.

A pink aura surrounded the happy couple.

“Ah, Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian called out cheerily. Another day of kneeling, it seemed; Lan Qiren was truly furious.

After making eye contact for a moment, Lan Wangji turned on his heel and walked away, pure-white robes fluttering in the breeze.

“Eh? What’s wrong? Why was he upset this time?”

“What else could it be?” Jiang Cheng responded. “I don’t think he’ll ever want to see you again.”

While probably true, it was most certainly not true for the reason Jiang Cheng thought it was. Silently, the real Jiang Cheng tried to kick his virtual self for giving such an incorrect observation to his brother.

(When his foot only phased through, he sighed heavily and mentally cursed other-him’s idiocy.)

Wei Wuxian laughed at the comment, then asked “Oh, right. Where’s that idiot Jin Zixuan?”

After what he had said to Yanli, Jin Zixuan had no defense to the “idiot” designation.

“I hear he’s very proud of his good looks, like a peacock,” Wei Wuxian continued, patting his face as if he wasn’t *also* extremely handsome. “He must be appalled when he looks in the mirror.”

“I wanted to hit him as well. If you hadn’t stopped me, the other side of Jin Zixuan’s face would also be ruined.”

“Nah, his face will look worse when it’s asymmetrical.”

Rather than making her protectively glare at Jiang Cheng, this statement made Madam Jin glare at Jin Zixuan. He ducked his head, fully understanding why she was angry.

Madam Jin smiled; it was good to see her real-son had finally realized what a gem Jiang Yanli was.

Hearing something from his right, Wei Wuxian turned and nearly did a double take, recognizing a figure in the distance.

It was Jiang Fengmian.

“If Uncle Jiang is here, is Shijie also here?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Why would she be here? To watch you make a scene?”

Wei Wuxian just clicked his tongue.

Jiang Cheng paused, glancing down at his brother, then said “Next time, don’t be so impulsive-”

The rest of his scolding was cut off by the tinging of a bell as his father approached, announcing the man’s arrival. “Wuxian,” Jiang Fengmian spoke kindly. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

Despite the fighting and punishment, nothing in the Jiang Sect Leader’s gaze spoke of anger. Wei Wuxian looked up at him just as happily.

However, Jiang Cheng, standing beside the pair, suddenly gained a look of dejection.

“Oh, of course, come for the bastard child, but not-”

“*My Lady,* he *isn’t*,” Jiang Fengmian corrected sternly, though his eyes remained on his son. Jiang Cheng looked far more hurt by his presence than he had expected.

Although the pair kept their voices fairly low, it was clear to everyone what they were talking about. Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli looked down in shame at the repeated argument.

Nie Huaisang, on the other hand, was confused. Disciples of equal standing would often get into various disputes and arguments, and those could usually be settled within the Cloud Recesses. However, this was the Jin sect heir getting into a conflict with the son of a servant and rogue cultivator — head disciple or not. Wei Wuxian had tried to help by preventing

Jiang Cheng from attacking, but in some ways taking all the blame onto himself just complicated the issue further. Normally, Wei Wuxian wouldn't have even been allowed to attend the Cloud Recesses due to not being a clan member. *Of course* it was a more serious incident than if Jiang Cheng had done so. With the complicated engagement on top of everything else, why wouldn't Sect Leader Jiang have come?

Then again, he knew all too well that, despite Nie Mingjue gruff exterior, his Da-ge coddled him like a mother hen. Logical reasoning or not, Jiang Cheng's feelings would not go away.

He shifted closer to the Jiang heir, trying to reassure with his presence.

Next, the watchers drifted just over water, getting a scenic view of the exterior of the Yunmeng's Lotus Pier. The towering white walls did not stop a large quantity of townspeople from gathering around, mingling with the cultivators and selling goods right outside the cove.

Returning to their home made all three Jiangs relax slightly, but most of the other sects were slightly thrown by the whiplash. The Cloud Recesses were exclusively for cultivators, and any servants in the area did their best to remain out of sight while the disciples were around. The Nightless City was only for clan members, but the non-cultivating clan members often fulfilled other roles. Qinghe's capital was open for any who were useful, but the high concentration of warriors determined the personalities of anyone else who came.

Yunmeng Jiang was the great sect closest to the common people, reflecting their rogue cultivator origins amicably. Less otherworldly, but righteous all the same.

On the edge of the pier, a lovely woman wearing lavender robes walked out to the very edge, obviously waiting for someone. When they got close enough to see her features, the watchers recognized her as Jiang Yanli.

She flushed slightly under the sudden attention, making both Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan step in front of her. The act was wholly unnecessary, of course, so she laughed lightly at their protectiveness.

Her bodyguards blushed, but remained in place.

"Ah, Miss Jiang, you're here. Do you want to try some fresh melon?" one of the civilians asked, far more casual than any other sect would have allowed, but with an undeniable layer of *respect*, rather than fear.

Jiang Yanli turned her sweet gaze on the man, responding "I would. Thanks a lot."

Jin Zixuan was going to commission a painting of his fiancée. No, a carving. Or a statue. Something that would prove to *everyone* how wrong they were when they tried to claim her beauty was just slightly above average.

"Shijie!" someone called excitedly. She turned back to see Wei Wuxian's approaching boat, an enthusiastically waving Wuxian standing on top.

“A-Xian?”

“Shijie! I’m back!”

Wen Ruohan thought it was notable how, even now, Wei Wuxian showed no sign of guilt or regret. It was true he hadn’t been expelled — as far as Wen Ruohan could tell, Sect Leader Jiang had simply decided to take him back due to the political implications of what he had done — but most students sent home disgracefully would not have been anywhere near as excited.

Then again, Wei Wuxian obviously hadn’t learned anything at the Cloud Recesses. The only reason he would have to stay would be the people there and the library, both of which were things he could find substitutes for at Lotus Pier. It was unfortunate that incentives and punishments regarding his reputation wouldn’t be effective, but Wen Ruohan was confident the boy could be molded regardless.

As soon as his boat was close enough, Wei Wuxian jumped down and ran towards his senior martial sister. He sped past lotus sellers, light as a feather despite the heavy trunk he was carrying, and paused right in front of her with a grin.

“Shijie! I’ve missed you so much!”

“You’re… not actually… I mean, right?” Jin Zixuan stuttered, seeing their close relationship. Jiang Yanli blinked for a moment, then understood. If they had a good relationship, it would not be surprising for a sect’s head disciple to marry the sect leader’s child. And their relationship seemed to be one of the best he’d ever seen.

Luckily, she shook her head.

“He hasn’t been officially adopted, but he is my brother. You have nothing to worry about.”

Both Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji did their best to hide their overwhelming relief.

“I thought it’d be one whole year?” Yanli asked with a smile. “Why are you back so soon?”

“Because I… missed you so much!”

Wei Wuxian’s habit of lying to spare the feeling of others was admirable, but one Yanli had spent years trying to break. One of these days, it would get him into trouble that he couldn’t get out of.

~~Like making him a demonic cultivator all the great sects united to murder.~~

“You sweet talker.”

“Oh, right,” he set down the case he was carrying. “It’s for you.”

Inside, were five high-quality moon cakes.

“For me?”

“Mmhm!”

“Thank you,” she told him, sincerely. With two golden smiles right next to each other, the viewers were lucky they didn’t go blind.

“I’m glad you like it. I missed your lotus and pork ribs soup!”

A glance at Wen Chao told Zixuan that the other was arrogantly recalling his earlier comment about Jiang Yanli’s time in the kitchen. Feeling unusually defensive, Jin Zixuan stepped between them. There was nothing wrong with Yanli making soup. In fact, he was certain it would taste far more delicious than anything the Wen or Jin clan’s prized chefs could cook up.

A slight scratching sound alerted the watchers to the ramp having been lowered, allowing the non-Wei Wuxians to get off the boat. Jiang Fengmian stepped off, giving a pleasant smile to the civilian sellers around him. Once again, the townspeople didn’t have even the slightest bit of fear in their eyes.

“Welcome back, Clan Leader,” one of them greeted, and the other bowed slightly with a smile on his face.

Lan Qiren had observed it during previous visits to Lotus Pier, but it still surprised him to see how comfortable the civilians were with the cultivators. Caiyi treated Lan cultivators like holy saviors, Qinghe treated Nie cultivators like the dangerous weapons they were, Lanling treated the Jins like princes, and Qishan treated the Wens like minor (dangerous) gods. No choice was inherently better or worse, but it was still strange to see even the *Sect Leader* spoken to casually.

“I’ve already made some soup,” Yanli informed him as her father approached.

“And sour and spicy lotus root!”

Jiang Cheng sighed, then, to Nie Huaisangs confused stare, explained, “He likes spice far, far too much.”

He and Zixuan raised their eyebrows skeptically, obviously not understanding the gravity of Wei Wuxian’s lack of functioning taste buds.

“It’s all prepared.”

“Really? Make them really spicy!”

Yanli laughed and pinched his cheek, “Spicy enough to make you cry!”

Seeing Jiang Yanli’s interaction with her brothers filled Wen Qing with a sense of melancholy. She had done everything in her power to keep Wen Ning out of the sect leader’s sight, so it would have been awful for him to be present. She knew that.

~~She still missed her brother.~~

Both Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen smiled at the scene, making eye contact with Jiang Yanli and gaining a sense of companionship only doting older siblings could have.

Once Jiang Fengmian had gotten close enough, Jiang Yanli glanced away from her brother to salute respectfully.

"A-die," she greeted.

Jiang Fengmian smiled softly and asked, "Where is your mom?"

"At… the drill ground."

Subconsciously, Jiang Cheng gave a slight twitch of pity. Whoever his mother was projecting her anger onto would not be happy that day.

With wobbling knees and rivers of sweat pouring down their faces, several Jiang disciples trembled in the scorching heat.

"Hold it!" Madam Yu's voice ordered.

"Yes! Yes… Madam," the Jiang disciple agreed. He stood up straight again, keeping his head high and arms out despite the heavy weights in his hands.

With a slight glare, Madam Yu scoffed at the obvious struggle the disciples were experiencing.

(This was still better than Wei Wuxian, though. Whenever she ordered him to hold weights, he would act like they were lighter than a flower. It was infuriating!)

A trail of five Jiang disciples were all standing with their arms extended in front of them, heavy weights carried in each hand.

"If you can't deal with something this simple, what will you do with fierce spirits?!" Madam Yu demanded. "You want to die?"

Neither option seemed fun to Nie Huaisang, but he kept that thought to himself. Although he did note that even his Da-ge seemed to feel the training was a little too intense.

"Practice for two more hours!" she demanded, twisting Zidian as she commanded them. "You should focus on improving your skills, not fooling around! You're just like that good-for-nothing Wei Wuxian!"

That was… an interesting way to talk about one's head disciple.

Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan couldn't understand why the Jiang sect wouldn't do everything in their power to keep a tight hold on an inventive, creative prodigy, but certainly weren't going to complain about it.

Perhaps, when the kind Jiang Yanli married into the Jin sect, her loyal brother would come as well.

Madam Yu scoffed, "We sent him to Gusu to learn, and he still managed to cause trouble. Are you following his lead?!"

Lan Wangji frowned slightly and turned to gaze at Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli, but the siblings, while embarrassed, did not look surprised a their mother's comments.

His frown deepened.

"A-Niang," Jiang Yanli's soft voice greeted.

"Ah, A-Li," Madam Yu responded as her daughter saluted, her furious glare turning into a softer smile. Then, when she noticed Wei Wuxian behind her daughter, the glare returned.

"Yu-furen," Wei Wuxian greeted, preforming a deep salute. It was a far cry from the affectionate and casual way he had greeted the *Sect Leader* just a few hours ago.

It seemed, despite his apparent shamelessness, he was highly attuned to the opinions of others.

(Minus Lan Wangji, but, without reading his thoughts, no one could have read him.)

Finally, Madam Yu's eyes drifted to the last member of the trio: her husband. However, after making eye contact for a moment, she glanced away with a huff of scorn.

Jiang Fengmian's gaze turned regretful. Despite that, there was no anger or hint of coming retribution. Nor was there indifference.

Madam Jin loved her friend and would support her no matter what, but, every once in a while, she couldn't help but feel like Yu Ziyuan was making something out of nothing.

"San-niang," Jiang Fengmian spoke. "Haste makes waste. The level these children can reach depends on many factors. If you push them too hard, it won't help."

Madam Yu glared and stood up, shouting "You're always defending them, that's why they won't achieve anything!"

'*Overworking them won't help either,*' Lan Xichen thought, before his face grew grim and he exchanged a glance with Nie Mingjue. Relationships among teenagers were one thing, but broadcasting the a sect's internal politics and possible weaknesses was something else.

And Wen Ruohan would take full advantage of it.

Both Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan frowned, the latter practically *daring* the other clans to comment on her personal life.

“Especially Wei Wuxian,” she continued. “He always picks fights with others, and you had to clean up his mess.”

“Mother, he was defending A-Jie and-”

“Do you think telling me solves anything?” she snapped back. “We’re all powerless here. What can I do to change the simulation?”

“I’ve never *seen* such impudence!”

Her words allowed the watchers were allowed to see Wei Wuxian almost wilt with guilt, a far cry from the laughing, uncompromising boy from before.

Frowning, Jiang Fengmian looked away from Wei Wuxian to give a warning “*San-niang.*”

“What? Am I wrong? He’s always messing around here, and now he has disgraced us in Gusu! He knew of Yanli and Zixuan’s engagement, but he still fought with Zixuan!”

Even now, having heard word-for-word what Jin Zixuan had said about her daughter, Madam Yu’s feelings remained unchanged. Zixuan had confessed; he *did* love her daughter. All Wei Wuxian had done was make it take longer for them to get together. Her husband was just being biased. Wei Wuxian, regardless of the reason, had embarrassed the sect before all of Gusu.

~~But, for the first time, she was starting to doubt her opinion of him.~~

Jiang Fengmian’s frown deepened, but he clearly realized the argument was not going to lead anywhere productiv, especially given that he had just ended his daughter’s engagement.

Jin Guangshan was shocked. If *his* wife had said that to him — not that he cared about any of his disciples — he would have gone to the nearest brothel for the rest of the day. Why on earth was Jiang Fengmian allowing his wife to speak that way to him without complaint? While both their wives were intimidating, *he* wasn’t stupid enough to remain loyal to an arrogant, insensitive, uncompromising *witch*.

Then again, he had always known the Jiang Sect Leader liked to remain neutral in most conflicts. It seemed that philosophy extended to his private life as well.

Pathetic.

Jiang Yanli looked back and forth between her parents nervously as the wind picked up dangerously, reminding several viewers of the effects of the future Jiang Cheng’s anger against Lan Wangji. As Jiang Fengmian continued to refuse to meet her eyes, Madam Yu’s fury grew.

She made a motion as if to step forward, only to pause when Jiang Yanli grabbed her hand.

“A-Niang, don’t be angry. They say Jiang Cheng is doing well in Gusu. Even Lan Qiren praised him.”

Jiang Cheng smiled slightly at the comment, though wondered if that would still be the case had Lan Qiren found out he had *also* been involved in the party. Due to Lan Wangji’s personal feelings, Wei Wuxian was the only one who had been punished (and then been forced to fight several fierce corpses). It made him slightly conflicted to know his good reputation was party due to Wei Wuxian taking the fall.

But, surely, that was a one-time thing.

After listening to her daughter’s words, Madam Yu took a deep breath and fondly huffed, “That boy. At least *he* didn’t let us down.”

While Jin Zixuan did want to absorb the obviously complicated family situation going on in the Jiang household, he had a mission to complete first.

Leaning to his right, he got close to ~~Jiang~~ *A-Li’s* ear and whispered “Good job.”

She smiled at him, and he found his admiration for her multiplying. Even he made sure to avoid his mother when she was angry, and Madam Yu was just as scary. His fiancée was truly amazing.

“Jinzhu, Yinzhu, let’s go,” Madam Yu ordered.

“Take care, A-Niang,” Yanli said.

Neither Jiang Fengmian nor Wei Wuxian had moved from where they stood, one lost in thought and the other uncharacteristically downtrodden. Then, Wei Wuxian shook his head and forced himself to smile again.

“Thanks, Shijie!” he called out.

She smiled back, “The other disciples haven’t seen you in a while. Go and say hello.”

“He’s popular, I take it?” Nie Huaisang asked, remembering how many guest disciples had been invited to the party they had. Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes.

“You wouldn’t believe how much he loves the kids.”

“And they love him back,” Jiang Yanli pointed out, sharing a glance with Jin Zixuan. It was obvious who both of them were thinking about.

~~Jin Zixuan’s smile flickered, as he prayed yet again that the time travel involved wouldn’t erase Jin Ling’s existence.~~

Wei Wuxian turned toward the panting and exhausted disciples, who instantly brightened upon seeing him.

“Da-shixi-” one began, then cut off, glancing hesitantly at Jiang Fengmian. Wei Wuxian also turned to look at his sect leader, who only smiled deeper, silently giving permission.

Wei Wuxian brightened up again and ran towards his fellow disciples, jumping towards them and sending them all crashing to the ground in a giant mess of limbs.

It made Jiang Cheng feel incredibly selfish to be envious of this. There was no reason to, and he had plenty of friends, but sometimes it felt like some people only spent time around him because of Wei Wuxian.

~~“It’s because he’s too much like me, isn’t he?” his mother had once shouted at his father. “Can’t fit in with the disciples at Yunmeng Jiang. Not like Cangse-”~~

As the trio got up from Wei Wuxian’s surprise attack, the latter wrapped his arms around them affectionately.

“Did you miss me?” he asked.

“Da-shixiong. Did they also do this to you in the Cloud Recesses?”

Wei Wuxian sighed, “No, they made me copy books instead. It’s even worse than physical punishment.”

“And yet you never stopped,” Lan Qiren grumbled.

Nie Mingjue coughed to cover up a snort, and Lan Xichen fought to keep his lips from twitching up. Especially when he saw the furious nod of agreement Lan Wangji gave.

Yunmeng Jiang’s head disciple left his brother so confused.

“Did you meet Lan Wangji?” one of them asked. “Is he really that good?”

“Hmm… he’s good,” Wei Wuxian decided. “We’re neck and neck.”

‘*Good,*’ Lan Wangji’s mind repeated. ‘*He thinks I’m good. He thinks I’m good. He thinks I’m good.*’

As the Second Jade of Lan, Lan Wangji had been complimented *hundreds* of times before. In fact, there had even been *poems* written about his beauty, personality, and skill.

And yet none of them mattered as much as that one comment.

On the other hand, most of the adults found it interesting that none of the Jiang disciples doubted Wei Wuxian’s claim of being Lan Wangji’s equal. While the claim was true, it also likely meant that no one in Lotus Pier had ever given Wei Wuxian a challenge in a fight.

In some ways, it seemed almost inevitable that the two would start paying attention to each other.

The disciples were eager to hear more.

“They say he can freeze people if they get too close. Is that true?”

Nie Huaisang gave the nearby Lan Wangji an exaggerated gasp of horror. He received a glare in response.

Wei Wuxian laughed, “He’s a man, not a monster.”

“Do they really have 3,000 rules?”

“Yeah, it’s true. They carve them into a huge rock.”

“And what about…”

The voices faded away as their surroundings darkened to pitch black, lacking even the moonlight a night sky would have. Then, from above, silver light began shining down as the moon and the rest of the scenery phased into existence.

It seemed that from now on, every time Lan Wangji looked at the moon all he would be able to see was Wei Wuxian’s eyes. Luckily, curfew was at nine, so that would rarely be a concern.

A glowing red dragonfly flew in front of the viewers, and soon thousands more joined it. The night sky above lotus pier was filled with a cloud of red light that gave it an ethereal glow.

Jiang Fengmian walked through the pier, approaching Madam Yu.

Seeing himself, Sect Leader Jiang gave a wary look around. What had already been shown was bad enough, but he most certainly wasn’t comfortable with displaying any more.

Lan Xichen frowned, seeing the invasions of privacy he had feared come to light.

“San-nian,” Jiang Fengmian greeted as Madam Yu set down her cup of tea. At the words, she turned to glare furiously at her husband. After observing him for a moment, she looked away.

“It’s late. Why are you here?”

“I went to your room to look for you. Jinzhu said I’d find you here.”

“...What’s the matter?”

Silently, Jiang Fengmian set down an intricate box and pushing it towards her. Scowling slightly, Yu Ziyuan slid it open to reveal a beautifully carved jade hairpin.

Once again, Jin Guangshan tilted his head in confusion. Did Jiang Fengmian want another heir? But cultivators had even less reason to need a spare due to their long lifespans. Then what was the point of the pin?

It couldn’t be love — *everyone* had heard about how little he cared for his wife.

“Why buy something so useless just to appease me?”

“The hairpin is high quality,” Jiang Fengmian explained. “It was beautiful, so I bought it.”

Madam Yu was silent.

Both Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli shrank down slightly as if expecting judgement. It made Jiang Fengmian feel guilty for the embarrassing display being shown, but there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Unbeknown to the Jiangs, however, no one felt they had any room to talk. Nie Mingjue was unmarried and had no plans to get married, due to the danger of his cultivation technique. Lan Qiren was also unmarried, and had seen a far worse marriage in his brother. Madam Jin wanted to support her friend, but couldn’t help the bitter feeling growing in her chest when she saw Jiang Fengmian’s actions. The Wens were all still following Wen Ruohan’s implied orders to remain silent. No one would judge them.

Jiang Fengmian sat down, leaning one elbow on the table as he stared at his wife’s back.

“...San-Niang, I went to Gusu and discussed A-Li’s engagement with Sect Leader Jin.”

“Zixuan’s mother and I arranged their marriage when they were little. Is there a problem?”

The *problem* was Jin Zixuan’s complete and utter disinterest in Jiang Yanli, which, while solved now, was a genuine concern for the people in the simulation’s universe.

Madam Yu refused to think about that.

“Sect Leader Jin and I have decided to call off the marriage.”

Madam Yu’s eyes widened in shock.

“What? Why would you do that?”

“I thought the two children loved each other, but I was wrong. We shouldn’t force it.”

“A-Li has met Zixuan several times. She obviously likes him.”

And Zixuan was continuing to curse himself for not getting to know her during that time.

“Did Zixuan say something rude?” Madam Yu demanded, then stood up, knowing the answer. “He’s too young to understand it now. A-Li is a great girl. Zixuan will realize that after he gets to know her.”

Given what had occurred for the real versions, it was obvious that was true. However, having heard what the simulation’s Jin Zixuan said about Jiang Yanli, no one could fault Jiang Fengmian for his decision.

“Besides, Zixuan’s mother and I are good friends. Our families were allies when we were children. The Jin Clan will be our ally if they get married.”

“...Getting married means they’ll spend the rest of their lives together. If they don’t love each other… if they’re forced to be together just to further their families’ interest….”

“Just like us, right?”

Jiang Fengmian flinched slightly, while Yu Ziyuan glared at the simulation as if it was personally responsible for her marriage. The other clan leaders remained silent, but their minds instantly recalled the gossip.

When the marriage between them had originally been proposed, the previous leader of the Jiang Sect was quite interested, but Jiang Fengmian had no such intentions. He didn’t like Yu Ziyuan’s conduct and felt that they wouldn’t be an appropriate match. He politely refused the offer a handful of times. However, the Meishan Yu sect set about multiple factors, putting pressure on Jiang Fengmian, who at the time was still fairly young and had nothing to lean on. Although Jiang and Yu were married, they had ever since been a grudging couple. They continued living apart and often had open disagreements, or so everyone said.

No simple solution to a relationship formed from politics. Although she was quite happy Zixuan returned her sentiments, Yanli was thankful her for her father’s consideration.

As Madam Yu’s anger spiked, a turbulent wind began to pick up again. Her cultivation was forming a miniature storm around them.

“San-niang, that’s not what I meant.”

“...Wei Ying, that little brat. He causes trouble wherever he goes.”

Privately, Jiang Cheng wondered what his mother would have said if *he* had been the one to punch Jin Zixuan. In some ways, he didn’t want to know.

(If she was supportive, it meant every time she complained about Wei Wuxian wasn’t a result of his actions but his-)

Jiang Fengmian was momentarily taken aback by the abrupt change in topic, before he sighed and turned away from her.

“There you go again, blaming him for everything.”

Madam Yu *slammed* her hand against the table, jousting the porcelain and shouting “I shouldn’t blame him?! If he hadn’t fought with Zixuan, none of this would have happened! Ha. Ever since you brought him here, you’ve always favored him, even over your own *son*! If it was Jiang Cheng who made a scene, would you rush to Gusu like you did? Never!”

“San-niang!” Jiang Fengmian shouted in synch with his virtual-self.

“What? I can’t change what it shows us now! What do you expect me to do?”

The simulation's Madam Yu glared further for a moment, before continuing "This time he got between Yanli and Zixuan. Who knows what he's capable of doing next time!"

Given that they had still gotten together, no one was especially worried about that.

"But it's alright, isn't it?" Yu Ziyuan asked scathingly. "Because you'll be there, cleaning up after him!"

Before he could respond, she had walked away.

If there was any silver lining to all this (not that any member of the Jiang family was willing to see it that way), it was that everyone already knew the complexities of their relationship. And knew of the Jin relationship. And, although it wasn't confirmed, had suspicions about the Lan.

None of them would be too judgemental despite the obviously-personal scene.

(None except Wen Chao, who was snidely chuckling at their expense.)

At the drill ground, Wei Wuxian stood, shadowed further by the branches of a tree. He was gazing across the lake at Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Fengmian as the former angrily stormed off.

After some hesitation, Wei Wuxian began making his way back as well. In his mind, Madam Yu's warning rang out like an echo.

'*This time he got between A-Li and Zixuan. Who knows what he's capable of doing next time.*'

Wei Wuxian continued to walk, down trodden, and softly whispered.

"Shijie."

"Not your fault, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered, as Jin Zixuan felt guilt attack him all over again. Why couldn't he have just gotten to know her years ago? Everything would be so much simpler then.

He turned a corner, and found Jiang Yanli sitting down, tea before her. He moved his foot forward, as if to descend the staircase, only to pause, then put it back.

"A-Xian, is that you?"

Wei Wuxian, flinched slightly, looking up at once.

The kind, unwavering, troublesome boy was for a moment so raw and *open* that Lan Wangji's first instinct was to hold him tight. But it was still only a simulation; there was nothing he could do.

(Thank god. At this point, he obviously couldn't trust his brain to make rational decisions.)

Wei Wuxian tentatively approached his martial sister, bowing as she began to pour them both a cup of tea.

“S… sorry, Shijie. I…” he couldn’t bring himself to finish.

Yanli shook her head kindly and responded “Silly boy. It’s not your fault.”

“But… I made you sad.”

Now that Jin Zixuan was looking at Wei Wuxian as a to-be brother in law (rather than an enemy or a romantic rival), he felt nothing but appreciation for the care and concern he showed for Jiang Yanli.

Jiang Cheng frowned, knowing that without Wei Wuxian, *he* would have been the one to make his sister sad.

She glanced back at him, eyes kind, and instructed, “A-Xian, sit down first.”

He did.

“...Ever since I was little, I thought Zixuan would be my future husband,” she explained. “I’ve only met him a few times, but a charismatic man like him is hard not to like.”

If Zixuan didn’t concentrate on taking deep breaths, he was sure his face would start turning red again. At this point, he had to save any face he had left.

“But when I really thought about it, I realized… I didn’t like him that much.”

He flinched, but realized he fully deserved that for what he had said. However, his fears were assuaged when Jiang Yanli shook her head.

“That version of me still barely knows you. The me now feels differently,” she whispered, placing her hand on top of his. Her body phased through, but he understood her offer and smiled back.

Yanli herself abruptly realized the truth in what she said. She had always admired his appearance and talent, but his consideration — when he noticed her interest in the icecream — his humor — from his interactions with her brother — and his willingness to learn from his own mistakes (leading to an adorable awkwardness) were all new to her. She was glad that the simulation had so much to teach them.

“Surely, I could spend my life with him, but if we don’t love each other….”

“Shijie….”

Jiang Yanli glanced over, and, seeing Wei Wuxian’s concerned expression, began to laugh.

“Well, he must have said something unpleasant about me, right?”

Wei Wuxian avoided eye contact and denied, “He didn’t. I just… don’t like him.”

With this lie on top of all the faked confidence and laugher, Wen Ruohan was starting to wonder how much of the future Wei Wuxian’s jokes were genuine. While his personality seemed mostly the same, there was a notable awareness in the Yiling Patriarch that the current Wei Wuxian lacked.

Yanli laughed and held out a cup, “You can’t fool me. We grew up together, I know you too well. You don’t hit people just because you don’t like them.”

Jiang Fengmian smiled slightly, pleased by the efforts from his daughter and his ward to cheer each other up. Their innate kindness was obvious to anyone who saw.

Similarly, Lan Xichen found himself impressed with Jiang Yanli’s maturity. Feelings of rejection and self-loathing would be inevitable after what had happened, but she held herself high and refused to blame her younger brother, even though that would be an understandable reaction.

Quite the kind older sister.

(Wen Qing wondered if Yanli and Wen Ning would get along.)

“A-Xian, it’s not your fault,” Jiang Yanli concluded, standing up. “Jin-gongzi is great, but I’m willing to wait for a man who truly loves me. Someone who I can spend the rest of my life with.”

“I promise I will, Maide… A-Li,” Jin Zixuan reassured in a low whisper.

After pausing for a moment, Wei Wuxian looked up and declared, “Shijie, Jin Zixuan isn’t good enough for you. He’s spoiled and vain. You deserve someone better than him!”

In Jin Zixuan’s room, said heir abruptly sneezed.

Jiang Cheng was suddenly torn between joining his brother and defending the man whom his sister had given her heart to less than an hour ago. Luckily, as Jin Zixuan had apparently decided Wei Wuxian’s words weren’t a problem, there didn’t seem to be any point in raising a fuss.

Several months later, the lotus flowers were in full bloom. Their beautiful light pink petals brightened up the pier into a scene out of a dream.

“Jiang-xiong, Jiang-xiong,” Nie Huaisang whispered. “You have to take me there when they bloom. I want to paint them — or, even better, convince Wei-xiong to paint them.”

Unlike last time, when he had been too uncertain to invite anyone, Jiang Cheng immediately nodded.

“Sure. And you two can try A-Jie’s soup while you’re there.”

Jin Zixuan gave an internal cheer.

The water landscape changed to a forest, where an ignorant pheasant ate casually. Behind several bushes, Wei Wuxian notched an arrow and aimed.

'*Where do you think you're going?*' he thought, lips drawn into a playful smirk. With the burning grin, he released the arrow and the pheasant's whail rang out through the forest.

Watching the head disciple's hobby made it instantly clear how he became so skilled at archery. Wen Ruohan idly wondered if he could replicate it when training his own sect.

Though, without Wei Wuxian's talent, it was hard to tell if any of them would be able to get the pheasants in the first place. The Wen Sect wasn't exactly known for subtlety.

Soon, Wei Wuxian was walking back through town, carrying his dead prize over his shoulder. Hearing a sound from his left, his gaze drifted out toward the water. In an instant, his face was encompassed by an innocent delight that made him look an impossible mixture between childish and seductive.

~~Lan Wangji's control over his mind had officially disappeared.~~

A boat bearing the flag of Yunmeng Jiang returned to the shore, and its passenger got up and stretched. Jiang Cheng then looked down, seeing a body floating in the water.

"Wait-"

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji asked.

"Stop," Jiang Wanyin ordered the servant, looking down at his brother. Then, picking up the bamboo pole, he began *poking* Wei Wuxian.

The unimpressed look his mother gave him was even more crushing that hearing Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan begin laughing simultaneously.

Wei Wuxian began releasing bubbles of air, making Jiang Cheng frown and lean down to get a closer look.

"Yaah!" Wei Wuxian shouted, jumping up and surprising Jiang Cheng into falling back. Laughing delightedly, Wei Wuxian leaned onto the side of the boat to speak to the collapsed Jiang Cheng.

"Wow! You're finally back!" he exclaimed. "I thought you fell in love with a girl in Gusu, and were planning on staying there forever."

'*Would Wei Ying truly dislike that?*' Lan Zhan wondered, suddenly dejected. Luckily, as his brother was still the only one who could read him, no one noticed.

Jiang Cheng wiped hair out of his face, lips breaking into a laugh, before he forced them back into a scowl.

“I’m not you,” he declared.

‘*Would he give himself away so easily?*’ he thought, his dejection changing into fear.

Wei Wuxian continued to laugh, climbing onto the boat and offering Jiang Cheng a hand. The other took it, pulling himself up.

“Where are the others?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“Practicing archery on the grounds. The Wen Clan will be holding a Discussion Conference soon. There will be an archery competition on the first day.”

At the mention of their clan, both Wen Xu and Wen Chao perked up.

“Oh? The Wen Clan?”

“Yes, in Nevernight City,” Wei Wuxian confirmed. Their surroundings turned back to white.

A sense of unease filled the room. If the simulation was willing to skip months ahead for this, then something was going to happen at the conference.

“Well, that was a boring segment,” Wen Chao decided.

“Boring?” Madam Yu repeated. “You weren’t even paying attention, and yet you believe you can pass judgement on-”

“San-niang,” Jiang Fengmian whispered, eyes planted firmly on the watching Wen Ruohan.

“And don’t even get me started on you!” she continued. “You can see right in front of you how much A-Li and Zixuan love each other, and yet you *dissolved* their *engagement?!”*

“San-niang, all I knew about was what he said, I had no no way to-”

“‘No way?’ You didn’t even *check*! But of course you didn’t bother looking further. *Wei Wuxian* supported it, so there was *no way* it could be-”

“Madam Yu,” Nie Mingjue interrupted, seeing that the argument was stressing his brother out. “Given what had just happened-”

“Are you trying to imply something about my son?” Madam Jin fired back.

Wen Chao scoffed, “The fact that he *likes* that inferior brat says enough-”

“Don’t talk about my sister that way!”

“Oh?” Wen Ruohan asked, making the Jiangs freeze.

“I-I mean-”

“With all due respect,” Jin Zixuan stood up, cheeks beginning to flush again. “Thank you for your support, Madam Yu. But I-I acknowledge that I was out of line speaking that way about someone I never bothered to get to know.”

Madam Jin frowned, then allowed “I suppose my son might have deserved that punch.”

He wilted.

“...Even if he was out of line, do you really think that justifies his murder at the Yiling Patriarch’s hands?” Jin Guangshan asked, cheerily glancing around at the now-blanching faces. “I hope you didn’t forget that. He didn’t even deny it. Should one comment as a teenager really equal death?”

Absolute silence. Nothing from this segment had related to demonic cultivation; it was easy to forget what this version of Wei Wuxian was destined to become.

“...Why would he kill Maiden Jiang?” Huaisang finally asked, glancing toward her.

Lan Xichen nodded, “Yes, from what we just saw, it’s extremely unlikely that he would have actually done so.”

“And yet he admitted it, didn’t he?” Wen Ruohan countered.

”Wei Wuxian is a monster! Yanli treated him like her own brother!” a voice had said.

“How could I say that to him?” Wei Wuxian asked himself, not denying the accusation..

“...With all due respect, Sect Leader Wen,” Jiang Yanli stood up and bowed low. “I ask that we refrain from coming to any conclusions until we have all the information.”

“You would risk you life on your faith in him?”

“I’m certain we can handle it,” Yu Ziyuan responded. “If nothing else, this at least proves he won’t fight against our sect for no reason.”

“Of course, of course. If you ever need any assistance-”

“Thank you, Jin-xiong,” Jiang Fengmian bowed emptily. “I will be sure to tell you, if that becomes necessary.”

“If you need it, you have our recourses,” Nie Mingjue said.

“We would be glad to offer our help as well,” Lan Qiren agreed, though he was notably less aggressive about taking action against Wei Wuxian than before. Lan Xichen turned a confused glance on his lost-in-thought Uncle, unaware that the man was mentally replaying the lantern scene in his head.

If nothing else, Lan Qiren was starting to believe that Wei Wuxian wouldn’t fall for no reason. Nothing would justify what he ended up doing, but perhaps the sect’s didn’t need to be as worried as he once thought.

(About Wei Wuxian, that is. His concerns about Wen Ruohan were only growing.)

Tension spread out among the watchers.

Then-

“Hello? Jiang Cheng? Helloooo? A-Cheng~”

“A-Cheng?” he repeated, scandalized by the simulation’s embarrassing nickname.

“Oh, it is you! Thank god!”

...The simulation shouldn’t be able to respond to them.

“Wei… Wei Ying?” Jiang Cheng asked. “Wei Wuxian?”

“That’s me! How’ve you been?”

“...What? How are you-”

“No immediate danger then? Okay, it’s a long story. So I have no idea how much you know about all this, but basically all the sect leaders collapsed. If my research is right, you should be with-”

“We’re here, A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian confirmed.

“Uncle Jiang! Is Shijie here too?”

“Yes, A-Xian.”

“Hello! Okay, so, the thing that’s affecting you was created by humans. It involves a few talisman characters that use time. It needs you to be able to talk with each other, so it slows down your perception of time so that it can send the signal back and forth between you all. It’s probably been about 3-ish hours in there, but it’s been over 4 days out here. I haven’t figured out what all the time-characters are meant to do, but I think that’s most of it.”

“The talisman’s also from the future,” Nie Huaisang pointed out.

“...What?”

It suddenly, horrifyingly occurred to the watchers how difficult it would be to convince anyone. The simulation required too much personal information to have been made by strangers, and yet was far too complicated to have been made by a sprit. Through the hours they had spent watching it, they had slowly been convinced of its authenticity.

To anyone who hadn’t experienced it, however-

“Hey, A-Yue,” Wei Wuxian began, speaking to someone from the outside world. “Can you make a note for me to contact the Lan Sect asking for a book on seeing through

illusions?"

"What?" Jiang Cheng shrieked. "We're real!"

"Mmhm."

"I'm serious. You-the first day you arrived at Lotus Pier, I-" he paused glancing to his father, then looked away. "I threatened you with Princess and Love!"

"With *what*?" Jin Zixuan laughed, not seeing the way Jiang Fengmian's eyes widened in surprise.

"...We never told anyone that."

"That's right," Jiang Yanli sang. "Just the three of us knew. Though I suppose it's not a secret anymore."

"...A-Yue, change that note to finding a book on soul-cleansing."

"We're not possessed!"

"Would you know if you are?"

"A-Xian," Jiang Fengmian interrupted. "We're sure. It seems highly unlikely that *any* spirit or human could take control of *all* of us. Did you find any records of something similar happening before?"

"...No."

"That much power would take time to build up. You know we're real. Nie-gongzi was just… joking."

"Ooooh. Okay, got it."

The crowd relaxed at the Jiang family successfully proving their authenticity. It was probably a good thing they had let the Jiangs talk to him; if people he had never met knew personal information about him, he might have panicked and treated them like spirits or tried to force them out. However, it did bring up a good point: even if all of them supported the same story, how would they convince anyone that they had been shown the future? Especially a future involving war, reincarnation, and demonic cultivators.

They might be Sect Leaders, but no one would believe *that*.

Though, on the plus side, Wei Wuxian's personality perfectly matching the one shown in the simulation did help confirm everything they had seen was true. Lan Wangji felt his chest flutter slightly at the thought.

"Is Lotus Pier alright?"

"Yup. I've been taking care of it. Withhold your horror, Jiang Cheng, I've done great!"

“I didn’t say anything!”

“Qinghe Nie’s doing pretty well since everyone there’s pretty independent. The Gusu Lan elders are in charge over there, but they keep switching between spokespeople since the clan usually handles talking to the disciples and they can’t seem to come to any agreements on the important stuff. Last I heard, Jin Zixun and four other cousins pretty much calmed down the mess going on at Koi tower, so at least the fires were put out, and I’m not sure what’s going on at Nightless City. They put the whole place on lockdown.”

The sect leaders frowned, considering the report.

“Wei Wuxian!” Madam Yu spoke commandingly. “How did you contact us?”

“Oh, it was really cool. I traced the signal back to its origin and left a distress message. The characters seemed meant for information sharing, rather than anything malicious, so I figured it couldn’t hurt. And then this guy named Mo Xuanyu — silver eyes like me, slightly shorter — sent back help. I’ll be able to get you all out!”

At the beginning — or even just after the first episode — the watchers would have all gladly left. They would have figured the simulation was a lie, and put the incident out of their minds.

But now?

“Can we… not?” Nie Mingjue asked.

“Er-Sect Leader Nie?” Wei Wuxian checked. “And I think I heard Huaisang-xiong earlier… wait, is *everyone* there?”

“...Yes.”

”Oh, uh, greetings, Sect Leader Jin, Sect Leader Nie, Acting Sect Leader Lan, Your Excellency. I… thought only the Jiangs could hear me, my apologies.”

It was so, *so* strange to hear Wei Wuxian addressing *anyone* formally. Then again, if they had really been gone for days, perhaps he had been forced to pay even more attention to his complicated status than usual.

“I… guess you don’t *have* to leave. The exit out will be an array that will look like it's inscribed on the “ground” somewhere in the area. To leave, you have to stand in it for a few seconds. But… why would you stay in there?”

“It is necessary for the future of the cultivation world,” Lan Xichen responded, so confidently and politely that the statement had to be taken at face value despite its vagueness.

“I… alright, I guess. I’ll just install it, and if you don’t want to leave I suppose you… won’t *have* to.”

“Can you contact us again?”

”There are these little fluctuations every once in a while where it becomes easier to contact you. I can try to hit the next one?”

The resting spaces between segments, everyone assumed.

“That would be great.”

“O… kay? Any last questions before I go, I guess?”

“Yes,” Jin Zixuan rushed to say, then caught himself and cleared his throat, running through how to phrase it. “Um, do you know if… sending this message back to us affected the people over there in any way? Like, is there anything tying them here?”

“Tying them here? Well… I guess there was this one bit of data I couldn’t figure out. It seemed like it tied the five souls that I presume used this to contact us — counting Mo Xuanyu — to other souls like the reincarnation cycle. Maybe.”

“Can you explain more?”

“Um… Mo Xuanyu’s signature just fused with me for some reason, and then one connected to Shijie and Jin Zixuan, one went over to an engaged couple of Lans, one headed to Nightless City, and one went to Sect Leader Ouyang and his wife. I’m not sure what it means though.”

‘*It means my son will still be born,*’ Jin Zixuan thought, lighting up.

“Is that what you wanted?”

“Yes!” Jin Zixuan turned to Yanli, declaring “As long as we… um, well, I think we can make Jin Ling happen!”

Her eyes widened, and Jiang Cheng let out a sigh of relief as he and the other Jiangs realized the implications. As long as they did the same thing, they didn’t have to worry about writing their son/grandson/nephew out of existence. He would grow up differently, but it would still be his soul.

“Um… okay. I’d appreciate if you at least send one person out though. I don’t think everyone believed me when I said I could get you out of here, and if I just say you all ‘didn’t want to’ I’d probably get thrown out of the conferences so… yeah. Bye!”

The real Wei Wuxian’s voice disappeared, and the watchers were left alone again.

Chapter End Notes

We all hate Wen Chao, but sometimes he has his uses. And yes, I snuck Mo Dao Zu Shi Q in there! It’s so adorable!

Everybody Gets a Wen Ning!!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Well. That happened."

"Eloquent," Nie Mingjue scolded teasingly toward Huaisang, who, in his defense, had been the first person *able* to speak after the bombardment of revelations they were given. He felt like he should get *some* credit for that.

"Wait, he said *Mo Xuanyu* sent it back?"

"You don't think-"

"The older him-"

Jin Guangshan hummed smugly, commenting "I suppose if anyone could find a way through the time travel created by Wei Wuxian, it would be the boy's younger-self."

Jiang Fengmian frowned slightly, disliking Jin Guangshan's continued focus on his young ward.

"Um… maybe the future Wei Wuxian just wasn't willing to send back messages to anyone else?" Jiang Yanli suggested, trying to redirect the sect leader's attention.

Wen Chao nodded in complete agreement.

"Of course. There's no way that *low-born brat* could be the *only* one to succeed unless the odds were stacked in his favor!" he cackled.

Ironically, the fact that *Wen Chao* was the one to say this only made the others more convinced that it was Wei Wuxian's unique brilliance that allowed him to trace it back. They had seen the future version in Mo Xuanyu's body — "silver eyes like me, slightly shorter" Wei Wuxian had said — and had personally witnessed his mind. In both investigation and inventing, it was clear he was unparalleled.

In some ways, this only proved the simulation's authenticity.

"He said we should pick one person to go, didn't he?" Jin Zixuan suddenly pointed out, glancing to the blood-red array that had slowly faded into existence on the invisible platform they stood on. It had appeared gradually, but, now that it was fully-formed, the crackling of resentful energy flickering off the crimson characters couldn't be more obvious. They finally had a way out of the prison.

And no one wanted to take it.

Glancing at his wife, Jin Guangshan suggested, “Perhaps you should go. Based on what he said, it seems like our sect needs the most guidance.”

“Then why don’t *you* go?” Madam Jin fired back, despite being well-aware of the reason. *“I* need to stay and make sure Wei Wuxian isn’t a threat to A-Xuan and A-Li. You must realize only one of us needs to be present for that, right? There’s no need for you to be here.”

“I-”

“Unless, of course, there’s something *else* you’re interested in?”

Even Jin Guangshan wasn’t shameless enough to admit his interest to the Jiang Sect leader’s face.

“I just don’t think I’m the best person to leave.”

“Of course,” Wen Ruohan agreed seamlessly. “As Sect Leaders, it is our duty to gain this knowledge.”

As much as he usually disagreed with Wen Ruohan, Lan Qiren was forced to admit, “Indeed. While your emotionally-driven excuses are important, learning how to prevent the invention of demonic cultivation is far more vital to the sects.”

Jin Guangshan’s lips twitched, wondering if Lan Qiren truly thought Wen Ruohan wanted to *stop* Wei Wuxian.

“If we take out the Sect Leaders, there aren’t many people left,” Jiang Fengmian pointed out, not volunteering to go but feeling the point needed to be raised. He turned to his wife.

“Don’t look at me,” she snarled. “Until I find out why that brat killed A-Li and Zixuan, I’m not moving from this spot.”

And that was another point: with the no touch system in place, they physically *could not* force anyone to leave the simulation. Whoever went would have to volunteer for the role.

“Everyone will need to believe the speaker,” Lan Wangji calmly pointed out, eyes glued to the array crackling behind him. “All the sects will.”

Xichen nodded, “The person who goes doesn’t necessarily have to be respected amongst all the sects, but they must at least have some sway.”

“Are you volunteering?”

“...Not unless there are no other options. Based on what I saw in the future, it seems the Lan Sect is heavily affected by the coming events.”

The only sect whose future had *not* been hinted at was the Nie sect, but, even ignoring how Nie Mingjue leaving would be openly disagreeing with Wen Ruohan (inevitably inciting conflict), he knew he couldn’t. He would not leave Nie Huaisang as the only Nie in a room containing both Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan, nor would he let his brother try to explain

the situation to the other sects. Not only would they not believe him, but the stress it would put Huaisang under was inexcusable.

Nie Mingjue spoke, “I don’t think any sects would believe the claims of possibly-possessed teenagers trying to explain that we all *wanted* to stay here. The only possible exception is Lan Wangji, who is obviously heavily-involved in future events.”

Abruptly, Lan Wangji’s face became conflicted. Although no one else could tell, Xichen saw his brother’s mind war with itself over the situation. He would leave if he was told to — if everyone agreed he *had* to — but if he could choose to stay, he would.

~~He wanted to see more of Wei Ying~~.

Wen Qing frowned, glancing across the crowd. Normally, she would do whatever his excellency told her to, but, the more she thought about it-

Who could she trust to tell her about A-Ning? Even if the others seemed hopelessly ~~kind~~ naive, would they truly betray Wei Wuxian to tell her the truth? Of course not, that would be ridiculous.

But if his excellency refused-

But hadn’t the others been supporting each other all this time? Even without being close, she, at the very least, must be able to rely on the boy who would become the righteous Hanguang-jun. He would-

No, he wouldn’t back her up. It was foolish of her to hope. The Wens would go to war with the Lans, he had nothing to gain from letting her stay. But then, Wen Qing’s eyes made contact with Jiang Yanli’s, and the Jiang girl realized her panic.

“...Given what apparently happened to Wen-guniang’s brother, I don’t believe she should leave either,” Jiang Yanli requested, making Wen Qing flinch back slightly at being so easily read. However, within an instant, she coughed and straightened up, making eye contact with Wen Ruohan.

“I also believe my medical experience will be a unique and valuable perspective,” she added, lying through her teeth and only relaxing when Wen Ruohan gave a careless nod.

Huaisang frowned slightly, thinking through the mess.

“...If we take out the younger teenagers, and the Sect Leaders, and the furens, *and* Wen Qing, the only person left is-”

“Me, yes?” Wen Xu asked, smirking cockily.

“...Yes.”

The tension in the room once again spiked. The constant changes in seriousness and stress were starting to become exhausting; Huaisang was almost tempted to walk to the array and leave. Of course, if he did that, then he would be met with *responsibilities* and *expectations* in

the outside world. Probably best to just stay with his Da-ge. In addition, it was kind of fun to see everyone try puzzling this out.

Wen Xu was certainly old enough to have his Clan's respect, and, so long as the Wen Clan supported one story, the other clans would have no choice but to concede. However, he was also loyal beyond a doubt to Wen Ruohan.

While that was usually a good thing between an heir and a leader, it could prove catastrophic for the younger Wei Wuxian waiting outside. No one outside knew anything about the predicted future, and would have no reason to suspect Wen Xu until it was too late.

Yu Ziyuan scowled, and moved to object-

"Alright," Jiang Fengmian allowed.

Every head swiveled in his way, most watchers gaping wide-eyed at the Jiang Sect Leader.

"...I would have thought *you* would be the most opposed," Nie Mingjue observed curiously. Jiang Fengmian smiled at him for a moment, before turning his now-cold eyes on a curious Wen Xu.

"I have faith in A-Xian's mind," he explained. "Don't forget, he'll contact us again at the end of the next segment. If he's truly as aware of the other sects' situations as we think he is, then I'm sure he'll be able to update us on any strange circumstances, don't you agree?"

It was said in the same calm, near-passive tone that Jiang Fengmian always spoke in, but the implied threat was heard nonetheless. No one could deny that the Wen brothers were the only two willing to leave, nor that, of the two, Wen Xu was the only one people would trust.

If there was nothing that could be done to prevent this from happening, their best option was to try and mitigate the damage as much as they could. Wen Xu's smile faltered slightly, hearing the very genuine threat loud and clear. If something happened to a sect, its sect leader could leave.

And if they were the only leader out, it was entirely possible for them to launch a pre-emptive strike on another sect. The room was tipping back and forth in a delicate balance; if one of them left, they would all leave. Then, none of them would have knowledge of the future.

Wen Ruohan's speculative gaze turned on Jiang Fengmian for a moment, before nodding once and glancing back at to his son.

"As Sect Leader Jiang said, it would be best to not give those of us who stay here any reason to worry, especially with the time advantage you'll have. Allow them to rest assured that you'll stick to gaining connections and supporting those who deserve it."

"Of course, father."

Wen Xu wouldn't do anything overt, but that didn't mean he couldn't start trying to win Wei Wuxian over. Several people tensed, but acknowledged that there were no better options.

“No complaints then?” Wen Xu asked, giving the crowd a glance, before stepping through them to the array on the ground. As soon as his feet touched the center of the circle, a blinding blood-red light filled the room as the sounds of static doubled in magnitude. For the first time since he was brought into the simulation, Wen Xu could feel something — heat, coming from below his feet, where the array sat.

Then, two seconds later, he was gone.

With a gasp, Wen Xu awoke.

“Wen-gongzi!” a woman shouted from his right, hurrying over. He turned to her, and recognized her as one of the healers from Wen Qing's branch family.

Soon, there was an onslaught of people gathered around the room, attracted by the shocked shout. Luckily, the healers kept them out to prevent patients from being disturbed.

“Wen-gongzi,” the healer began again, hesitantly. “Do you feel pain anywhere?”

“I’m fine,” he rejected, pulling his hand away from where she had been trying to feel his pulse. A younger man, also a healer, quickly brought over a glass of water.

“Gongzi-”

“Leave,” he ordered calmly, and they both cowered away.

Wen Xu’s eyes drifted toward the people watching him from outside the room, and saw the overwhelming relief on their faces. They also, however, kept turning to the still-sleeping Wen Ruohan’s body with unconcealed confusion.

“Wen-gongzi,” Wen Zhuliu greeted, stepping forward and saluting lowly. “Do you know why you woke up?”

“Yes, YunmengJiang’s head disciple figured something out,” Wen Xu revealed, taking note of how, despite there being surprise, there was a distinct lack of astonishment. It seemed Wei Wuxian had kept the other sects up-to-date on his research, or at least the existence of it.

Good, then no one would be surprised by his sudden interest in the boy.

“Do you know why His Excellency hasn’t woken?” Wen Zhuliu prompted, straight to the point as always.

“I do,” Wen Xu confirmed, then turned toward the crowd. “Send word to the other sects: the Great Sect Leaders are being granted knowledge that is vital to the future of the cultivation world. I was chosen to return and maintain order while they continued to gather information.”

“They chose to stay?” someone asked, flabbergasted.

“They did. They felt they had a moral obligation to find out the truth being offered to them, and all agreed to remain. When they are ready to leave, they can exit using the array

YunmengJiang's head disciple created. Until then, they will stay."

"Understood, gongzi," Wen Zhuliu bowed again. "I shall inform the other sects at once."

"Good. And, when you're done-"

Wen Xu frowned. He needed to begin gaining Wei Wuxian's trust, but going himself would raise far too many questions, especially with the sects in such disarray. No, he needed someone who Wei Wuxian could grow to trust, but was still tied to the Wen sect.

Someone who the future-him was known to work with.

"Gongzi?"

"After, tell Wen Qionglin — Wen Ning — to take a group to Yunmeng Jiang and offer help as thanks for his assistance in allowing me to escape."

"Understood."

Thanks to how long their discussion took, the watchers barely had time to sit down again before the next segment started.

The sun appeared, shining down on a clearing which was surrounded on all sides by natural stone pillars. Inside, an archery target was set up.

Then, a heavy sigh was heard.

'*God, we already had to sit through the clans' debates early in the morning! Now I have a headache, why is this place so hard to navigate on top of all that?*' Wei Wuxian asked, groaning to himself. Unlike his usual black-and-red outfit, Wei Wuxian was fitted into a festive red and gold outfit — the uniform for the discussion conference.

His gaze drifted around the open field until he heard a soft thump from his right.

"Huh?" he asked, turning towards it.

A second later, another arrow flew forward and hit the bull's eye.

"Not bad," Lan Xichen admitted.

"Xichen-ge, who do you think it is?" Nie Huaisang asked, receiving an equally unsure expression in response. Based on what the simulation had shown, it seemed like it was skipping over unimportant details.

Whoever this was, they would likely play a significant role.

"The shooter's hand is firm and steady. Who's this excellent archer?" Wei Wuxian asked, moving around the target to get a better look.

"*A-Ning?*!" Wen Qing couldn't help revealing in shock.

"What?" numerous people shouted, most doing a double take.

Before them, a young boy in Wen robes stood, brow creased in determination. Carefully, he lifted his arms and aimed another shot. His concentration peaked, and his surroundings faded away until his focus rested solely on the target before him.

"Nice shot!" Wei Wuxian shouted.

With a scream, Wen Ning startled and launched his arrow towards Wei Ying.

"A-Xian!"

"Woah," Wei Wuxian said, catching the arrow with his bare hand.

"Wow," Nie Mingjue muttered.

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow, impressed with both Wei Wuxian's reflexes and Wen Ning's skill.

(He had thought the boy was only useful as a hostage, but now-)

Seeing his gaze, Wen Qing focused on maintaining a blank face, trying to hid how she clenched her fists in abject terror.

"That was close," Wei Wuxian continued, before looking up and smiling at Wen Ning. "Don't be so nervous. What's your name? You're such a good archer!"

Hearing Wei Wuxian's usual social exuberance, Wen Qing relaxed slightly. She should have expected it, given what she had seen so far, but Wei Wuxian's open positivity was still staggering.

~~*'No, no. You can't forget what he does. One of these days, he'll kill A-Ning to turn him into an unstoppable weapon. Don't get your hopes up.'*~~

Still smiling, Wei Wuxian continued "I'm serious. That was really amazing. It's rare to see such a skilled arch-"

"*I'm sorry!*" Wen Ning yelled, then turned and sprinted behind one of the rock formations, hiding like a scared rabbit.

For a moment, there was silence. Then-

"Wait…. *That's* the Ghost General?!?!"

"...Couldn't be," Lan Qiren muttered, remembering the fierce corpse's unparalleled power and ferociousness. "I… suppose they look similar, but he-"

Then, Yanli giggled.

“He’s so cute,” she whispered. Wen Qing turned away at the words — unwilling to risk letting her mask break — and missed seeing Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue nod in synch.

“Huh? Am I really that intimidating?” he asked, staring at the stop where Wen Ning had stood just moments ago. “Hm. Whatever.”

With a casual toss, Wei Wuxian speared the arrow straight through the distant target. Most people wouldn’t have been so powerful or accurate even *with* a bow.

Jiang Cheng let out a breathless sound halfway between a gasp of awe and a jealous sigh. As far as he could tell, the additional year this-Wei-Ying lived had made him significantly more powerful. Not surprising, given that he was one of the most powerful of their generation despite beginning his cultivation late.

~~“As expected of the *favored* child,” his mother’s voice mocked.~~

“This place is a maze!” he complained again. “Where’s the archery field’s entrance?”

From behind the stone wall, Wen Ning tensed slightly, then, hesitantly raised a hand to point to the right.

“Well, it’s… over there,” he explained.

“Hm?” Wei Wuxian glanced in the indicated direction, then smiled and bowed to Wen Ning. “Thanks! I’m Wei Ying from Yunmeng Jiang. Courtesy name Wuxian. May I have your name, gongzi?”

It really wasn't fair for him to be so constantly upbeat. Although she was confident she could remember to hate him, Wen Qing noticed herself slipping every time she relaxed.

Slowly and cautiously, Wen Ning crept out from behind the stone, his hands clasped together.

“I… I’m Wen Ning from the Wen Clan. Courtesy name Qionglin.”

Once again, Jiang Yanli barely kept herself from cooing at the adorable behavior of the young Wen. Xichen obviously felt the same, and, although he was trying to hide it, it seemed like Nie Mingjue wasn’t too far behind them.

With her most inviting smile, Yanli turned to Wen Qing and said, “I had no idea your younger brother was so skilled at archery, Wen-guniang.”

“I was also uninformed,” Wen Ruohan added.

The hesitant smile that had begun to creep onto Wen Qing’s face instantly vanished and she bowed lowly to her sect leader.

“My apologies for not informing you, Your Excellency. However, my brother is only capable when acting alone; as soon as he tried to practice with someone else, he becomes completely

incapable. In addition, he only began practicing recently, so I neglected to inform you. My deepest apologies."

It pained her to speak so dismissively of her A-Ning, but she could *not* allow Wen Ruohan to consider using him as anything beyond a hostage. If he was sent on one of Wen Ruohan's attacks (used to corral smaller clans into obedience) and got hurt-

And yet, despite her best efforts, he had died anyway, hadn't he? Their glimpse of the future had confirmed at least that much.

Wen Ruohan hummed, but allowed the subject to drop.

Then, one after another, five flags were raised in the air. Gusu, Yunmeng, Qishan, Lanling, and Qinghe all proudly displayed their symbols in a line.

Drums began to beat, and the ground below the flags switched to the competition's starting point. Banners fluttered, music played, and the disciples gathered around into small groups.

"Wei Wuxian, where did you go?!" Jiang Cheng demanded.

"I got lost," he explained as he came to a stop in front of an enormous tarp with the Wen Sect's sun painted in the center. "Wow! This must be the famous Qiong Qi Drum! Spectacular."

As Wen Chao preened at the compliment, Wen Qing worked to withhold an exhausted sigh. She loved her position, her brother, and the rest of her family, but she was not blind to the less-than-savory ways the Wen heirs represented her sect.

"Is it really made out of the skin of Qiong Qi?"

"If it is, the legend that the Wen Clan's ancestor Wen Mao killed Qiong Qi must also be true."

Wen Chao's eyes arrogantly surveyed the crowd, pleased by the discussion about his ancestor. The simulation might have proven Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji 's power, but they could never hope to kill a divine beast of the same magnitude as his ancestor did!

"Qiong Qi is an ancient fierce beast," Jiang Cheng reminded. "No one has seen it. Who knows whether or not it was true. As for the drum… Father did say it wasn't ordinary."

With a laugh, Wei Wuxian ran forward and wrapped an arm around his third shidi's shoulders.

"What? You want it?" he asked, making the other boy laugh. "Don't worry. When I find out where the beast is, I'll kill it and bring it back to make an even bigger drum!"

Behind them, someone tested the strength of his bowstring several times, making a musical sound. Wei Wuxian looked back, then lit up.

“Hey! Lan Zhan! Is that you?”

Lan Wangji glared back, then began to walk away.

“*Wangji-xiong!*” Nie Huaisang protested. “Why would you do that! Wei-xiong is never going to realize you like him if you give him the cold shoulder!”

“I don’t like him,” Lan Wangji responded evenly.

Jiang Cheng scowled, about to argue that Lan Wangji didn’t *deserve* Wei Wuxian, until he saw the slight red on Lan Wangji’s ears and quieted down. He supposed he didn’t have any room to talk when it came to hiding affection under anger and aloofness.

“Lan Zhan, why are you ignoring me?” Wei Wuxian whined. “We were at least classmates before. No need to be so cold.”

“At least *classmates?*” Madam Jin repeated disbelievingly.

“Well, no offense,” Nie Mingjue muttered glancing at the Lan brothers, “But I don’t think any of us would have figured it out without his thoughts and Xichen.”

As Lan Xichen began to laugh and Lan Qiren glared, Lan Wangji looked down slightly. Affection and romance always led to disaster in his clan; encouraging Wei Ying should be the last thing on his mind. Why couldn’t everyone leave this alone? He was perfectly fine on his own.

Why did it have to be *his* life on display for everyone to see?

After a several-second-long glare, Lan Wangji gave a heavy sigh.

“Excuse me,” he said. Wei Wuxian faltered for a moment, then covered it up with a cheerful grin, sweeping his arm dramatically as he allowed Lan Wangji to pass.

Then, as soon as Wangji was a sufficient distance away, Wei Wuxian smirked and shouted, “Lan Zhan! Your forehead ribbon isn’t straight!”

His hand immediately slapped his head in a rush to check.

Panicking slightly, the real Lan Wangji also brought his hand up to check his own ribbon. The sight made a majority of the teenagers snicker, only to fall into a mischievous silence under the Second Jade’s ferocious glare.

Realizing that his ribbon was already perfect, Lan Wangji glared darkly at the snickering Wei Wuxian. For a moment, the day’s light seemed to fade under his fury, and the wind picked up into a dangerous rumble. It remained like this for a few seconds more, before he spun on his heel and marched off, Wei Wuxian laughing uproariously the whole time.

Jiang Fengmian sighed fondly, privately delighted by his ward’s open playfulness, only to hesitate slightly when his wife turned a terrifying glower upon him.

“Absolutely shameless,” she hissed. “What is that boy thinking!”

“San-niang, there’s no harm in a little teas-”

“Would you still think that if *A-Cheng* was the one doing it?! No, I suppose you would approve of such reckless chaos; it’s what *your sect* values, isn’t it?”

“San-Niang, *enough.* That isn’t-”

“Isn’t it?”

Although they had endeavored to keep their voices down, perhaps subdued by the scenes showing their family, it was obvious to everyone what they were saying. While most of the unwilling audience pretended not to hear, Wen Ruohan gave them a highly considering look.

Then, with a gust of wind sending his hair flowing back, Lan Wangji appeared on a cliff overlooking the grounds, presumably several minutes later.

“Wangji-xiong! Wangji-xiong!” someone called from below.

Lan Wangji turned his gaze down, making eye contact with a beaming Wei Wuxian.

“Ah, Lan Zhan!” he exclaimed with a smile.

Wangji glared.

“I’m sorry for earlier!” Wei Wuxian declared unconvincingly. “You were ignoring me; it’s not my fault.”

He branched off from the crowd of people surrounding him to get closer to Lan Wangji, not noticing the mix of amused and forlorn gazes watching him go.

Nie Huaisang huffed a slight laugh, seeing Wei Wuxian’s ever-so-constant popularity. Given that, it was almost unbelievable that he had become friends with the weak, air headed Nie heir at the cloud recesses. It probably didn’t mean much to Wei Wuxian, but Nie Huaisang couldn’t understate how much he appreciated the unconditional offer of friendship.

His Wei-xiong was truly special.

“Wangji-xiong!” Wei Wuxian repeated.

Lan Wangji turned away.

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian blinked, confused.

Xichen snorted.

Laughing slightly, Wei Wuxian moved so that he was just under the ledge where Lan Wangji stood.

Realizing escape was impossible, Lan Wangji sighed and asked, “What is it?”

Smirking, Wei Wuxian reached into his qiankun sleeve's pocket and pulled out an enormous present. As Lan Wangji jumped down, Wei Wuxian leaned on the box and cleared his throat.

"Last year I was away and missed your birthday," he explained. "So I made sure to specifically get you a gift for today."

"Unnecessary."

"Eh?" Wei Wuxian asked, doing a double take.

Ignoring the chortling teenagers around him, Lan Wangji focused on taking deep breaths, his mind caught up in a destructive war with itself. He couldn't tell if he was proud of his simulation-self's calmness, angry at the refusal, or jealous over his other-self getting yet *another* present from Wei Wuxian.

His simulation-self didn't realize how lucky he was.

Wei Wuxian stared after the departing Lan Wangji, gaping openly. Then, he turned and chased after.

"Don't be so cold," Wei Wuxian advised. "I put a lot of effort into it! I really hadn't known you'd never read it-"

Suddenly realizing what he was talking about, the trio of teenage heirs gave Lan Wangji apprehensive stares.

"It's a beginner's one this time," Wei Wuxian explained with a smirk. "You can definitely accept it!"

Cheerfully as always, Wei Wuxian held out *Entry-Level Erotic Depictions with Tips for Love*. Lan Wangji scornfully gazed down, before turning his head away with a huff.

"Ridiculous."

"Saw that coming from a mile away," Nie Mingjue whispered to a giggling Xichen.

"Eh?" Wei Wuxian exclaimed, sounding genuinely confused with Lan Wangji's refusal. Nevertheless, he shook off his first failure and shown with renewed determination.

This time, he pulled out a plate painted red with chili powder.

"I also brought you a specialty of Yunmeng: Spicy Mantis Shrimps-"

"No one can tolerate that except *you*," Jiang Cheng denied.

"Or this calligraphy I wrote!" he laughed, holding up a scroll with a portrait he drew of the Lan heir next to the words '*Lan Wangji is so attractive!*'

Ears slowly turning red, Lan Wangji added the three additional presents to his mental list of the gifts his ungrateful other-self got to receive.

“Hey, Lan Zhan, talk to me!” Wei Ying requested, blocking off his fleeing friend. “Which one do you like?”

In response, Lan Wangji notched an arrow and aimed at his smiling crush. Instantly, Wei Ying’s face changed to one of panic.

“If you don’t like any of them, I’ll get you something else!”

Jiang Yanli laughed slightly, finding the now obviously-mutual crushes between the boys adorable. While she made sure not to show it, Wen Qing was feeling much the same.

Lan Zhan released the arrow.

Even though his encounter with Wen Ning proved he could simply *catch* the arrow, Wei Wuxian responded to the second jade’s attack by ducking down and screaming.

“Help! Lan Zhan is trying to kill me!”

Then, he paused and looked back at where the arrow had landed, noticing the practice target there.

“Lan-er-gongzi has hit the bullseye,” an announcer proclaimed.

~~Lan Zhan did *not* think Wei Ying’s befuddled expressions was adorable. He did not.~~

Although it wasn’t a surprise, Jiang Fengmian nodded to Lan Qiren with respect, impressed by his prized student’s archery. It took everything in the other man to bow back without preening.

(The stressful experience they were in had all-but shattered his self control.)

Wei Wuxian stared at the arrow for a moment, before his face lit up as the illusion of a sun appeared next to his head.

Nie Huaisang couldn’t resist laughing at the adorable way the simulation’s creators had shown Wei Wuxian having an idea.

Presumably several minutes later, Lan Wangji was once again poised to take a shot. He narrowed his eyes in concentration, only to lose it when an arrow flew by from directly behind him, slicing his previous arrows in half upon impact.

“Wei-gongzi has hit the bullseye.”

Wen Chao scoffed, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like “I could do that too,” before Wen Ruohan’s glare shut him up.

“Wei Ying!”

With smug disregard, Wei Wuxian cheekily responded, "What? The target isn't just yours. Why can't I shoot it?"

"...Whatever."

Head buried in his hand, Jin Zixuan mumbled a soft, "You two are so cute."

"We're not," Lan Wangji snapped back, glaring. The Jin heir was undeterred, however. After he had decided that his mother and fiancée might be onto something with their investment in the two's relationship, he had also begun paying more attention. Now that he was, their mutual unaware pining was mortifyingly sweet.

"Look how hard they're trying," Jiang Yanli whispered at him.

Jin Zixuan nodded back with a, "I can't believe Wei Wuxian got him so many presents."

"And they're all personalized."

"And-"

"Quiet," Lan Wangji hissed. Lan Qiren looked like he was about to gaze disapprovingly on his unusually-flustered nephew, but stopped at Lan Xichen's thoroughly pleased smile.

After refilling Wangji's quiver, the pair's match began again.

An arrow hit.

"Lan-er-gongzi has hit-"

Another one.

"Or — Wei-gongzi has hit-"

Another one.

"Lan-er-gongzi has hit — Wei-gongzi has hit-

"Oh my god-"

"Lan-er-gongzi has hit the bullseye! Wei-gongzi has hit the bullseye! Lan-er-gongzi has hit the bullseye! Wei-gongzi has hit the bullseye-"

"*Seriously?"*

"Lan-er-gongzi has hit the bullseye! Wei-gongzi has hit the bullseye! Lar-er-gongzi has hit the bullseye! Wei-gongzi has hit the bullseye!"

"Now they're just showing off!" Jiang Cheng protested.

"Lar-er-gongzi has hit the bullseye! Wei-gongzi has hit the bullseye! Lan er gong-Wei-gongzi. Hit, hit, hit… they both hit it."

“Oh, that poor announcer,” Nie Huaisang bemoaned pitifully.

Everyone else was either smirking in amusement or staring slack-jawed at the display before them. There had never been any doubt the two were talented, but *this* was something else.

Nearly an hour later, all four nearby targets were decorated with a plume of arrow feathers located smack dab in the middle. Every one of the dozens of shots had been a bullseye.

Wei Wuxian sneaked forward and gazed appreciatively on the display they had created. He laughed as he stared at them.

“These bouquets are nicely arranged!” he winked. “There’s mine in yours, and there’s yours in mine.”

“I guess that’s where his fourth place ranking comes from,” Jin Guangshan cackled, raising an eyebrow in surprised appreciation. Jiang Yanli frowned, but, realizing who she was up against, refrained from mentioning Wei Wuxian’s complete and utter lack of experience in romance.

Lan Wangji gripped his bow tighter and glared, “You were provoking me.”

He spun on his heel and began to storm off, only for Wei Wuxian to pop in front of him again.

“You didn’t accept my gifts!” he pointed out. “I had to do this.”

“You-”

Silently, Wei Wuxian held out one of the feather bouquets, offering it to the second jade.

“Here, your birthday gift.” Wei Wuxian declared as Lan Wangji’s expression shifted to one of shock. “Lan Zhan, do you like it?”

One thing was undeniable: no god or dream or immortal or *deity* could possibly compare to the beauty on display before them. As the afternoon's warmth created a soft halo of light around them, Wei Wuxian tilted his head and gave an *angelic* smile. Coupled with his beautiful aura, the air around him seemed to shine like the sun. Meanwhile, the equally beautiful Lan Wangji turned a soft pink — pale skin blushing a beautiful rose — and looked away. The flush had spread from his ears to his cheeks, and down his neck. The wind brushed their hair back, long tresses flowing like smooth rivers around them. One could almost believe their mere presence blessed the land.

No matter how hard they tried, no artist could *possibly* recreate the scene’s beauty.

“...That is *so* unfair.”

No one had to ask what Nie Huaisang was referring to. Lan Xichen held the title as the most sought after bachelor in the cultivation world, but seeing the perpetually-apathetic Lan Wangji suddenly *blush* was unquestionably more precious than Lan Xichen’s constant smile,

even if just for the rarity. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, had maintained spot four even with no family background, meaning his over-exuberance being replaced by genuine romantic attempts created a siren song of a vision.

Jin Guangshan hummed to himself, mentally tallying up how much their faces could earn if someone knew how to use them well. Politically, their appearances would be combined with their talents and connections, creating a package that would leave *any* manipulator salivating in anticipation.

Trembling slightly, the still-turned-away Lan Wangji finally uttered out a soft, "Ridiculous."

Simultaneously, Jiang Yanli and Lan Xichen cooed.

"Xiongzhang!"

"I'm sorry, Wangji, but it's-"

"Adorable."

The real Lan Wangji began to tremble, torn between utter humiliation and his meger leftover pride. Despite what was being displayed before them, he refused to show weakness.

However, he had to admit, it was much easier to accept everyone's reactions when he had also gotten to see *them* through the simulation. When compared against the Jiang marriage, Nie Huaisang's cheating, Jin Zixuan's confession, and the Wen's supposed defeat, the ~~flirtatious~~ interactions between himself and Wei Ying seemed comparably insignificant.

A short while later, the beat of the drums picked up in intensity.

An announcer stood tall and declared, "Leaders of Lanling Jin Clan, Yunmeng Jiang Clan, and Qinghe Nie Clan, as well as Lan Qiren-xiansheng have arrived!"

The disciples all stood in straight rows as four men walked down the path in the middle. At the front of the four leaders stood Nie Mingjue, his head held high.

Both Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian broke formation slightly to gaze happily at their sect leader as he passed, a stark comparison to Lan Wangji, standing at Wei Wuxian's right, who remained calmly facing forward.

The watchers were brought up the steps with the sect leaders, only stopping when Nie Mingjue came to a halt. The man turned to glare at the places laid out for them, then up at the elevated centerpiece where Wen Ruohan would soon sit.

Realizing what had been laid out, the real Nie Mingjue also turned to glare, only receiving an amused chuckle in response. Jiang Fengmian stepped forward slightly, attracting Sect Leader Nie's attention, and shook his head once.

'*It's not worth it,'* he conveyed. '*If you anger him enough, he'll send Wen Chao to Wen Xu, and have his sons destroy Qinghe Nie while you're gone. If you follow, you'll lose*

information on the future.'

Nie Mingjue growled slightly, but could not deny the statement.

Similarly, as the simulation's Nie Mingjue angrily turned on his heel, Lan Qiren spoke.

"Easy, Sect Leader Nie," he advised.

"Us four Clans and the Wen Clan always sat together as host and guests, but now Wen Ruohan is acting like he's the Leader of all Clans!"

A loud scoff.

"Are we not?" Wen Chao snidely asked. "What exactly can you do against us?"

Nie Mingjue immediately stood up, only to belatedly remember their inability to touch each other. As Wen Chao began to snicker, Nie Huaisang spoke.

"Eh?" he asked. "But we already know the answer to that question, don't we? We fought, and we won. That was the first thing we heard, wasn't it?"

Just as he predicted, even with Huaisang's exaggeratingly ignorant tone, the reminder was enough to *infuriate* Wen Ruohan. He gave a low growl of warning, making Nie Mingjue stand protectively in front of an innocently-tilting-his-head-Huaisang.

"He has mastered many powerful skills, and merged three established clans in the North," Lan Qiren steadily reminded. At this point, he is powerful enough that he no longer needs to pretend to be friendly with us."

"Hm. Fine then. I'm fed up with all this hypocrisy anyways."

He began walking toward the exit, only for Lan Qiren to hold out a hand, stopping him.

"Sect Leader Nie, please. I know you want to avenge your father, but the Wens' influence is immense. And they're *known* for their ruthlessness."

The younger teenagers — who until that point had only ever known Lan Qiren as a terrifying teacher — were somewhat awed by the man's calm speech and political mindset. Then again, it wasn't like Wei Wuxian was by any means a *normal* student, so their perception might have been slightly skewed.

"For the sake of your clan, you have to bear it for now," Lan Qiren concluded as Jin Guangshan sat down. A moment later, the man began to chuckle with false pleasantry.

"Exactly," he agreed. "No need to be angry, Sect Leader Nie. Why not just sit down and have a drink?"

Nie Huaisang and Jin Zixuan glanced awkwardly at each other, usure of how much they agreed with their sect leaders. While Nie Huaisang loved and respected his Da-ge above all else, he knew the Nie Clan couldn't stand against the Wens alone. Jin Zixuan, on the other

hand, felt uncomfortably reminded of his father's penchant for overindulging in both alcohol *and* women.

As Nie Mingjue huffed and took a seat, Jiang Fengmian moved to his own spot.

"It's not important where we sit now," Jiang Fengmian said, glancing across the walkway towards the additional seat. "I'm more interested in seeing who will be sitting with us."

There was a spike in Wen Qing's heart rate as Wen Ruohan leaned back in his chair, consideringly. He glanced at the other sect leaders and thought to himself.

This was a predicted future which had already said the Wen Clan lost the Sunshot Campaign, and the presence of the other sect leaders made it more important than just a random theory. If the Wen Clan failed during the archery competition, then their main source of pride, their strength, would be brutally insulted.

And yet, there was no way the sect leaders could secretly launch an attack right now. Was there any point in worrying about the competition when it technically hadn't happened yet? Would it not be smarter to focus on what the Wen Clan could do differently once they got out?

Wouldn't it be best to see how Wei Wuxian managed against the others?

(If the pheasant hunt was any indication of his skill, this would be an interesting competition.)

Once again, the announcer stepped forward to gather everyone's attention.

"His lordship, Wen-er-gongzi, has arrived!"

Wen Chao immediately snapped upright, his interest in the simulation multiplying.

With a smirk on his face, Wen Chao marched up the steps, then took a seat across from the sect leaders. He glanced over, then gave them a careless salute that was even ruder than Jin Zixuan's had been to Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian.

Madam Yu hissed "The *audacity*-"

Nie Mingjue scoffed, "Sect Leader Jiang, are you satisfied with this answer?

Instead of growing angry, Jiang Fengmian gave a soft, amused smile and inclined his head once.

In the rows of disciples below, discontentment grew.

"This Wen Chao. Does he think he's the future leader of us all?" Jiang Cheng demanded. He and Wei Wuxian both wore displeased scowls on their faces, and the latter nodded in agreement.

“I guess that’s why they arranged the seating this way.”

“Going to kick up a fuss?” Wen Chao demanded, completely forgetting his father’s silent commands in his excitement at seeing himself. “What exactly do you think you can do?”

Lan Qiren frowned as he drank, warning “Such arrogance forecasts incoming chaos.”

It was clear that Jin Guangshan was the only sect leader who had no problem with it. In that way, the discussion created a clear line dividing the cultivation sects in half.

Nie Huaisang glanced around, cataloging the reactions to each sect leader’s emotions.

The beat of the drums returned, causing ripples in the leader’s cups. As expected, the announcer stepped forward again to introduce the final ruler.

“His Excellency, Wen Ruohan!”

Now, even Jiang Fengmian had stopped smiling. As calm as can be, Wen Ruohan stepped up to his elevated throne, ignoring the other leaders. While Lan Qiren, Nie Mingjue, and Jiang Fengmian had all become more tense, Jin Guangshan had slipped into a genuine smile for a moment, pleased at his ally’s presence. However, a moment later, he noticed the reactions of the others and returned to a neutral expression, fanning himself lightly.

Jin Zixuan wanted to sink into the floor. It was one thing to be close to the Chief Cultivator, but now, when they *knew* it would result in war, Jin Guangshan’s friendship with him gained a very different light. Seeing his confliction, Jiang Yanli shifted slightly closer.

The second Wen Ruohan sat down, graceful and elegant, yet arrogant and dangerous, the entire congregation of Wen disciples dropped to their knees in unison.

They recited, “Sect Leader Wen of renowned prestige, will live as long as heaven and earth!”

Wen Ruohan hummed. He liked the knowtowing, but the words “renowned prestige” might need to be edited a little. The complete unison was well done though.

Next to him, Jin Guangshan chuckled slightly in considering appreciation, ignoring the barely-hidden disgusted looks thrown his way by his wife and heir.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng made displeased eye contact, before saluting Jiang Fengmian as well (though keeping it at an expected level of respect, rather than full-on worship).

“All of you, rise.”

As Wen Chao smirked up at his father, the speaker began again.

“The year of Jimao under the reign of Xuanzheng, the archery competition of the Cultivation Conference begins now! Open array!” he commanded, causing the barrier

to melt down. “Hundreds of evil spirits dwell in the stone forest. The one who shoots the most evil spirits wins. Black signals will appear for wrong shots or missed shots, indicating that the participant must leave. When the fireworks begin, you may start.”

Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng made eye contact, both nearly vibrating in excitement at the competition. They had experience hunting and practicing on targets, but the competition was given a more unique spin by isolating the available targets to just spirits.

Huaisang didn’t seem interested in joining their excited eye contact, but Lan Wangji gave them a calm-yet-intrigued glance that made them both start laughing.

Wen Chao took another sip, before glancing over and nearly spitting it out.

“Hold on!” he commanded. “Who’s standing at the end of the line?”

Said person flinched slightly at the harsh voice, before glancing back and revealing himself as Wen Ning. A Wen servant slipped next to Wen Chao, whispering the boy’s name.

“He is Wen Ning.”

“Right, him. What’s he doing here? He’s just a distant relative, who let him in here? Look at him! Can he even draw his bow?”

Were it not for Wen Ruohan’s constant presence, Wen Qing would have paralyzed every one of his limbs. She wondered if he’d still be able to maintain his cocky arrogance while getting his stomach slowly and carefully slit open.

Though, as fun as it was to daydream about it, she knew better than anyone how impossible that would be. She tried to not allow her frustration to show, but must have been more obvious than she thought, as Jiang Yanli gave her an understanding smile.

“Tell him to leave right now!” Wen Chao continued. “He’ll only humiliate our family.”

Wen Qing glared.

“*You-”*

“Who said he couldn’t draw his bow?”

“What?” Wen Qing gasped out, staring at the simulated Wei Wuxian.

“Yes! Go Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang shouted.

Wen Ning’s eyes had widened at the question, and he turned his vulnerable gaze upon Wei Wuxian. Yunmeng Jiang’s head disciple walked toward Wen Chao, head held high.

“Not only can he draw it, he can also shoot very well.”

Wen Qing's breath stuttered slightly as she watched. Why was Wei Wuxian standing up for Wen Ning? There was nothing he could get out of it and he did seem nice but this was the man who would one day turn her brother into a *corpse* so why-

"Hm," Nie Mingjue muttered. "Good for him."

"You're… Wei Wuxian?" Wen Chao asked.

Wen Ruohan stood and moved to stand directly between his son and Yunmeng Jiang's ward, observing the two. One was the second of his heirs; the other, the heir to his legacy as the cultivation world's strongest monster. As time went on, it was becoming more and more obvious which was the greater investment.

"They say your archery is pretty good," Wen Chao scoffed.

"Good enough for shooting pheasants~"

Was it a coincidence that Wei Wuxian always responded to praise by highlighting his own childishness? Probably. But several people couldn't shake the feeling that had *someone* taught him to stay as far away from looking like an heir as possible.

Wen Chao laughed, "Then you've got to be careful; our evil spirit targets are nothing like your stupid pheasants. *They* won't stay still and wait to be shot!"

Among the people too young to control their expressions, utter disgust was clearly displayed. Glancing between the stuttering Wen Ning and the two smirking Wen Chaos, a single thought flew through everyone's minds.

'*I didn't think I could hate him any more than I already did. I was very, very wrong.*'

(Wen Chao was very proud of his simulation-self; it really showed his wit and power.)

Despite the implied insult against his first disciple, Jiang Fengmian remained calm. Almost *too* calm, showing no traces of worry as he drank his tea and making no effort to silence Wei Wuxian.

"What? You're not going to stop him?" Madam Yu hissed. "He's destroying our sect's reputation!"

Given that Yunmeng Jiang's reputation was specifically about gaining excellence through valuing freedom and righteous actions, Madam Jin wasn't entirely sure what her friend meant.

Just like his sect leader, Wei Wuxian remained cheerfully smiling even in the face of Wen Chao's words. To his left, Wen Ning shrank down, trying to hide inside his robes like a turtle slipping into its shell.

"Wen Ning!"

The boy flinched.

Unconsciously, Yanli stepped forward and tried to put her hand on Wen Ning's arm for reassurance.

"He said you can shoot," Wen Chao continued. "Let's see what you've got."

As instructed, Wen Ning pulled back an arrow and lined up in front of the target. However, the second he got in place, his arm started trembling frantically.

"A-Ning!" Wen Qing breathed out, stepping next to Yanli and putting her hand on Wen Ning's other arm. Her hand went through, but, with Wen Ning preforming before Wen Ruohan, was too stressed to care.

Wen Ning's nerves tore through his stance. Instead of watching the target, his eyes kept drifting the the audience of skeptical Wens surrounding him. It couldn't be further from the dangerously collected Wen Ning who had shot the arrows alone.

Nie Huaisang stepped toward him as well, feeling an unusual sense of kinship.

"Relax!" Wei Wuxian cheerily advised from the side. "You were doing great just a little while ago."

Rather than the intended effect, Wei Wuxian's advise shocked Wen Ning into releasing the arrow. It missed the target entirely.

Although she was unsurprised by the result, Wen Qing felt fear tear through her nonetheless. Even worse than Wen Ruohan's response, she suddenly realized the danger of Wei Wuxian's.

In an act of truly unique kindness and valor, Wei Wuxian had stood up for her brother. He had put his own reputation on the line to give her brother a chance, and Wen Ning had just embarrassed him in front of the entire cultivation world. His offer had come back to bite him.

Now, Wen Qing would never *dream* of blaming her brother for this, but what if Wei Wuxian did? She had spent the whole time wondering why such a seemingly kind boy would murder her brother to make him into a weapon, war or not!

Perhaps she had just gotten her answer.

Immediately, Wen Chao snorted and began to cackle, having to put his tea down as he doubled over in mocking laugher.

"Great! So great!" he shouted sarcastically. "What were you waiting for? Waiting for me to kick you out? Find someone else!"

Used to the cruel words, Wen Ning simply lowered his head, staring in disappointment at the arrow he had shot. Wei Wuxian approached him, his Jiang bell ringing as he stepped.

Wen Qing's heart skipped a beat, too filled with fear to care about the real Wen Chao's laughter.

“You were just too nervous,” Wei Wuxian whispered calmly. “Don’t worry so much. You’re really good, you know that, right? Among the disciples from all the clans, there are at most three guys better than you!”

Wen Ning looked up at him, awed by Wei Wuxian’s radiance.

‘*He doesn’t sound like he’s lying,’* Wen Qing thought, mouth slightly agape. ‘*But then, what else could it be?’*

On the opposite end of the simulation, Madam Yu glared at the grinning-Wei Wuxian. She was far from unaware of how popular Wei Wuxian was among his shidis and shimeis. They all loved the days he took over teaching them, and had occasionally compared his teaching style to Jiang Fengmian’s (though Wei Wuxian’s was always inevitably more chaotic).

For the first time, she was seeing what they meant.

~~Of course the *favored* son would be a combination of *him* and Cangse Sanren. The apple never fell far from the tree, after all.~~

Smirking, Wei Wuxian motioned at Jiang Cheng and continued, “See? You’re better than this one.”

“Hey!”

“Huh?” Jiang Cheng asked, then glared and elbowed Wei Wuxian’s back. “Shut up!”

Wei Wuxian went careening forward, arms pinwheeling as he regained his balance. When he stood up again, he rubbed his sore back while regaining eye contact with Wen Ning.

“I’m serious. There’s nothing to be nervous about. You just need some practice. Next time, you’ll leave them all shocked!”

“Why are you still chatting? Hurry up and get ready!” Jiang Cheng demanded.

When Jiang Yanli smiled at the interactions of her brothers, Wen Qing glanced over and was momentarily overwhelmed by a sense of companionship.

Then Yanli glanced back at her with her ever-constant kindness, and Wen Qing was forced to look away.

“Alright, alright,” Wei Wuxian allowed, not noticing Wen Ning’s slack jawed expression behind him. A moment later, that shock melded into a warm joy, proving at once how effective Wei Wuxian’s comfort was.

Fireworks went off, and the disciples rushed to the fields.

Wen Qing was frozen. That was practically the opposite of her expectations. She hadn’t been sure of *why* it would happen, but, once she realized how kind Wei Wuxian was to most

people, she had been sure some misunderstanding took place between him and her brother that would lead to such hatred.

Surely, there had to have been *some* reason Wei Wuxian hated A-Ning more than all the other Wens. Why else would he turn her beautiful brother into a corpse?

~~And yet, the look in his eyes when he first saw the Ghost General had been the opposite of hatred, hadn't it?~~

A deep fog swept past the watchers, making the gray stone in the hunting grounds even duller. In one section, Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng, and a handful of other Jiang disciples stood, looking around.

“Wait, where are the evil spirits?” one of them asked.

Their only answer was silence as the desolate ground around them remained barren. Another cloud of fog swept by, further obscuring vision, and Jiang Cheng made a decision.

“Let’s go separate ways and meet at the exit.”

“Oh, I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all,” Nie Huaisang whispered, glancing around the ominous fog with worry. Nie Mingjue sighed at his brother’s antics, but motioned for him to come closer regardless. A few seconds later, a considerably-happier Huaisang was, once again, hidden in his brother’s chest.

The simulation’s no-touch rule was surprisingly helpful~

A few moments later, the watchers were brought to the top of two adjacent plateaus. In the crack between them, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian shuffled through, forced to walk sideways by the small space.

Seeing Wei Wuxian pressed against the wall like that infuriated Lan Wangji. All his life, he had been praised for his control and discipline; yet now he kept imagining himself pressing his chest against the annoying disciple and trapping him in the small space and leaning closer and bringing his lips to-

How could one person possibly be so *unbearably* distracting? And it was made worse by the blinding smile he always had. It was just like the one on an orphan Wangji had given a rattle drum to years before. And just like that boy had been, Wei Wuxian was dirty and expressive and pointlessly smiling and he was also a troublesome, undisciplined rule breaker and yet so incomparably *dazzling* that Lan Zhan wanted to-

Wangji once again cut off his thoughts, realizing where they were leading.

Grunting slightly, Wei Wuxian smiled and asked, “Jeez, where on earth are you leading us to?”

“Stop complaining. Just keep u-”

Jiang Cheng flinched and cut off as he bumped his head into an extended piece of rock. Wei Wuxian's laughter shook the walls, and Jiang Cheng clutched his bruised forehead tenderly.

With a cough, Jin Zixuan tried and failed to cover up a snort. With Huaisang also snickering on the side, Jiang Cheng was forced to pick which one of them to elbow in annoyance.

And then he remembered that they wouldn't feel it regardless, so he sent them each his sternest glare until they stopped chuckling.

(It was completely unfair that Jiang Cheng couldn't do anything to stop the simulated Wei Wuxian's laughter, but he would take what he could get.)

Even with Wei Wuxian's constant giggles, the Yunmeng heir remained undeterred. Soon, the pair was crawling across the narrow ground, barely slipping through the small space.

"Hey, how about we just go back to where we started," Wei Wuxian suggested through his laughter. "Don't worry, I won't tell anybody."

"Shut up, you!" Jiang Cheng commanded, then- "Gah!"

Madam Yu's unimpressed gaze was even worse than Wen Chao's scornful cackling as the virtual Jiang Cheng crashed into yet *another* rock. Soon, Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang were literally crying in laughter, and even Lan Wangji seemed slightly amused.

As soon as they got out, Jiang Cheng was going to burry himself in a hole and hibernate for the next 100 years. Secluded meditation was a perfectly respectable decision.

...Maybe he'd bring a few dogs too. At least then Wei Wuxian wouldn't bother him.

When they got out, a slight lump was visible on Jiang Cheng's forehead, making Wei Wuxian's laughter resume every time he noticed it. The only up-side was that Jiang Cheng's cultivation would heal it quickly, hopefully bringing an end to Wei Wuxian's amusement.

Sliding forward, Wei Wuxian whispered, "Hey, Jiang Cheng!"

"What now?!"

"Look!" Wei Wuxian said, pointing to the sky. Five phantoms floated at around the same elevation, about 30 meters above them. "Those are the evil spirit targets."

They were blankets of shadow, with a head and collarbone resembling the shape of a human's, but a swirling skirt of fabric-like darkness from the chest down. Swirls of maroon energy swept around the greyish forms, dancing across the beings' glowing red eyes.

Even knowing he couldn't be touched, Nie Huaisang stepped further into his Da-ge to hide from the terrifying creatures.

The spirit looked down, then its stitched-together mouth stretched open into a ravenous grin. With an inhuman sound, it catapulted towards them.

Glaring determinedly at the figures, Jiang Cheng swiftly removed an arrow, notched it, and shot down one of the creatures. A second later, he removed the other one.

But the third was centimeters away.

"A-Cheng!"

He flinched back just as the spirit moved to bite down on him, only for it to dissolve away. The arrow which had pierced it fell to the ground.

A second later, the final two were destroyed. Wei Wuxian stood on a nearby cliff — a perfect vantage point for shooting down the spirits. Rather than the cocky grin many were expecting, Wei Wuxian looked back at Jiang Cheng with an open smile of camaraderie.

"You're welcome!" he sang.

He had been too slow.

That realization struck through Jiang Cheng, filling him with annoyance and frustration. It was hardly a new realization, but it seemed Wei Wuxian's archery had surpassed his by an even *greater* distance than before. And Jiang Fengmian looked as proud of his head disciple as ever.

And why wouldn't he be? His ward had shot down the spirits easily, while his heir had taken them the wrong way and then nearly gotten hurt right after the competition started!

So caught up in his internal musings, Jiang Cheng didn't notice the concerned Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang, the impressed Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan, or the fact that, above all else, Jiang Fengmian was happy that Wei Wuxian had protected his *son*.

It was Wei Wuxian's job to keep Jiang Cheng safe; as the Jiang heir had done far better than most disciples would have done in that situation, Jiang Fengmian didn't realize his son wanted additional reassurance.

Directly above where the spirits had been shot, fireworks burst into the air. They were the emergency signals pertaining to each sect, allowing the judges to keep score.

"Wow, Sect Leader Jiang," Jin Guangshan commented, standing up. "Your disciples' archery skills are unmatched. I'm certain the winner will be from your clan yet again."

As Jiang Fengmian bowed slightly to the real Jin Guangshan, Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen made eye contact. Seeing how Wei Wuxian's skills compared against the other disciples, one thing became clear.

Madam Yu and Lan Qiren might want to claim Wei Wuxian's actions made the Jiang sect lost face (and considering the sect's emphasis on freedom, even that was inconsequential), but a

clan's reputation was truly determined by the skill of the disciples produced.

Overall, Wei Wuxian was *helping* the sect, not hurting it.

Smiling calmly, Jiang Fengmian responded, "I'm flattered. However, no one can know the result until the match ends."

Shortly after, two Lan, one Jin, and one Nie signal shot into the air. From his seat across from the sect leader's, Wen Chao's eyebrow twitched angrily.

'*If I was out there, the Wen Clan would be the only one making any hits,'* Wen Chao thought arrogantly.

He looked over, and glared at the sect leaders who were continuing their conversations with each other. Nie Mingjue and Jiang Fengmian seemed to be congratulating each other, and Jin Guangshan was cheerily speaking to Lan Qiren.

When the next firework ended up being for the Wens, Wen Chao smirked and laughed to himself. However, a moment later, five pale suns shot into the air.

Five members of the Wen Clan were out.

Wen Ruohan frowned slightly, but didn't show nearly as much anger as everyone was expecting.

"Gosh, five Wen disciples are already eliminated?" Jin Guangshan observed.

With a clang, the simulation's Wen Chao slammed his cup onto his table. Jin Guangshan hesitated at the reaction, not wanting to alienate his ally, but Nie Mingjue smirked mockingly.

Completely coincidentally, at this moment clouds began to block the sun, dimming its light.

Although he tried to resist, the real Nie Mingjue felt a similar smile working its way onto his mouth. It hadn't technically happened yet, but it was hard for him *not* to be happy with this.

Nie Huaisang, who was peaking his way out of Nie Mingjue's chest, also grinned slightly.

Jin Guangshan frowned nervously, glancing up at Wen Ruohan once before sitting down and trying to make the Wens forget he had ever offered Jiang Fengmian any praise.

Outraged, Wen Chao immediately stood up, marching to the base of the platform upon which his father sat. He bowed down and spoke.

"Father, please allow me to compete."

Lan Wangji glanced between the two self-satisfied Wen Chaos, furrowing his brow slightly. While Wen Chao wasn't *bad* at archery, Lan Wangji didn't think he had ever been good

enough to turn the tide in the competition. Then again, no one had known of Wen Qionglin's skill, so perhaps the Wen Clan simply didn't care about announcing their archers.

Lan Wangji couldn't shake the feeling that his theory was unlikely.

Back in the competition's grounds, Wei Wuxian chased after yet another spirit. He imbued an arrow with energy, allowing it to follow the moving target and pierce through. The second spirit dodged, but, as the arrow had already hit one, that didn't matter.

The second spirit moved to chase after Wei Wuxian, gaining on him until he punched it into a rock formations ten meters away. A large cloud of dust appeared at collision.

Jin Guangshan gave an appreciative whistle.

Wen Ruohan couldn't resist a slight smile of intrigue.

As Wei Wuxian approached, the armless spirit lay collapsed on the ground, unable to move after the heavy blow. Laughing to himself about the surprising weakness of the spirits, Wei Wuxian notched his arrow and slowly aimed at the being.

Then dodged as another arrow flew at it from behind him.

He turned and saw Wen Chao standing on one of the nearby rock formations.

While technically not against the rules, Nie Mingjue couldn't help feeling disgusted by Wen Chao stealing a spirit that someone else had already taken down. In such a big hunting grounds, the point was to spread out and act like they were on a night hunt.

Stealing someone else's prey was unquestionably unrighteous by comparison.

"Wei Wuxian!" Wen Chao shouted out. "Since I'm here, your people have no chance of victory."

Wei Wuxian ignored him.

While technically frowned upon, Jin Guangshan supposed Wen Chao could have done worse. Wei Wuxian was undoubtedly one of the best archers in the tournament. Normally, there would be no way for anyone to find out about what happened inside the grounds, so following him around (while unsubtle) wasn't the *worst* idea Wen Chao could have come up with.

From there, as Wei Wuxian ran, a group of six Wen disciples followed along. Nearly every time he moved to shoot a spirit, one of the Wens would hit it first.

Despite that, Wei Wuxian limited his resistance to angry glances back, refusing to get into a fight. It was a stark contrast to his behavior at the Cloud Recesses.

Now that Lan Qiren had an opportunity to directly compare Wei Wuxian's behavior here with how he acted at the Cloud Recesses (or even with how he acted around Jiang Fengmian

versus Madam Yu), one thing became clear: Wei Wuxian was well aware of his standing.

When he acted out and was punished with lines, he continued to do so because he thought that was an acceptable price for the fun. The second time he snuck out to get alcohol, he only started rejecting the punishment when he realized Lan Wangji intended to get punished as well. When he hit Jin Zixuan, he was content (even *happy* as he terrorized the ants), because he had decided getting kicked out was worth Maiden Jiang's honor.

Lan Qiren had thought he was simply uncontrollable, but it seemed like Wei Wuxian thought things through much more deeply than any of them had realized.

Now, Wei Wuxian tried to get an advantage by sticking to high ground. When compared against Wen Chao — who had helpers regularly handing him arrows and another group on the lookout for spirits — it wasn't much of an advantage, but it was better than nothing.

As usual, his helpers ensured that Wen Chao got to take a shot first.

However, those assistants couldn't increase his talent. He missed his shot, and Wei Wuxian got the spirit.

"Huh? What the-"

Wen Chao's question remained unfinished as a purple signal for Yunmeng shined, proving his victory. Simultaneously, a gray signal flashed into the air, signifying his own loss.

His son began to tremble, but Wen Ruohan paid that no mind. Instead, he stared very intently at Wei Wuxian as the boy landed gracefully.

Even with six people helping him look, one person providing arrows, and a status that kept Wei Wuxian from complaining about the advantages, Wen Chao had lost. Wen Ruohan had given his son every lead imaginable, and yet Wei Wuxian's natural talent allowed him to succeed nonetheless.

It seemed it was now undoubtable which boy was worth more. And, judging by the trembling, Wen Chao knew it.

Turning to Wen Chao, Wei Wuxian nodded playfully.

"Thanks," he teased.

"Wei Wuxian! You…."

Seething with anger, Wen Chao didn't notice the concerned look the arrow-holder gave him. Instead, he instantly grabbed an additional three arrows and took aim.

"Hey! You were-"

"Nothing can be done now," Wen Ruohan countered, silencing Nie Mingjue's righteous fury.

“Is there something wrong with your eyes?” Wei Wuxian asked mockingly. “Or is there some other reason you haven’t noticed the big ‘Out’ sign?”

“What did you say?”

“Cheeky brat!” Wen Chao hissed, still trembling with fear. Everyone outside of the Wens and Madam Yu gave Wei Wuxian a mental cheer, thanking him for speaking out against Wen Chao the second he got a rule-based reason to. Even the Wens couldn’t argue against their own rules.

“Black signals will appear for wrong or missed shots, indicating that the participant must leave,” Jiang Cheng recited as he regrouped with Wei Wuxian. “Are you going to break your own rules?”

“Hm. Rules? I am the rules!”

All three Lans frowned at the declaration.

“He’s completely unreasonable,” Jiang Cheng muttered. “Why bother setting the rules in the first place then?”

Normally, Wen Chao would have raised an eyebrow at the statement, daring anyone to deny the truth of the words. Now, however, he only glanced nervously towards his father, who, at the very least, didn’t care enough at the moment to watch him. While Wen Ruohan was undoubtedly furious with his son’s failure, his mind seemed consumed with thoughts on Wei Wuxian.

An accompanying disciple from a minor clan — the Ouyang heir — scoffed, muttering “He thinks he’s above the rules just because he happens to be a Wen.”

“What did you say?” Wen Chao demanded.

Within a second, the Wen heir had turned around and aimed the three arrows at the last person. Due to the Ouyang heir walking away, the Yunmeng Jiang boys were too far away to catch the projectiles.

“Ouyang! Watch out!” Jiang Cheng shouted.

The boy turned around, eyes wide, and the three arrows were reflected in his eyes. In the next second, a multitude of things occurred.

First, Lan Wangji, likely drawn over by the noise, appeared overhead as he jumped from one of the rocks. His red competition robes floated elegantly in the air, ribbons and hair fluttering around him. An instant later, he aimed and shot an arrow. It split through one of Wen Chao’s, shattering it and causing the others to fall off track once the pieces collided. Imbued with spiritual power, his arrow continued its path and made contact with one of the spirits, simultaneously earning the Lan sect a point.

““*Wow*,”” Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan gaped simultaneously, looking at Lan Wangji in awe. Jin Zixuan nodded in respect, but Jiang felt his fists clench slightly.

It was obvious from the simulation that Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian were deeply personally connected. As time went on, their similar values and growing closeness — they were *still* using each other's first names — became more and more obvious. However, all relationships had to start from something.

The reason Wei Wuxian had originally been so interested in Lan Wangji was because ~~Jiang Cheng~~ the other Jiang disciples couldn't challenge him. As the gap between Wei Wuxian and himself grew larger, would Wei Wuxian become closer and closer to Lan Wangji?

Right as Jiang Cheng scowl began to grow, Jiang Yanli reached a hand out. When he looked over, she play-acted giving him a hug, the best she could do in the no-touch simulation.

Jiang Cheng relaxed.

Now, Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng, and Lan Wangji were all standing against Wen Chao, a combination few people could hope to beat.

"You, you people…" with a huff, Wen Chao threw his bow into the air for his servants to catch and stalked off, glaring at them as he departed.

Madam Yu glared after him, furious at the brat who had dared believe himself to be above her son.

"Lan Zhan, nice shot!" Wei Wuxian shouted, and, once again, was ignored. When the watchers turned to the departing Lan heir however, they noticed something off.

Frantically, Lan Wangji brought his hand up to his own forehead ribbon, ensuring it was still in place.

On the other hand, the virtual Lan Wangji didn't notice. The only one who did was Wei Wuxian.

"Hey, Wangji-xiong!" he shouted. "Your headband isn't straight!"

"...Liar," Lan Wangji decided, barely glancing back.

"It's true this time," Wei Wuxian refuted, running closer. "Here, let me help you."

Then, in an act neither of the Lan brothers could have predicted, Wei Wuxian reached a hand of to the end of the pure white ribbon and pulled down. Due to the structure of the knot, that slight tug was all that was necessary for the entire thing to come fluttering down.

As if in slow motion, the watchers saw Lan Wangji's eyes widen in horror as he noticed the pressure on his forehead loosen. He trembled slightly as the white silk slipped down his face and fell towards Wei Wuxian. Furious, *bloodshot* eyes glared at Wei Wuxian, and the boy flinched back.

The real Lan Wangji looked away from the simulation, turning to stare at his brother. Although most saw his gaze as a dark, terrifying level level of anger they had never

witnessed before, Lan Xichen was able to see the lost, conflicted *fear* in his brother's widened eyes.

"Xiongzhang, he-"

"Wangji, I know, I-"

'*I just ripped off a headband, right?*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*It's not like it was part of his body or anything.*'

At the additional reminder that Wei Wuxian didn't even *know* what it meant, Lan Wangji growled. Nie Huaisang, Jin Zixuan, and Jiang Cheng backed up warily, intimidated despite being as clueless as Wei Wuxian about why Lan Wangji was angry.

A dark cloud appeared as Lan Wangji glared at Wei Wuxian. He hesitated slightly in confusion at the jade's fury, but his face soon deflated into genuine regret.

"I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to do that."

At those words, Lan Xichen finally saw the source of the confliction. To Lan Wangji, even worse than the shamelessness and implications of the action, was the fact that Wei Wuxian didn't *mean* it. He had *accidentally* broken the rules in a way that left Lan Wangji completely and totally vulnerable.

At first, Xichen had thought his brother wanted a friend. After seeing them interact so much (and witnessing the actions of the future Hanguang-jun) he had realized there was a little more to it.

Now, was the first time he was truly getting to witness the depths of Lan Wangji's emotions.

"H-here. You can tie it back yourself," he offered, bravely holding it out despite the pitch-black glower he was being given. The Second jade looked like he would gladly bite Wei Wuxian's hand of if it got too close.

Staring terrifyingly down at the offered ribbon, Lan Wangji's fist clenched tighter and tighter around his bow until it *shattered* into a million pieces of wood.

The shards fell to his feet.

Huaisang may or may not have eeped.

Wei Wuxian flinched at the action, and Lan Wangji swiftly snatched the ribbon from Wei Wuxian's open palm. Without waiting for a response, he turned and left the area.

'*What's… what's wrong with Lan Zhan?*' Wei Wuxian wondered.

Although no one could see it on his face, Lan Wangji's heartbeat was speeding ahead at several hundred times the rate it would normally go at. He was now *certain* that the demons who made the simulation were did so in an effort to give him a heart attack.

“What?” Wei Wuxian asked, back on the conference grounds once the competition ended. “Lan Zhan left before the match finished?!”

Some people had expected Lan Qiren to be annoyed at his nephew’s emotional reaction, but instead the man nodded several times in agreement.

“That evil demonic cultivator,” he hissed.

“When did that happen?!”

“After you tore off his headband,” Jiang Cheng explained, making Wei Wuxian glance behind himself.

“It’s just a headband, what’s the big deal?”

“You know how much they value their forehead ribbons. You were just asking for trouble.”

Behind them, Lan Wangji stood, gaze down, as Lan Xichen comforted him.

Jiang Fengmian sighed slightly. It wasn’t a well known fact, but all the sect leaders knew the specifics of why the forehead ribbon was considered so sacred. He wasn’t sure if Lan Wangji thought Wei Ying pulling the ribbon was better or worse than a stranger, but it had undoubtedly shaken the Lan.

“Lan Wangji will hate you forever,” Jiang Cheng declared right as the boy sent Wei Wuxian yet another furious glare.

Suddenly, future-Wei Wuxian’s certainty that Lan Wangji hated him was making a lot of sense to Xichen. It seemed likely these miscommunications weren’t a one-time thing.

Several of the younger heirs glanced over, but, luckily, the adults didn’t seem interested in explaining. It looked like everyone was willing to spare Lan Wangji the embarrassment of having the others know why he was so mad.

Soon, the watchers saw a grumpy Wen Chao sitting across from the sect leaders. A scroll was unrolled, and the announcer began to project his voice.

“The champion of the archery competition this year goes to…”

The audience tensed.

“Yunmeng Jiang’s Wei Wuxian!”

Just like his virtual self, Jiang Cheng had lit up at the first two words, and then blinked in surprise at the second two.

And, just like Yunmeng Jiang’s third-shixiong and fourth-shixiong, Nie Huaisang and Jiang Yanli began cheering at the declaration (though their joy was considerably muted compared to the screaming and suffocating hugs of the exuberant Jiang shidis).

“Da-shixiong is the best!”

“We won! Da-shixiong is the best!”

On the side, Wen Ning smiled at the trio.

“Congratulations,” Lan Xichen said genuinely.

“Very impressive,” Nie Mingjue agreed, nodding once to Jiang Fengmian.

“The runner-up is Lan Xichen from the Lan Clan.”

Lan Wangji’s mouth didn’t lift into a smile, but Xichen could tell how it softened in happiness.

“Well, Xichen-ge,” Nie Huaisang whispered. “If you’re going to lose to anyone, the to-be Yiling Patriarch is pretty impressive.”

Xichen chuckled slightly and nodded in agreement.

“Third place goes to Jin Zixuan from the Jin Clan.”

“Good job,” Yanli whispered, turning him bright red.

“Fourth place goes to Lan Wangji from the Lan Clan.”

“Eh?” Nie Huaisang asked. “But you left early!”

Lan Wangji glanced back once, then looked away. While not uncommon behavior from the second jade, Huaisang was a little sad he hadn’t gotten a nod back. He had thought they were getting closer.

The thing with the ribbon had really shaken him.

“Wow,” someone whispered. “Two out of four are from the Lan Clan. Impressive.”

“Ah,” Yunmeng’s fourth shixiong said. “Lan Wangji left halfway through but still managed to rank fourth!”

“Look at the Wen Clan,” third shixiong added. “They didn’t even finish in the top four. That’s so embarrassing.”

Nie Mingjue smirked slightly and glanced to the side. Everyone knew the Nie sect specialized in sabers and close combat training, so it was no surprise that they hadn’t been in the top four. However, the Wen Clan was meant to be far more balanced, so their defeat was surprising.

However, Wen Ruohan’s eyes simply remained on Wen Qing, who was standing impossibly stiff as she lifted her head in a show of arrogance. Instantly, the gathered crowd was reminded of the to-be ghost general.

If Wei Wuxian was right in his prediction — and he probably was — then Wen Ning would have been in the top four. Wei Wuxian was highly skilled, and very aware of the capabilities of others. If the competition was repeated several times for accuracy, the results would have most likely been Wei Wuxian first, Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji second or third, Wen Ning fourth, and Jin Zixuan fifth. When the actual archery competition happened, there was no doubt that Wen Ning would be one of the participants.

Wen Qing's upturned nose seemed to be to remind the other sect leaders of this fact.

(Though, if Nie Huaisang's guess was right, a lot of the confidence Wen Qing was currently showing was to cover up her fear.)

Hearing the musings of his shidi, Jiang Cheng coughed slightly to remind them of where they were.

"Shut it," he warned.

An ominous wind seemed to pick up, as the virtual Wen Ruohan, unlike his real counterpart, began to seath in anger.

"Very nice," he chuckled. "The four clans have some great talents indeed. Since the match has ended, I'll take my leave now. My guests, take your time."

"Goodbye, Your Excellency," the Wen disciples recited.

Nie Mingjue couldn't resist rolling his eyes at the theatrics.

Wen Chao walked before them, commanding, "All rise!"

Jin Guangshan stared nervously after the departing chief cultivator, fanning himself lightly.

"You can tell he's unhappy," Sect Leader Jin observed. "Those youngsters made a hit here. Trouble's coming our way."

"It was a competition, wasn't it?" Jiang Fengmian asked. "The futures of our clans lie in the hands of those youngsters. Besides, the future is unpredictable."

And who could have predicted the invention of demonic cultivation? The clan members frowned, vowing to keep their minds open for the rest of the simulation.

The sunset faded behind the mountains.

"I suppose that at least confirms one thing," Lan Xichen turned to Jiang Fengmian. "I believe the civilians in the first segment described him as a '*prominent figure from an established clan.'* He has brought great honor to the Jiang sect."

"Brought honor?" Wen Chao repeated. "You saw what happened, didn't you? All this has done is prove that the simulation is fake. There's no way I would lose to a-"

“Silence,” Wen Ruohan growled. “There is only evidence in favor of it being true.”

“Of course,” Lan Qiren coughed his throat and glanced at Jiang Fengmian. “As Xichen said, your disciple is, despite his manners, highly skilled.”

Jiang Cheng’s smile turned bitter for a moment, before he shook away his negative thoughts and smiled genuinely, pleased at his brother’s success.

Similarly, Jiang Fengmian smiled gratefully.

Madam Yu only huffed in annoyance.

At the end, the other three winners had been from the main branches of the great clans; Wei Wuxian wasn’t even a clan member! Someone like *him* coming in first just brought *more* attention to the improperly of the situation. Because of him, Jiang Cheng had-

In her flurry of furious thoughts, she didn’t notice the judgemental looks the others were giving her. In the previous segment, she had complained about that “good-for-nothing” Wei Ying. And yet, a cultivation sect’s reputation among the public was far more dependent on the skill and approachability. In terms of the latter, Wei Wuxian’s personality and gargantuan number of friends more than proved his worth.

In terms of the former, Wei Wuxian was *Lan Wangji’s* equal in swordsmanship, and had just proven himself to be the best archer in the sects.

While Lan Xichen smiled sadly, understanding how the complications of Madam Yu’s marriage influenced her opinion of Wei Wuxian, Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan raised disbelieving eyebrows. Although they didn’t say it outloud, it was clear what they felt.

If Madam Yu was foolish enough to alienate and unjustly berate the person who did the most to improve her sect’s reputation, then the Jiangs couldn’t complain if someone else snatched him up.

“What made you so mad about the ribbon, Wangji-xiong?” Nie Huaisang asked, sneaking closer. He got a glare in response, but his question also made Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng inch closer as well.

Tilting his head, Jiang Cheng added, “Is it somehow different than my Jiang bell?”

Wangji sighed.

“The forehead ribbon is sacred and… intimate. It was inappropriate for him to touch it.”

The insulting suggestion that his ribbon was at all similar to the Jiang bell prompted him to answer, but, now that he had, he silenced further questions with a frigid glare. In the awkward silence that progressed afterwards, Jiang Yanli tried to catch Wen Qing’s attention.

“Your brother is quite sweet, Wen-guniang. I heard you raised him without much help, is that true?”

“Ah, yes,” she responded, lowing her voice in an effort to not bother Wen Ruohan. “I suppose your… your brother was quite kind. I appreciate the help Wei Wuxian tried to give A-Ning. And watching your brothers try to navigate the arena was… entertaining.”

Jiang Cheng flushed.

Hearing Wen Qing’s comment, Wen Chao laughed, “Don’t be ridiculous. Wei Wuxian is so stupid. If he had succeeded in getting Wen Ning to join the tournament, he probably would have lost! I suppose he’s lucky Wen Ning was just incopentent enough to not get the chance to earn our true victory.”

There was a stunned silence for a moment as everyone wondered if Wen Chao had somehow forgotten that *he* was the one who had forbidden Wen Ning from competing.

“A-ah, of course, gongzi,” Yanli bowed, realizing no one knew how to respond to that. Jin Zixuan felt his admiration for her skyrocket all over again.

“Um, I’m just checking, but…” Nie Huaisang paused and peaked at Wen Qing from behind Nie Mingjue. “You’re *sure* the ghost general was your brother?”

Her mood soured instantly.

“I am. I know what he looks like. As for his personality changes, I hope you remember what he was turned into,” she hissed, the implied ‘idiot’ ringing loud and clear.

“Right, right. Just asking.”

Although no one argued with her, the disbelief in their expressions was clear. If there was one word that the teenage Wen Ning embodied, it was ‘adorable.’ No one could deny how innocently cute the boy they saw had been, so there was no doubt as to what words should be used to describe him. At worst, Jin Guangshan’s mental ‘pathetic’ could be considered.

So where did ‘violent,’ ‘dangerous,’ and ‘Ghost General’ come in?

A spurt of silence encompassed the room once again as people struggled to find something else to discuss, not wanting to risk attracting the wrath of the cultivation world’s greatest doctor.

Then-

“I’m baaaaack~”

“Finally!” Jiang Cheng commented, feeling suffocated under the room’s political tension. “Took you long enough!”

“Sorry, sorry. Next time, I’ll be sure to be at your side the *second* you want me, your Grand-iest Honored Lordship. My deepest apologies.”

“Shut up!” Jiang Cheng ordered as Nie Huaisang and Jin Zixuan burst into laughter.

“Is that really them?” a different voice asked.

“Huh?”

“Wei Wuxian!” Madam Yu barked. “Who is that? You’ve allowed *strangers* into our rooms?”

“I, um,” the new voice stuttered.

“Wen Xu send him,” Wei Wuxian explained. “Don’t worry, I’ve kept him away from your bodies. But his sister’s also stuck there, and he helped me figure out how to contact you from farther away!”

“Sister?” Wen Qing repeated, suddenly realizing why the voice sounded familiar.

“Mmhm. This is Wen Ning, courtesy name Qionglin. Say ‘hi,’ A-Cheng!”

While Jiang Cheng sputtered at the patronizing nickname, Jiang Yanli smiled and said, “It’s nice to officially meet you, Wen Qionglin. I hope my brother has been treating you well?”

“Shijie! Did Jiang Cheng tell you something about me? Don’t believe him!”

“A-ah, yes, he-he has. Very nice. I was… I was sent over with some of the other healers from our branch of the Wen family, and since Wen-gongzi made me the leader we had to talk but a guard we brought with us wasn’t listening to me so then Young Master Wei helped and, I mean-I, thank you!”

“I already told you, you don’t need to thank me for that.”

“Right, sorry.”

“I-”

“A-Ning,” Wen Qing interrupted. “Are you okay?”

“A-jie?” he asked. “Y-yes. I’m fine. Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian raised his voice. “What is the situation outside?”

“Well, it took some time, but it seems like everyone’s accepted Wen Xu’s explanation of how you don’t want to come out. Or, at least, they’re not openly opposing it. The Jin Clan is doing much better now that someone is in charge, relatively speaking, and the other clans started contacting me to get more cooperation while you’re gone. Hey, guess what Shijie?”

“Yes, A-Xian?”

“A few hours ago, I got a message from Gusu! They want to start a collaboration with me to make sure you guys stay okay! Can you believe it?”

Smiling warmly, Jiang Yanli answered “Of course I can. Our A-Xian is a genius.”

"Or they finally got bored of their endless rules," Wei Wuxian suggested. The boy's resounding laughter followed, but it was clear Wei Wuxian was embarrassed by the compliment. He made a sound as if to continue talking with his sister, only to be stopped by Wen Ning.

“Um, Young Master Wei, wasn’t there something you were going to ask them?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. Uh, I contacted Mo Xuanyu again, and he had a few things to say. First, are you sure you want to stay there? The things you’re being shown are all fake, right?”

“What makes you say that?” Nie Mingjue asked.

“Well… that’s what Mo Xuanyu said, I guess.”

“Wei Wuxian,” Lan Qiren commanded. “Describe Mo Xuanyu’s personality.”

“Huh? Um… I guess he seems like he has a sense of humor? And he was pretty confident, and he obviously knew what he was talking about so I’m pretty sure he was telling the truth when he said he invented the talisman that caused all this? But he said not to worry about what you’re being shown, since none of it’s true.”

That claim only served to confirm for the viewers that everything they had seen *was* true. Mo Xuanyu looked like the Mo Xuanyu they had seen and was desperate to deny it; a simple “it was all fake” wasn’t an adequate explanation for that.

“Any other questions? Do you want me to keep contacting you or-”

“Yes, actually,” Lan Xichen confirmed. “Some of this is a bit… uncomfortable. We don’t have any way to block ourselves off from it; did Mo Xuanyu mention anything?”

By “uncomfortable” he meant “an enormous breach of privacy,” but that wasn’t an important distinction.

“I mean… I guess. He had a few addition instructions for something imbuing a soul that could judge situations for emergencies but… why not just leave if that-”

“We don’t need to explain to you!” Madam Yu growled, silencing further objections from Wei Wuxian. Privately, she was pleased; if nothing else, this was an opportunity to prove to all the other sect leaders that the Jiang Sect still (begrudgingly) had control over Wei Wuxian.

“O… kay. I guess I can work on that. Might take a while though.”

“I-I can try to help,” Wen Ning whispered.

Although he had remained silent — hoping to make Wei Wuxian forget about his presence — Wen Ruohan couldn’t resist smirking slightly at the discussion. If Wen Xu had sent Wen

Qionglin over, there was no doubt that he was working hard to foster an emotional bond between Wei Wuxian and the Wen sect.

It seemed he had nothing to worry about.

Jiang Fengmian made eye contact with Lan Qiren before suggestion, “Check in every once in a while. I would like updates every two to three segments.”

“Okay! I’m running out of power now, so I’ll have to cut this a bit short. Bye, Uncle Jiang, Madam Yu, Shijie, Jiang Cheng, and everyone else.”

“Goodbye, A-Jie, stay well.” Wen Ning whispered. “I wish you good health, Your Excellency.”

“Ah, thank you for your time, Your Excellency,” Wei Wuxian added, seemingly having forgotten that people outside of his family where there.

“Goodbye, A-Xian.”

“Bye, idiot,” Jiang Cheng mumbled.

In another timeline twenty years in the future, the Yiling Patriarch waited restlessly for his friend to arrive. Once Wen Ning had returned with Sizhui, he had taken to using his body to his advantage and night hunting nearly 24/7. He only relaxed for any significant amount of time when Wei Wuxian or Sizhui pestered him into visiting them. Therefore, it was Wei Wuxian’s duty to tempt Wen Ning to stay for as long as possible.

“Wen Ning!” he called out, bounding over. “How was the hunt?”

“Hello, Young Master Wei,” Wen Ning bowed slightly. “It went well. You said you had something you wanted my help with, right?”

“I mean, part of it is that you wouldn’t have visited otherwise-” he teased, Wen Ning flinched slightly and Wei Wuxian began to pat him on the head. “But if you’re feeling up to it, we can start now.”

“But… do-do the people in the Cloud Recesses know I’m coming?” he asked tentatively.

“I told Lan Zhan, and he told his uncle. It’s a bit of an important matter, so they were willing to give permission,” he explained, beginning the walk towards the Cloud Recesses. “Though I’m half convinced the only reason they were so willing was because Jiang Cheng kicked up a fuss about it when he visited.”

“Ah, I-I heard about that.”

“Really? Wow, my fame never ceases to amaze me. Even in a place like the Cloud Recesses, no one can resist spreading gossip about how Sect Leader Jiang nobly prevented the Yiling Patriarch’s latest scheme.”

“W-well, everyone kept talking about how angry he was when he got back from the Cloud Recesses. He kept screaming your name and people were a little concerned he’d start hunting down demonic cultivators again.”

“He hasn’t though?”

“He hasn’t,” Wen Ning agreed, allowing Wei Wuxian to sigh in relief. If there was one upside to Jiang Cheng’s knowledge of his core, it was that he had stopped looking for demonic cultivators entirely. It was beyond just losing his excuse to; Jiang Cheng no longer *wanted* to hunt them down.

“That’s… that’s good.”

“Did you two… fight again?”

Wei Wuxian ran a hand through his hair, sighing slightly, “No. Not really. There was just a bit of a problem with one of my inventions and it set him off. That’s actually the thing I’ll need your help with.”

Seeing his friend’s momentarily bitter scowl, Wen Ning forgot himself for a moment and asked, “Do you miss him?”

“Who? Jiang Cheng?”

A nod.

“...I do. Of course I do. But things can’t — *shouldn’t* — go back to the way they used to be. Too much has happened for us to be kids again.”

With his own guilt on top of everything else, trying to repair their relationship even to just *tolerance* was guaranteed to end in disaster. He knew that.

~~That didn’t stop him from wanting.~~

“We probably shouldn’t talk to each other.”

“But you want to be able to move on.”

“...Yeah. I… we *both* need to be able to move on. At the very least, it would be nice to be able to be in the same room without a fight breaking out.”

Not feeling comfortable talking to Jiang Cheng didn’t stop him from wishing they could look each other in the eyes. Even with Jin Ling’s help, that seemed like an impossible dream.

“Thank you.”

“Young Master Wei?”

“For letting me talk about this,” he shook his head. “Anyways, I’m sure we’ll figure something out. On another note, I wanted to tell you that Lan Zhan and I picked a date for

our official wedding. Do you think you can spare some time in three months?"

"Didn't you already get married?"

"Yeah, but the elders want an 'official' one. On the plus side though, they said I could be in charge of the decorations! I can't wait to see the looks on their faces!"

Suddenly apprehensive, Wen Ning asked "D-did Hanguang-jun approve of your plans?"

"Kinda."

If he hadn't been a fierce corpse, Wen Ning's eye would be as wide as dinner plates. He took a nervous step back, glancing towards the Cloud Recesses as if it was an unspeakably dangerous beast.

(Which, considering he was quite possibly the strongest fierce corpse in existence, was not a good sign.)

"Don't worry. It'll be fine, I promise!" Wei Wuxian vowed. "Lan Zhan and I will make sure nothing happens to you. Besides, don't you want to see A-Yuan?"

A-Yuan, as always, was the straw that broke the camel's back, making Wen Ning relax and resume his trek towards the Cloud Recesses.

"S-so," he began. "What is it you need my help with?"

Wei Wuxian smirked, "Well, I may or may not have tried something a little dangerous, and I need a brave, strong fierce corpse such as yourself to deal with the issue. So, what do you know about time travel?"

"...I'm sorry, what?"

Chapter End Notes

> You know, everyone always says Wei Wuxian is super oblivious. They're definitely right in terms of Wei Wuxian's awareness of his own feelings, but literally only Xichen could have guessed Lan Wangji didn't hate Wei Wuxian at the beginning. And after-resurrection LWJ thought Wei Wuxian remembered his confession, so that just made it more confusing!

The Heirs Have A No-Good Very Bad Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the mountains of Gusu, a cool fog swept over the ground.

“Huh. It’s so quiet here,” Wei Wuxian observed. Behind him, Wen Ning followed like a frightened duckling, constantly looking to the left and right and only staying on the path because of the grip he kept on Wei Wuxian’s sleeve. The Lan disciple leading the pair glanced back, but made no move to answer.

When the Wen guard behind them glared at the trembling Wen Ning, Wei Wuxian glared right back and forced him to back off. If Wei Wuxian needed Wen Ning’s help because the other boy had a talent for helping regulate energy, then *no one* had any right to object to his presence.

“We’re here,” the Lan disciple announced.

Although she was speaking to them, she didn’t bother looking them in the eyes. Instead, she kept her gaze stubbornly facing forward, even as she stepped to the side and allowed them to pass. Apparently the rumors were right: losing the main clan had quadrupled the sect’s stress.

Wei Wuxian wondered if they’d appreciate an invitation to a pheasant hunt. That usually helped him calm down.

“You’ll find the healers and Lan Qiren-xiansheng at the end of this hallway,” she explained.

“Thanks~” Wei Wuxian sang back, leading Wen Ning and the latter’s “guard” (Yi Wanqiu, a somewhat-talented Wen sect outer disciple) inside. From what he understood, Lan Qiren and the Twin Jades were all being kept in separate rooms, allowing the healers assigned to them to devote their full attention to just one. It seemed a little excessive to Wei Wuxian, but, if nothing else, he understood their paranoia.

~~He had woken up Wen Xu, but the Jiangs weren’t waking up why weren’t they waking up why were they leaving him alone he needed help please shijie!~~

As the door swung open, every healer in the room instantly turned suspicious glares on Wei Wuxian. Wen Ning squeaked in response, while Wei Wuxian gave an overly cheery wave.

“Hi there. I’m Wei Wuxian, and this is Wen Ning,” he introduced with a slight salute. “I was told there was something for me to check out here.”

“Yes,” a woman from the Lan Clan stepped forward, her elaborate robes proving she was the Lan sect’s head healer. “We have tried using cleansing to limit the effects of the resentful energy, but found it entirely unsuccessful. You released a statement claiming that this process

was man-made, but that shouldn't indicate that our efforts are useless. If something goes wrong with your cure, we need to be able to get them out."

As she began to bring up the effects of musical cultivation, Wei Wuxian had a sudden epiphany. For some time now, he had been brainstorming ways to create the solution to Lan Xichen's (vague) concerns about being uncomfortable, but found dead ends at every turn. The most important piece of this would be creating something that could recognize the intentions of the watchers, but talismans and arrays couldn't do that.

Musical cultivation, however, could. If he wanted to manipulate the resentful energy of the simulation, wouldn't using music be the most effective route?

Realizing she had finished her explanation, Wei Wuxian smiled and gestured to Wen Ning.

"My friend over here is actually the younger brother of Wen Qing," he explained, cueing a nervous eep. "We've worked out a few theories for why that might be the case. Would you like to discuss them?"

"If you don't mind."

"Well, first of all, we think when you use musical cultivation on their bodies you're trying to change the effect, not the source. Instead, you should try to…"

When the void around them darkened, Wen Chao sucked in a breath. Based on what had just been shown, he had a feeling he knew what was coming.

The moon glowed brightly above the Nightless City, giving the sky a dull, grey sheen contrasting against the yellow fires shining below. In front of two massive wooden doors, Wen Chao knelt lowly.

Trembling, he excused, "Father, I have let our family down due to my incompetence during the archery contest. The-the four families worked together to chicane me!"

"*Trick* you?" Lan Wangji repeated sternly, making it clear exactly what he thought about that excuse. Given what they had seen, it would be far more accurate to say *Wen Chao* had tried — and failed — to cheat against Wei Wuxian.

When Wen Chao glared back, Lan Xichen moved protectively in front of his brother, silently begging Wangji to not continue the argument (even if he was right). Lying was against the rules in their family, but to attempt to discipline Wen Chao *now* would be foolish.

However, Wen Ruohan simply raised his hand, silencing his son. Xichen supposed that, since Wen Ruohan was the one being lied to, he didn't mind the reprimand.

(Many of the watchers silently thanked Lan Wangji for being willing to say something.)

"I-If they hadn't, I-"

A loud thump rumbled through the hall, silencing Wen Chao's words. Gazing up, Wen Chao's fear made his already-shadowed face resemble that of a corpse.

Once again, Huaisang glanced between father and son, cataloging his observations for later use. Jiang Cheng did the same, before glancing towards his *own* father with a look of confused gratitude.

(It didn't mean much, but at least he had never been *scared* of his father.)

Jin Zixuan, on the other hand, refused to acknowledge the amused chuckles coming out of the Jin sect leader; as much as he hated Wen Chao, this was far from an amusing scene.

Creaking slightly, the doors before Wen Chao swung open, revealing the figure of His Excellency, Sect Leader Wen Ruohan. The golden lights behind him left his facial features completely shadowed.

Wen Chao's breath turned frantic as Wen Ruohan stepped forward. The man walked past his son to gaze out over the field which had hosted the competition just a few hours before.

"Chao-er," he spoke. Wen Chao instantly spun around to prostrate himself before the imposing man.

"Yes, Father?"

Wen Ruohan smirked, "Since we've realized the four families' arrogance, it is time to teach them a lesson on the rules of immortals, and *respect* for the hierarchy."

At the accusation of "arrogant," Nie Mingjue nearly stood up in fury. Luckily for the watchers as a whole, Nie Huaisang's sudden gaze halted him in his tracks.

Smiling slightly, Huaisang shook his head, then glanced at the concerned Lan Qiren and Jiang Fengmian. With the delicate truce between them, they couldn't risk making Wen Ruohan send someone to Wen Xu. The Wen Sect had entered the simulation with the greatest number of people; they were the ones who could most easily send someone to make changes in the real world.

The Nie, who only had two people, were in a far more precarious position.

They couldn't do anything yet.

"One week later," Sizhui explained.

Among the buzzing songs of the cicadas, dozens of bodies lay flat against the ground. The rolling heatwaves made it a bit hard to tell at first, but it soon became clear that the watchers were surrounded by shirtless Jiang disciples.

"Wait… what?"

Flipping themselves over like sizzling pancakes, the disciples complained.

“It’s….”

“So hot….”

Due to the laws of the simulation, the watchers couldn’t feel the heat being experienced by Wei Wuxian and the other Jiang disciples. Therefore, when combined with the abrupt tone shift, they were left more than a little befuddled.

Composing herself, Madam Yu scoffed and glared at Jiang Fengmian for his disciples’ undisciplined display. The leaders of the other Clans were witnessing their weakness! Why wasn’t he doing anything?

A sigh.

‘*If only it was as cool here as it is in the Cloud Recesses,’* Wei Wuxian thought whimsically.

‘*Then stay there with me,*’ Lan Wangji’s mind responded before he could stop himself. Instantly, his ears heated into a humiliated-red, utterly ashamed at his thoughts. How could he be so undisciplined as to be distracted by Wei Ying yet again?

He internally resolved to do everything in his power to resist the boy’s unearthly temptation.

Having heated the wood under him to his own body temperature, Wei Wuxian once again flipped over. However, at the exact same time, Jiang Cheng turned over as well, Jiang Cheng’s arm landing on Wei Wuxian’s leg.

“Jiang Cheng, move your arm. You’re like a piece of coal,” Wei Wuxian complained.

“Move your leg.”

“An arm’s lighter than a leg! It’s harder for me to move my leg, so you should move your arm instead!”

“Is this really important?” Nie Mingjue couldn’t resist asking, laughing to himself. After being shown Wen Ruohan’s continued ambitions in taking over the entirety of the cultivation world, this seemed more than a little out of place. The whiplash had left most watchers stunned.

Jiang Fengmian smiled slightly, then suggested “Well, perhaps it’s a final reminder of what we stand to lose.”

Jiang Cheng glared, “I’m warning you, Wei Wuxian! Shut up and don’t overdo it. It gets hotter the more you talk!”

“Stop arguing, alright?” Sixth-shidi requested. “I feel hot just listening to you two argue. I’m even sweating faster! Please just be quiet!”

Ignoring their begging junior, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng continued.

“Go away!”

“You too!”

“No, no, please, go right ahead.”

“No thanks, you’re welcome to leave first!”

Jin Zixuan snorted.

“Oh, shut up!” Jiang Cheng hissed angrily. The Jin heir smirked and raised his hands in surrender, covering up a sting of jealousy.

If this was what having a brother was like, then he wanted one too.

Jiang Cheng continued, “You go right ahead-”

“Fight outside if you have too!” a now fed-up shidi shouted.

“Please leave together, won’t you?”

“We’re begging you!”

Wei Wuxian glanced over, then teased, “You hear them? They’re asking you to leave. Let… let go of my leg! It’s going to break, Jiang Cheng!”

“You — they’re clearly telling you to leave! Why don’t you let go of my arm first!”

Suddenly, swishes of a long dress could be heard approaching, and the pair immediately snapped apart. Then, Yanli lifted the bamboo curtain and peaked inside.

“Oh, so this is where everyone is hiding.”

Wen Qing lifted an eyebrow slightly, impressed by the unquestioned respect Jiang Yanli’s two rambunctious brothers had for her.

(If that thought made her miss her brother a little more, no one had to know that but herself.)

Everyone greeted her warmly.

“Shijie!”

“Hello, Shijie!”

Some of the shier ones snuck away to the corners, covering their bare chests with their arms. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, happily glanced over at his martial sister without an ounce of shame.

Despite his best efforts, Lan Wangji was unable to stop his eyes from following a bead of sweat trail down from Wei Wuxian’s neck, to his collarbones, to his chest, to his abs. It was

only when the drop started getting lower that he managed to snap himself out of his shameful observations.

Meanwhile, Jin Zixuan was trying to decide whether to be grateful that A-Li wasn't paying attention to Wei Wuxian's body, or disgusted that his father *was*.

(Jin Guangshan recalculated his earlier calibrations, realizing that Wei Wuxian was, politically, worth even more than he had thought. An arranged marriage with him would be highly sought after.)

"No sword practice?" Jiang Yanli asked. "Slacking off, aren't you?"

"It's scorching hot today!" Wei Wuxian protested. "The training grounds are on fire! We'll shed a whole layer of skin if we go out and practice. Don't tell anyone Shijie!"

Madam Yu was unimpressed with their excuse.

Instead of answering, Jiang Yanli glanced between her brothers and asked, "Were you two fighting again?"

"Nope!"

"Then who made this footprint on A-Cheng's chest?"

Wei Wuxian spun around to check, seeing that there was indeed a footprint left on Jiang Cheng.

Once again, Jin Zixuan's lips crept up into a smile, and he glanced at his fiance with unparalleled warmth.

'*She's so cool,*' he couldn't resist thinking.

As if able to read his thoughts, Madam Jin smiled warmly at her son and made pleased eye contact with Madam Yu. Creating the engagement had truly been the right decision (even if it had apparently taken the dissolution of that engagement for their kids to realize that).

In some ways, they owed this to Wei Wuxian, didn't they? Silently, Madam Jin made a mental note to try and pay back the favor in the future; if nothing else, she could support Wei Wuxian's own relationship. A perfect reward for allowing Jiang Yanli and her son to make the perfect couple.

(Then, she remembered who killed that couple, and her good mood vanished instantly.)

Laughing slightly, Yanli held out a plate, saying "If no one's interested in fighting anymore, why don't you have some of these?"

Perking up, the whole slew of boys immediately buzzed over to take bites out of the juicy watermelon pieces.

Nie Huaisang felt his mouth salivate at the scene.

Immediately, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian began to compete in their watermelon-eating, scaring the other disciples away from them. With force and guile, they fought so hard that the others cleared out a whole area for their competition.

Jiang Cheng blushed, refusing to make eye contact with his disgusted mother.

At first, Wei Wuxian was quite engaged in the competition. However, a minute later, he suddenly began to laugh.

Alarmed, Jiang Cheng demanded, "What have you done?"

Lan Qiren tensed apprehensively.

Wei Wuxian grabbed another piece and explained, "Nothing! Don't misunderstand, I'm not doing anything. I just happened to think of someone."

"Who?"

"Lan Zhan!"

Simultaneously, Lan Xichen and Jiang Yanli let out surprised but delighted laughs. That was shortly followed by Lan Qiren's body being wracked by scandalized coughs, and Lan Wangji's ears turning redder than an apple.

Nie Mingjue smirked and leaned next to Lan Xichen, whispering "It seems like the crush is mutual."

"It appears so," Lan Xichen agreed with an amused smile.

"Why would you think of him for no reason?" Jiang Cheng demanded. "Reminiscing about copying rules?"

'*Not even close,*' the real Jiang Cheng realized with a horrified expression. He turned to his sister for emotional support, but found her still giggling, and therefore no help at all!

Wei Wuxian spat out a seed, "It's fun to think of him. You have no idea — he's just way too amusing. I told him 'Your sect's food is disgusting. I'd rather eat stir-fried watermelon peel than eat your food. If you have time, come have fun with me at Lotus Pier and we'll-"

"You invited him to Lotus Pier?" Jiang Cheng repeated. "Are you mad, or trying to torture yourself?"

It took all of Lan Wangji's self control not to glare at the Jiang heir.

"Why are you so upset?" Wei Wuxian asked. "My watermelon almost flew away! And besides, I was just being polite. Of course he won't come. Have you ever heard of him going anywhere to have fun?"

"Let me make this clear. I don't want him to come. Don't invite him."

Lan Wangji seemed to buzz in place for a moment, unable to decide whether to be angry at Jiang Wangyin, Wei Wuxian, himself, or his simulation self. On one hand, he knew full-well that it would be completely improper for him to visit Wei Wuxian just because he wanted to have fun, and Jiang Wangyin's words were understandable.

On the other-

Jiang Yanli frowned slightly, recognizing the slight jealousy in both real and fake Jiang Chengs' expressions. Having grown up with the knowledge that she would one day leave for Lanling, Jiang Cheng wanted more than anything to keep Wei Wuxian by his side.

She hoped that wouldn't cause problems later.

Wei Wuxian tilted his head in confusion, "I didn't think you hated him so much."

"I've got nothing against Lan Wangji, but if he came, my mom might have something to say, comparing me against him. And you wouldn't have it easy either."

Madam Yu glared, silently asking her son how he expected to improve if he never compared himself against others.

"Don't worry," Wei Wuxian assured. "There's nothing to be scared of even if he does come. You could just tell Uncle Jiang to let him sleep with me."

Lan Qiren collapsed.

"I'll drive him mad in less than a month," Wei Wuxian declared.

Filled by a million conflicting emotions he couldn't even *begin* to name, Lan Wangji's mind promptly short-circuited. No one could tell by looking at him, but all his thoughts had come to a complete halt.

One phrase played on repeat.

'*Tell Uncle Jiang to let him sleep with me. To let him sleep with me. Let him sleep with me. Sleep with me. Sleep with me. Sleepwithmesleepwithmesleepwithme-*"

If he had been standing, Wangji would have surely collapsed to the ground like his uncle.

Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng just snorted, "You want to sleep with him for an entire month? You'd be stabbed to death within a week!"

"You think I'm scared of him? If we really started fighting, there's no telling who would win!"

The other shidis immediately started cheering for him. Although Jiang Cheng outwardly mocked his thick skin, he knew Wei Wuxian wasn't just boasting.

Jiang Yanli sat beside them and asked, "What are you two talking about? A friend you made in Gusu?"

“Yeah!”

Xichen smiled slightly, once again pleased that his brother had finally made a friend. And someone who seemed to treasure him equally at that.

~~But then why had Wei Wuxian wanted to run away in the future?~~

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, “What a shameless ‘friend!’ Why don’t you go ask Lan Wangji what he thinks! See if he actually wants you as one.”

“Wants more than that,” Jin Guangshan whispered softly, glancing at the real version of the boy.

“Shut up! If he doesn’t want me as a friend, I’ll just bother him until he does!” he turned to Jiang Yanli. “Shijie, do you know Lan Wangji?”

“I do. He’s the Second Young Master Lan who everyone describes as handsome and talented, isn’t he? Is he really that handsome?”

When Jin Zixuan squeaked in worry at her question, Jiang Yanli giggled and shuffled closer to him.

“He is!” Wei Wuxian answered confidently.

Lan Wangji was literally becoming light-headed from all the blood rushing to his face.

“Compared to you?” she asked.

Wei Wuxian thought about it for a moment, then formed a tiny space between his fingers and responded “Maybe just a little more handsome than me.”

“Not true,” Lan Wangji whispered softly.

Wen Chao, bored with the non-Wen-related incidents, started to fall asleep.

Taking the plate away, Jiang Yanli responded “He must be truly handsome, then. It’s a good thing you made a new friend. In the future, you two can visit each other in your free time.”

Jiang Cheng spat out his watermelon.

‘*Except that isn’t what happened, is it?*’ Wen Ruohan thought consideringly. ‘*Instead, Lan Wangji had to drag Wei Wuxian back against his will.*’

He glanced at Lan Qiren, smirking when he saw the man’s face tense as he made the same realization.

“Forget it, forget it,” Wei Wuxian decided. “All that’s in the Cloud Recesses is bad food and a lot of rules. I’m not going there ever again.”

“Then you can bring him here. This is a good opportunity, why not invite your friend to stay in Lotus Pier for some time?”

“Don’t listen to his nonsense, A-Jie!” Jiang Cheng protested. “He’s super annoying at Gusu! Lan Wangji would never want to come home with him.”

“Ah, Jiang-xiong,” Nie Huaisang tutted. “You are truly naive in matters of the heart, aren’t you? How could you mistake-”

“Oh, shut up!” he shouted back.

“What are you talking about?” Wei Wuxian asked back. “Of course he would.”

“Oh, wake up. Lan Wangji was constantly telling you to ‘get lost,’ wasn’t he? Did you forget that?”

Over time, it was becoming more and more clear why Wei Wuxian might think the future Lan Wangji hated him.

“What would you know?” Wei Wuxian demanded. “Even though he told me to get lost, I know he secretly wants to come and play with me in Yunmeng. In fact, I think he’d love to!”

“I've wondered this for years, but where do you get so much confidence?”

“Stop worrying about it. If *I’d* thought through a question for so many years without coming to an answer, I’d have given up a long time ago.”

Jiang Cheng shook his head, about to throw his watermelon on the ground, when violent footsteps began shaking the pavillion. A moment later, a woman’s voice sternly spoke.

“I was wondering where everyone went. As expected….”

As the Jiang disciples rushed to stand, Nie Huaisang jumped back inside his Da-ge’s chest, phasing through to hide inside. It was bad enough being forced to watch his friends fight terrifying monsters, but this was far, far worse. In Nie Huaisang’s humble opinion, no monster was even a *tenth* as scary as the Violet Spider.

Nie Mingjue sighed slightly, but allowed Huaisang to stay hidden away.

The boys who had rushed to stand were then greeted by the ferocious figure of Madam Yu, whose violet robes gave her the aura of a spirit exiting a cloud of purple smoke. On her face was a chilling rage.

When she saw the boys’ unsightly state of undress, her expression twitched dangerously.

Immediately, the boys all turned to run in terror. Seeing this, Madam Yu finally realized exactly who was present, and her expression turned even darker.

“Jiang Cheng! Go get some clothes on! You look as uncouth as a barbarian! What would people think of me if they saw you like this?!”

The real Madam Yu’s expression conveyed exactly the same thing, making her children shrink in on themselves under a heavy coating of embarrassment. Seeing this, Nie Huaisang and Jin Zixuan slipped closer to them, while Lan Wangji turned a vaguely reproachful gaze on Madam Yu.

Jiang Cheng’s top had been tied at his waist. Hearing his mother’s complaint, he hastily pulled it over his head. Then, Madam Yu turned her gaze on the rest of the disciples.

“And you boys! Can’t you see that A-Li’s here?! Who taught you brats to dress like this in front of a girl?”

Even though it wasn’t at all appropriate, Jin Zixuan couldn’t help but wonder what Jiang Yanli would think if *he* dressed like that. He quickly dismissed the thought, but his rosy cheeks made Jiang Yanli giggle slightly.

As usual, Madam Yu’s next sentence was “*Wei Ying!* Do you want to die?!”

Those outside the family turned to gaze at Madam Yu in confusion at the sudden demand.

“Sorry! I didn’t know Shijie would come. I’ll go get my clothes right now!”

These words made Madam Yu even angrier.

“How dare you run? Come back right now and kneel!” she shouted, letting her whip lose with a flick of her wrist. A moment later, Wei Wuxian felt an intense pain sear across his back in a slash.

“Ow!” he shouted, nearly tripping.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji whispered frantically, tensing as he and many of the others present flinched at the attack.

Madam Yu moved as if to attack again, only to stop when someone quietly whispered in her ear “A-Niang, do you want to eat some watermelon?”

While Madam Yu startled at Jiang Yanli’s sudden voice, all the boys managed to disappear. Annoyed, Madam Yu turned to Jiang Yanli and pinched her cheek.

“Eat, eat, eat — all you ever do is eat!”

When Wen Chao snorted, obviously reminded of his earlier comments about Jiang Yanli’s time in the kitchens, Jin Zixuan sent him an infuriated glare.

Jiang Yanli almost cried from her mother’s pinching, mumbling “A-Niang, A-Xian and the others were hiding here to escape the heat, and I came on my own. Don’t blame them. Do… do you want some watermelon? I don’t know who gave it to us, but it’s

really sweet. Eating watermelon in the summer is great for cooling down and quenching your thirst. Here, I'll-I'll cut some for you if you want me to."

Letting out a slight gasp of awe, Jin Zixuan glanced at his brave, kind, courageous fiancée and tried to give her a supportive smile. He was sure she wasn't comfortable with these details from her personal life being shown, so the least he could do was try to help her though it.

The more Madam Yu thought about everything, the angrier she became. With the summer heat on top of all that, her increased anger made her really crave watermelon. With that thought… she grew even angrier.

Although Madam Yu kept her head tall, completely agreeing with her other-self, Jiang Cheng had steadily begun hiding with Nie Huaisang, who was currently wishing he had a fan to lend his friend.

As Jiang Yanli tried in vain to tame her mother's temper, the watchers' surroundings shifted again. On the Lotus Piers, the group of disciples ran out and hopped onto boats, laughing as they did.

Seeing that, Jiang Fengmian's mouth twitched up in a smile, while Lan Qiren raised an unimpressed eyebrow. However, despite their undisciplined, carefree actions, Lan Qiren remained silent. He was well-aware of how different the Jiang and Lan sect's cultures were, so he resisted the urge to comment.

After a while passed without anyone chasing after them, Wei Wuxian managed to relax. Exerting force, he rowed the boat a couple of times away from the pier, only to pause.

He could still feel some pain on his back, and felt it would be unwise to continue. Tossing the paddles to someone else, Wei Wuxian sat down and felt along the stinging piece of flesh.

"How unfair!" he whined. "No one else was wearing anything, why was I the only one to get beaten up?!"

"Because you're the most difficult to look at when you've got no clothes on," Jiang Cheng mocked.

Wei Wuxian gave him an annoyed look.

As several people laughed, the three Lans blinked in confusion. What they saw before them was completely at ends with the Cloud Recesses' culture.

Although every person who had attended Wei Wuxian's party during the disciple exchange should have gotten punished (rather than just Wei Wuxian), there *was* a logic behind it. Wei Wuxian had been the one sent to get the alcohol, and had done so multiple times. Lan Wangji's own bias might have contributed to the extent of the Wei Wuxian-only punishment, but one could easily justify it.

But, this time, it was quite clear that everyone had broken the *same* rules. And yet, when Wei Wuxian was singled out for punishment, no one was surprised. Even Jiang Cheng, who had been shown to care for Wei Wuxian, treated it like a joke.

Lan Qiren frowned, vowing to keep that in mind.

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian turned and lept into the water, and was instantly followed by his shidis. Soon, Jiang Cheng was the only one left in the boat.

Jiang Cheng scowled, "What the hell are you doing?"

Wei Wuxian glided to the side of the boat and struck hard. It instantly flipped over.

"Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng shouted as he watched his simulated-self be tossed into the water. Both he and Madam Yu gave Wei Wuxian identical outraged glares, while Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Yanli tried (and failed) to cover up their laughter.

The boat flopped over, creating a perfect board for Wei Wuxian to climb on top of and sit, crossing his legs. Resting his chin on a hand and his elbow on a knee, Wei Wuxian smirked down.

"Do your eyes still hurt from being forced to watch me, Jiang Cheng?" he asked.

'*Never,*' Lan Wangji's traitorous mind supplied.

After several seconds with no response, Wei Wuxian frowned and wondered "Why is he taking so long?"

"Did he drown?!" sixth shidi exclaimed.

"That's impossible."

Despite Wei Wuxian's confident words, his face began looking more and more concerned. Then, just as he was about to go down and help Jiang Cheng out, he suddenly heard a shout from behind him.

A moment later, he had been pushed into the water!

Seeing the boys' interactions, Jiang Fengmian was no longer able to hide his laughter behind fake-coughs. Even as Madam Yu glared, a majority of the people present had fond smiles on their faces. Even Wen Ruohan was smiling.

However, *his* smile was one of malicious amusement. After all, despite the seemingly-unbreakable bond between the boys, the simulation had proved that it would soon change. In the next five years, Wei Wuxian would become the Yiling Patriarch, get kicked out of the Jiang Sect (he was an "ally" of the four sects, rather than a *member*), and be murdered by his former shidi.

Now, Wen Ruohan only needed to wait and see how it happened.

Blissfully ignorant of the future, the two boys smirked and began circling around each other, watching the other vigilantly. The other Jiang disciples spread out to observe the show without interfering, although some continued to splash each other.

Wei Wuxian taunted, "What's with the weapon? Put down the paddle; we can fight with out bear hands!"

"Do you think I'm an idiot! You'll take it the moment I let go!"

Jiang Cheng was *mortified* by his simulation-self's childishness. As he turned away from the scene and covered his ears, he found himself wishing for the sweet release of death; only *then* would he forget this embarrassment.

The pair then began to battle in earnest, Jiang Cheng brandishing the paddle while Wei Wuxian was forced to duck and hide. As Wei Wuxian moved left and right, he finally got enough air to respond.

"How could you think I'd be so shameless?"

Boos came from all around him, "Da-shixiong, I can't believe you have the face to say this!"

Witnessing the close interactions between Wei Wuxian and his junior disciples, Lan Wangji was once again struck silent. As the head of punishments in the Cloud Recesses, he had a similar position to Wei Wuxian.

And yet, no Lan disciples would *ever* be willing to say something like that to *his* face.

Lan Wangji didn't *dislike* that. His position at the Cloud Recesses suited him well, and he wouldn't be comfortable trying to be who Wei Wuxian was. However, the striking difference between them only served to remind Wangji of how hard the future Wei Wuxian had tried to escape him.

Hadn't he wanted to visit the Cloud Recesses? Why had his future self dragged him there against his will?

Still unaware of the thoughts of the watchers, the simulated pair of Jiang disciples continued their match. Soon, the crowd had sunk into a chaotic water-fight. From the Jab of Justice to the Plant of Poison to the Bolt of Brutality — Wei Wuxian finally gave Jiang Cheng a kick before climbing onto the boat. Spitting out a mouthful of lakewater, he frantically waved his hand and shouted down:

"Wait, wait, stop — I call a truce!"

"Why are we stopping, let's continue," the adrenaline-filled shidis called. "Are you begging for mercy just because you're at a disadvantage?"

"Who said I was begging for mercy? We can fight later, I'm just too hungry to keep going. Let's get some food first."

Begrudgingly, Lan Qiren noticed that, despite the rebellious attitude of the Jiang disciples, they all followed Wei Wuxian's instructions. They pouted and whined and complained, but did as he asked all the while. Even if he was unfathomably ridiculous, they respected him as their Da-shixiong.

But they were children; their respect meant nothing.

"Then should we go back?" sixth shidi asked. "We can have a few more watermelons before dinner starts."

"If you go back now, you'll get nothing but whips," Jiang Cheng reminded.

"Then we won't go back," Wei Wuxian decided. "We'll go pick lotus seed pods!"

"That sounds tiring," Nie Huaisang muttered.

"You mean 'steal,' don't you?"

"It's fine, we repay them, don't we?"

"You encourage this behavior?" Lan Qiren couldn't resist asking. Normally, he would have respected Jiang Fengmian too much to raise a complaint over something inconsequential. But, unfortunately, being stuck in this place and having their personal information broadcasted made it hard to maintain discipline.

Luckily, Jiang Fengmian merely smiled and explained, "Aside from the fun, it allows them to get a better understanding of *who* they'll be using their cultivation to protect. Sometimes, a difference in determination will be the deciding factor in a match."

Lan Qiren frowned, then nodded in understanding. Considering Wei Wuxian had just proven himself the best junior archer in the sects, he couldn't objectively say that was a bad strategy.

A flash forward, and the watchers were greeted to a view of the disciples crowded around a boat in a lotus lake. While one person paddled the boat, the others snapped off branches of lotus pods.

"The ones with their stems attached taste the best, Wei Wuxian thought," Sizhui's voice explained. "He had no idea if it was true or not, but he confidently said so to everyone he told."

Wen Qing snorted slightly, feeling another mysterious rush of parental affection for the boy who would one day kill her brother.

As Wei Wuxian worked, he began humming to himself something along the lines of "I'll treat you to lotus pods; what will you treat me to?"

Instantly, the entire crowd swiveled to look at Lan Wangji. He flinched and blushed at the attention, but felt a slight flutter in his stomach at the thought that ~~his~~ Wei Ying might be thinking about him.

Furrowing his brow in confusion, Jiang Cheng demanded "Who are you treating these to?"

"Not you, that's for sure!" Wei Wuxian responded instantly, then flinched back slightly and shushed his friends. "The old man's here today! We're dead!"

And, just as he'd said, the old man who farmed the lotus seeds was indeed making his way towards them. Although Wei Wuxian didn't know his age, he had long since considered anyone older than Jiang Fengmian an old man. Therefore, this man who had been at lotus pier since Wei Wuxian first came was called as such.

When the other shidis noticed him, they also paled and scrambled, shouting "Let's run!"

They fled, but when Wei Wuxian turned around he noticed something strange.

"How's that boat going so fast?" Jiang Cheng asked, following Wei Wuxian's eyes and noticing the same. Despite the old man not bothing to use his bamboo pole, the boat was cutting through the water even faster than the juniors' was. It was only when the boat moved past them that they realized why.

"Is that a water ghoul?" Lan Xichen asked, bewildered. At those words, Nie Mingjue stepped forward to closely observe the white shadow swimming under the man's boat.

As far as he could tell, Lan Xichen's words were correct.

Wei Wuxian turned around and brought his index finger to his lips, reminding everyone to stay silent. Nodding in agreement, Jiang Cheng then began rowing the boat towards the pair. When the boats were only a few feet apart, an ashen hand reached up and snatched a few lotus seed pods from the boat.

Nie Huaisang flinched and began sneaking farther back.

A few moments later, the empty shells floated to the water's surface.

"...Wow, so even water ghouls steal lotus seed pods."

The words alarmed the old man, who turned around and swung the bamboo pole into the water. The splash startled the water ghoul, who instantly vanished from their sights.

"Come back here!"

Wei Wuxian crashed into the water and dove underneath, then emerged with a cocky smirk and something bone-white grasped in his hand.

"I caught it!" he declared.

'*Takes initiative,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*And a good swimmer.*'

The pale water ghoul curled in on itself in fright, appearing to be no older than a child.

Jiang Yanli found herself frowning slightly in pity.

Suddenly, the old man's pole swished around as he cursed, "Messing around again?!"

When the pole came into contact with Wei Wuxian's back, he yelped and almost loosened his hands. Although his cultivation-enhanced body could usually withstand the pole, the whipping done by Madam Yu just a short time before left him quite sore.

Several people flinched and allowed themselves to gape in confusion at the man.

With a shaky, calming breath, Lan Wangji carefully reminded himself that frowning at Madam Yu for something that was within her rights to do and hadn't actually happened was illogical.

(Still, her being *allowed* to single out Wei Wuxian for whipping didn't make it right.)

"Hey!" Jiang Cheng raged. "Speak plainly. Why would you hit him all of the sudden? How ungrateful!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Wei Wuxian assured. "Old… Sir, look carefully. We're not ghouls. This one here is the only ghoul."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm only old, not blind! Hurry up and let it go."

Wei Wuxian was startled. The water ghoul caught by him clasped its hands together in salutation, its dark eyes glistening in quite a pitiful way. It was still gripping the plump lotus pod it had stolen, reluctant to let it go. Although the pod had been broken, the ghoul had only eaten a couple of bites before Wei Wuxian pulled it out.

Momentarily, Wen Qing found the whimpering water ghoul reminding her of her brother, though its skin was far too pale for that.

When her subconscious pointed out that the paleness *did* match the Ghost General, she nearly clenched her fists hard enough to break skin.

Clearly thinking that the old man had gone insane, Jiang Cheng turned to Wei Wuxian and ordered "Don't let it go. We'll take it back to the pier."

Nervously turning to look at his mom, Jiang Cheng was pleased to find that she thought he had made the right decision.

However, the old man lifted up his bamboo pole again, making Wei Wuxian lift his hands in surrender.

"Don't, don't! I'll let it go. I promise."

"What?" Jiang Cheng demanded. "You can't! What if it kills someone!"

Nie Mingjue nodded in agreement, and Madam Yu scoffed at the boy's constant refusal to follow simple instructions.

“There’s no scent of blood on it,” Wei Wuxian explained. “It’s too young to swim out of this area, and there hasn’t been any word of deaths occurring around here. It’s probably never killed anyone.”

“It’s still a ghoul,” Lan Qiren pointed out, not understanding why Wei Wuxian wasn’t noticing the obvious.

“Just because it hasn’t killed anyone, doesn’t mean that it won’t in the future-”

Before Jiang Cheng could finish speaking, the old man’s bamboo pole struck him. Arm sore from the impact, Jiang Cheng’s expression turned enraged as he shouted.

“Are you out of your mind, old man?! You know it’s a ghoul — aren’t you scared it might kill you?!”

“Why would a man who’s halfway across the threshold already be scared of a ghoul?” the old man responded.

Once again, Madam Yu scoffed, glaring at the man who had hit her child and muttering, “Who exactly does he think he is? He lives on *my* territory and yet-”

“San-niang, there’s no need for that-”

“Isn’t there? If you would just keep them under control-”

“Stop fighting, stop fighting,” Wei Wuxian ordered, halting both the simulation and real-Jiang’s arguments. “Jiang Cheng, it won’t be able to get far, don’t worry so much. I’m letting go!”

And indeed he did, allowing the ghoul to slip back under the old man’s boat and hide away from the humans. As the soaked Wei Wuxian climbed back onto his boat, the old man tossed another lotus seed pod into the water for the ghoul to eat. When the ghoul paid it no attention, the man tossed in an even bigger one, which was soon devoured.

“Why would he let it go?” Nie Mingjue muttered in confusion, only to look up when his brother sneaked close.

“From what I’ve seen, Wei-xiong doesn’t like hurting people on what ‘might’ happen,” Nie Huaisang whispered back. “If the ghoul really isn’t going to hurt anyone, then it isn’t a problem, right?”

“...I guess not,” Nie Mingjue decided.

Watching it savor the lotus seeds, the boys were bewildered.

“Sir?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Why is it that when it wants your lotus pods, you let it steal them and even hand some over, but when we do it, you always beat us?”

The old man answered, “It helps me with the boat, so what’s wrong with giving it a couple of pods? And you lot, on the other hand… how many did you steal just today?”

Madam Yu sighed yet again, annoyed that *this* was the version of the sect being shown to all the leaders. On the other hand, Jiang Fengmian was slightly pleased; few actions could display the ideal of his sect — to do what was right, even if it seemed impossible — more than Wei Wuxian's decision to let the ghoul go.

The boys were embarrassed by the man's accusation. When Wei Wuxian glanced back and saw the pile of pods gathered in the corner of the boat, he knew it couldn't end well.

"Let's go!" he ordered.

As the boys all fled, Jin Zixuan turned to the Jiang siblings and asked, "Is this what we'd be doing if we visited Yunmeng Jiang? I'm not sure Nie Huaisang will be up for that sort of thing."

As Nie Huaisang nodded in agreement, Jiang Yanli laughed and said, "Well, only if you come when they're ripe. If you come some other time, I'll have no choice but to let the boys surprise you."

"I honestly can't tell which option I'm more afraid of."

"Hey!" Jiang Cheng shouted.

As the boys paddled the boats and fled, the man kept swinging his pole. However, over time, one thing became clear: the only one he was aiming at was Wei Wuxian!

He covered his head and yelled, "That's not fair! Why are you only hitting me? Why is it only me again?"

Suddenly, Lan Xichen wondered if part of the reason for Wei Wuxian's interest in "Lan Zhan" was the fact that he had accepted an even greater punishment than he had given Wei Wuxian.

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian's shidis were wholly unsympathetic.

"Keep it up, Shixiong!" a shidi shouted. "It's all up to you!"

"Yeah, keep it up," Jiang Cheng added.

At these words, Lan Qiren was reminded of the thought he had bookmarked before. If this was meant to be a representation of what everyday life was like in Yunmeng Jiang — and, by the reactions of the Jiang watchers, it was — then perhaps it was obvious why Lan Qiren's attempts at disciplining Wei Wuxian wouldn't work.

Some of it was certainly his personality, but a lot Wei Wuxian's actions seemed to be done under a philosophy of "if I'm going to be punished anyways, then I've got nothing to lose."

Perhaps that was something to consider when he met the boy in the real world.

(No, no. He couldn't forget that, regardless of what happened, Wei Wuxian became a demonic cultivator. There was no excuse for that.)

The man continued to swing the pole at Wei Wuxian until he snapped, "No! I'm not taking it anymore! Catch!"

As he spoke, he grabbed a lotus seed pod from the boat and hurled it out. It was quite a big pod, and made a rather large splash in the water when it landed. As expected, the old man's boat paused, then backtracked as the water ghoul moved to giddily follow after it.

Using the opportunity, the boys quickly paddled away.

Yet another instance of Wei Wuxian being resourceful during combat. In some ways, Wen Ruohan was even more impressed by this one than the ones from the fights against Lan Wangji. Here was an entire group of Jiang disciples, and yet Wei Wuxian was the only one to think of a way to permanently escape.

Perhaps the differences and similarities between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian had more to do with *them* than their sects.

After getting a sufficient distance away, one shidi asked, "Da-shixiong, do ghouls taste anything?"

Just like they had been shown in the future, Wei Wuxian was treasure trove of information, and had an aura that made it easy for younger disciples to ask him questions. Lan Wangji recalled the delighted smiles on the juniors' faces when his future self had appeared, and, for a moment, wondered if he could raise a child with Wei Wuxian.

Then he flinched — his ears turning bright, blazing red — and removed the nonsensical thought from his mind.

"...Usually not, I think. But I'd say this little one pro-probably… Ah- ah-choo!"

A cold breeze chilled him to the bone, a stark contrast to the blazing heat from before.

Shivering slightly, Wei Wuxian continued "Probably couldn't get any lotus pods before it died, and drowned in the lake when it snuck inside to steal some. And so… ah- ah-"

"And so it ate lotus pods because that was its wish," Jiang Cheng finished. "It gains a sense of fulfillment through it."

"Uh huh, that's right."

Madam Yu smirked, pleased that Jiang Cheng had been able to answer when Wei Wuxian couldn't. Really, why hadn't the younger disciples just asked her son to begin with?

Tenderly, Wei Wuxian felt his back which was covered with both old and new scars. Finally, he found his anger boiling over, and he couldn't hold back the question any longer.

"How awfully unfair! Why am I the only one who ever gets beaten up when something happens?"

Lan Qiren frowned at the final confirmation that this series of events was the usual state of things at the Jiangs. Based on their expressions, none of the Jiang disciples saw anything abnormal about that.

Wen Ruohan, realizing the same, hummed. What a strange way to treat one's head disciple.

Laughing slightly at Wei Wuxian's whining, the disciples all offered different answers.

"Maybe it's because you're the most handsome!"

"You have the highest cultivation!"

"You look the best with no clothes on!"

Everyone nodded.

The four older siblings laughed at the declaration, amused at how it directly countered Jiang Cheng's answer to that very same question from earlier.

"Thanks for the praise, you guys. I'm even starting to feel some goose bumps."

"You're welcome, Da-shixiong! You protect us every single time! You deserve even more."

'*Every single time,*' Lan Qiren mentally repeated, frowning even deeper.

"Oh, there's more?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Alright, let me hear it then!"

"Shut up!" Jiang Cheng complained. "If you guys don't start talking properly, I'll stab a hole into the boat and we can all die together!"

Both Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang snorted, while Lan Wangji's lips twitched slightly in amusement.

Just then, the boat passed through an area of water which had farmlands on both sides. On the right were a few petite-figured female farmers, working in the fields. As the saw the boat pass, they ran to the shore and cheerfully greeted the Yunmeng boys from afar.

"Hey!"

The boys responded in the same way, before nudging Wei Wuxian and whispering "Shixiong! They're calling you! They're calling you!"

'*Number four on the list of young masters, indeed*," Jin Guangshan acknowledged.

Wei Wuxian looked carefully, recognizing the woman who was leading the group. His mood immediately lifted and he stood up to wave.

"What's up!" he shouted.

If it weren't for Lan Xichen's incredible self-control, he would have fallen over laughing at the way Wangji *pouted* at Wei Wuxian's chipper response.

"You boys went to steal lotus seed pods again, didn't you?" they guessed.

"Tell us how many hits you got!"

"Or did you spike someone's dog food this time?"

Listening, Jiang Cheng almost wanted to kick Wei Wuxian off the boat, eyes filled with distaste.

"Your reputation sure loses face for our sect, doesn't it?"

'*But they all did that,*' Jin Zixuan thought, tilting his head in confusion. '*If anything, since Wei Wuxian won the archery competition, doesn't he help the sect's reputation the most?*'

Similarly, Wei Wuxian protested, "They said 'you boys.' We're all in the same boat, right? Even if I'm losing face, we're all losing face together!"

Madam Yu rolled her eyes.

Interrupting them, a woman asked, "Was it good?"

"What?"

"The watermelon we gave you," the woman clarified. "Was it good?"

"Next time we go shopping, let's go to Yunmeng with Wei Wuxian," Nie Huaisang told his brother. "I bet we'll get all sorts of free treats and goodies if we do."

Nie Mingjue rolled his eyes, but didn't object.

"So you were the ones who gave us the watermelon! It was delicious. Why didn't you come in and sit? We could've poured you some tea!"

The woman smiled, "You lot weren't there when we visited, so we left without going in. I'm glad to hear it tasted good!"

"Thank you!" Wei Wuxian shouted, then fished out a couple of lotus seed pods from the bottom of the boat. "Here are some lotus seed pods! Next time you visit, come and watch me train!"

This present wasn't even *his* to be jealous over, and yet Wangji felt a wave of it nonetheless.

Jiang Cheng snorted, "Why would anyone want to watch you train?"

"Those girls certainly seemed interested," Jin Guangshan muttered, making Madam Jin glare at him.

Ignoring Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian threw the seeds to shore. Despite the far distance, he managed to land them lightly in the woman's hands. Then, he grabbed a few more and turned to Jiang Cheng.

"Why are you just standing there? Hurry up!" he instructed.

"Hurry up and do what?" Jiang Cheng asked back, finally taking them after Wei Wuxian shoved them into his hands a few times.

"You ate the watermelon too, so you also have to return the gift, don't you? Here, here! Don't be embarrassed. Start throwing, start throwing."

"Has he ever been in a relationship with one of them?" Madam Jin asked, to which Yanli confidently shook her head.

"No, he enjoys flirting, but I don't think he's ever considered going any further than that."

Madam Jin nodded, pleased, and mentally awarded Wei Wuxian a few extra points for enthusiastically returning favors without an ulterior motive.

"You must be joking," Jiang Cheng responded, glaring at Wei Wuxian. "What is there to be embarrassed about?"

However, even after all his shidi began throwing the seed pods, Jiang Cheng still refused to move. Wei Wuxian raised an amused eyebrow, then waved a hand towards the women.

"If it's really not embarrassing, then throw some! If you throw a few seed pods this time, then next time you can ask them if the seed pods tasted good, and you'll be able to start a conversation again."

The Jiang shidi were in awe of their da-shixiong.

"So that's why. What a lesson! You have so much experience in these things, Shixiong!"

"You can tell he does this on a regular basis."

Wei Wuxian laughed.

Lan Wangji sat up, back straight, face emotionless. Regardless of what his brother's barely-suppressed laugh seemed to imply, he was not, by any stretch of the word, jealous.

Jiang Cheng moved as if to throw one off, only to pause at the last second, realizing how shameless it was. He scowled and peeled the lotus seed pod to eat by himself.

"Jiang-xiong, at this rate, you'll be all alone in the future," Nie Huaisang warned, then ducked an attack from Jiang Cheng that just phased through anyways.

The boat continued, the maidens running along the shore and catching the green pods the boys were throwing at them. Wei Wuxian put his right hand above his brows, taking

in the scenery. Then, amid the laughter, let out another sigh.

“What’s wrong, Da-shixiong?”

“You’re sighing even when girls are chasing after you?”

Lan Wangji frowned, moving closer to Wei Wuxian as if he could offer some comfort.

“Nothing,” Wei Wuxian responded. “I was just thinking that I sincerely invited Lan Zhan to come to Yunmeng, yet he still dared to decline the offer.”

Wangji flinched back, blinking in shock.

“Wow, that’s Lan Wangji for sure!”

Wei Wuxian stayed in high spirits, “Shut up! Someday, I’ll drag him here and kick him off the boat! I’ll fool him into stealing lotus seed pods and let the old man beat *him* up with a bamboo pole for a change. And then he’ll be chasing after me from behind!”

‘*Sounds good,*’ Lan Wangji thought.

“Ridiculous,” he said aloud.

After laughing for a while, he turned and looked at Jiang Cheng, who was sitting at the front of the boat eating the leftover lotus seeds with a long face.

Jiang Cheng flushed.

Wei Wuxian’s smile gradually disappeared and he sighed.

“Well, what an unteachable child.”

“Oh, shut up!” Jiang Cheng shouted.

Jiang Cheng fumed, “So what if I want to eat alone?”

“Look at you, Jiang Cheng. Nevermind. You’re hopeless. Just get used to eating alone for your whole life.”

“Ungrateful brat!” Madam Yu hissed, then turned to glare at a frowning Jiang Fengmian.

Then, at long last, the boat pulled up at Lotus Pier, stuffed with riches.

The world faded to black.

Jiang Yali smiled, feeling strangely homesick at the sight of the pier against the setting sun.

The sky brightened again, and the watchers were brought to the Cloud Recesses. Before the Lanshi, two white figures stood in the hall. As a breeze swept by, their robes fluttered gently, yet they remained motionless.

Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji were standing.

Upside-down.

“What are you *doing*?” Jin ZIxuan asked, flabberghasted.

“Training.”

“Training?!” Nie Huaisang squeaked, looking slightly faint at the word.

Finally, after a long pause, Lan Wangji broke out of his meditation and spoke, “Brother.”

“Yes?” Xichen asked, calmly leaving his own state of meditation.

“Have you ever picked lotus seed pods before?”

“...No.”

Lan Wangji tilted his head downwards, “Brother, did you know?”

“Know what?”

“Lotus pods with their stems attached taste better than those without stems.”

Realizing Wei Wuxian was mostly just saying that, Lan Wangji ducked his head in embarrassment. Soon, both Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue were laughing at his reaction.

“Really? I’ve never heard of that before. Why do you ask, all of the sudden?”

“It’s nothing. The time is up.”

Without landing, the two switched the hand holding them up from their right to their left, moving uniformly and soundlessly; not a ruffle in their robes.

The sight was a true testament to the twin jades’ grace. Both Nie Huaisang and Jin Guangshan wondered if the scene would look better depicted in embroidery or a painting.

Lan Qiren glared at them both.

Lan Xichen was about to ask again when his eyes focused on something and he teased, “Wangji, you have guests.”

At the edge of the wooden hallway, a black ball of fluff slowly crept over. The rabbit clung to Wangji’s left hand, its pink nose sniffing at his robe.

“Are those… the ones from Wei Wuxian?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“Oh my god, that’s so romantic!” Nie Huaisang squeaked.

“It’s not,” Lan Wangji corrected, ears turning pink.

“How did it find its way here?” Xichen asked.

“Go back,” Wangji commanded.

And yet the rabbit didn’t listen. Instead, it began to nibble on the edge of Lan Wangji’s forehead ribbon and pulled with force, as though it wanted to use the ribbon to drag Lan Wangji away.

The action abruptly brought Lan Wangji back to the ribbon-removal during the archery competition, and became even *more* traumatic when he realized it was Wei Wuxian’s bunny pulling on it.

His perfect posture broke slightly, another round of light-headedness running over him.

“Perhaps it wants your company?” Lan Xichen suggested.

The rabbit, unable to move Wangji, hopped around the pair in a flurry. Lan Xichen was quite amused.

“Is this the boisterous one?”

“Too much so.”

“There’s no harm in being boisterous.”

At “the boisterous one,” Lan Qiren finally realized what was being implied.

“No pets in the Cloud Recess!” he screamed. “Especially not ones from Wei Wuxian!”

“And why not?” Madam Jin demanded. “I may not approve of the person Wei Wuxian grows up to be, but right now it seems obvious that this crush is requited.”

“Mom!” Jin Zixuan protested, blushing heavily.

“There is nothing between my nephew and Wei Wuxian!”

“If you really think so, why don’t you ask him?! See what he says!”

“I-”

Lan Wangji was cut off by Madam Yu’s, “Well, I can understand if the Lan Clan doesn’t want to have their name sullied by associating with a brat like that.”

“He-”

“And what’s so bad about Wei Wuxian?” Nie Mingjue asked, once again interrupting Lan Wangji. “He might be a bit shameless, but he works hard and acts righteously! I don’t see why you went out of your way to whip him first when those boys had all done the exact same thing.”

“Well-”

“You have no authority over the Jiang sect, Sect Leader Nie. Or do I have to remind you-”

“San-niang, enough. He didn’t mean it like that. And besides, the boys are too young to make any huge decisions based of their feelings at the current time.”

“I don’t-”

“What are you trying to say? That you want to end A-Li’s engagement now that it’s finally started working out? But I guess all *you* care about is Wei Wuxian’s happiness, huh.”

“It-”

“There is *nothing* between them!” Lan Qiren shouted again. Lan Wangji closed his mouth, realizing he wouldn’t get a chance to speak.

“*Uncle!*” Lan Xichen shouted, raising his voice for the first time in quite a while. “I don’t believe now is the time to discuss this. We’ve missed quite a bit.”

The adults glanced back at the simulation, only to see that it had moved on without them. They turned to Lan Xichen, who smiled slightly and explained.

“My simulation-self reminded Wangji that there are two bunnies. I asked why the first one was alone, and the second one followed shortly after.”

As the watchers turned back to the simulation, it changed to show the Lan brothers eating watermelon.

Lan Wangji kept his eyes glued to the floor. All this time, he had tried desperately to convince himself that he would eventually learn to ignore his feelings for Yunmeng Jiang’s head disciple.

Now, some doubt was starting to creep in.

“...Brother.”

“What is it?”

“Have you ever had watermelon peel before?”

Realizing where this was going, Nie Huaisang laughed into his sleeve and turned to Lan Wangji, exclaiming, “Both you and Wei-xiong are so cute! You’re always thinking about each other!”

Wangji blushed, but, this time, didn’t deny it.

“...Is watermelon peel edible?”

“I heard it can be stir fried.”

“Perhaps it can.”

“I heard it tastes quite good.”

“I have never tried it.”

“Neither have I.”

Lan Qiren sighed at the Wei Wuxian-influenced conversation, but, like his nephew, avoided making any further comments on the matter. In hindsight, it had been foolish of him to start an argument.

(And yet, every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was Wangji forcing Wei Wuxian to enter the Cloud Recesses. Their forms would then shift until it wasn’t Wei Wuxian he saw being forced back inside, but Madam Lan.)

“Hm…” Lan Xichen turned completely. “Do you want someone to stir-fry it for you?”

After some thought, Lan Wangji shook his head, his expression solemn.

Lan Xichen let out a sigh of relief. For some reason, he didn’t feel like he had to ask “who told you all of this?” The answer was made apparent by the slight flush on Wangji’s ears.

“...You two are sickeningly sweet,” Jiang Cheng muttered. He hadn’t wanted to believe it at first, but getting beaten over the head with their interest in each other so many times made their mutual feelings impossible to ignore.

The scenery around them transitioned to a marketplace where Lan Wangji was looking around for someone to ask for directions. After a bit of trying, he found himself stuck.

He didn’t want to approach others, and they didn’t want to approach him.

He was too different — too pristine — to fit into the messy hustle and bustle of the market. Everyone around him hurried to avoid him, either fearing the arrogant heir his clothes implied, or the cold expression resting on his face. The only ones who wanted to look at him were women, and they were too nervous to do more than sneak glances out of the corners of their eyes, giggling with each other as he passed.

“That’s almost impressive,” Wen Qing carelessly muttered as she watched the crowd part into a large space around Lan Wangji. She tensed slightly when she realized she had spoken without thinking, but relaxed when Wen Ruohan glanced away, dismissing her comment.

Jiang Yanli tried to give a supportive smile, pleased the other girl was speaking more.

Finally, after walking for quite some time, Lan Wangji found an old woman sweeping the ground before her house. He walked towards her and spoke.

“Excuse me, where is the closest lotus lake from here?”

“...Ah,” Lan Xichen laughed, glancing at his brother. “I was wondering what you were doing.”

Lan Wangji refused to acknowledge the comment in any capacity.

The woman panted, unable to see clearly, and pointed, "Go two or three miled this way. One house has been planted over an acre of lotuses."

Lan Wangji nodded, "Thank you."

"Young master, they don't let anyone inside at night. If you want to go, you should hurry up and get there before dusk."

"Thank you."

Just as he was about to leave, he saw the woman struggle to shake a branch down with the end of her broom. With a flick of his finger, he directed his sword to knock the branch to the ground, and continued on his way.

Both Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen gave him identical proud smiles, and he relaxed slightly under their gazes.

The watchers were quickly brought to a distant path, soaked by the pouring rain. Due to Lan Wangji's speed, it was clear that the two to three mile journey would not take him very long.

Suddenly, he saw half a dozen people in the field before him.

"Oh, no," Nie Huaisang muttered worriedly.

Despite the rain, none of these people had any umbrellas, nor sought shelter. Instead, they stood circled around something, talking worriedly. Lan Wangji went over, and saw a farmer lying on the ground, moaning in pain.

Jiang Yanli flinched and glanced away from the gruesome sight, making Jin Zixuan stand protectively beside her.

A few sentences between the villagers cleared up what had happened. Apparently, an ox had run into the man, leaving him unable to get up. Someone had run to get a doctor, but it had started to storm shortly after, and there was no telling when the man would arrive.

"Damn, it's only been a minute, and the rain is already crashing down," a man grumbled, trying in vain to block the water above the collapsed man.

After a moment, another farmer pointed and said, "Let's prop up the shed over there. It'll hold up for a little while."

"I thought we weren't supposed to move him."

"A… a few steps should be fine."

The earlier parts were understandable in Wen Ruohan's eyes; they were a clear representation of Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian's feelings, making later motivations clearer to the watchers.

Focusing on this, however, seemed completely illogical. Why were they being shown a random farmer?

Two of the men went to lift up the shed roof, their faces turning red from the exertion but not causing the wood to budge even a centimeter. Shortly after, two more farmers went to help out, but the result was the same.

It was quite strange. Although it wasn't light, the roof wasn't so heavy that four men wouldn't be able to lift it up. And yet, it was quite clear they weren't able to budge it even an inch.

Realizing what had happened, Lan Wangji walked to the shed, bent down, grabbed a corner of the roof, and raised it with a single hand.

The farmers were shocked speechless.

"Wow," Jiang Cheng couldn't help but utter.

"It's all the handstands they do," Nie Mingjue explained. "Training and punishment all in one."

"Wangji and I rarely do it as punishment," Lan Xichen corrected. "But yes, it's rather effective. Perhaps Huaisang should give it a try?"

"Xichen-ge, you traitor!"

After several seconds, the farmers finally got over their shock and moved to take the injured man inside the hut. Nervously, one of them stepped towards Lan Wangji.

"Y… Young Master, you can let go. We-we can hold it."

Wangji shook his head, causing another farmer to continue, "You're too young. You won't be able to hold out."

They raised their hands to the roof to take some of the burden. After thinking it over a moment, Lan Wangji relaxed his hand slightly and the farmer's expressions changed instantly.

"Never underestimate Lan strength," Jiang Fengmian advised, giving Lan Qiren a smile.

Lan Wangji turned to the roof again, letting his strength flow back. Embarrassed, the farmers went back to squatting with the rest of their group. Even if they wanted to, they wouldn't be able to carry it without Lan Wangji.

Inside, the farmers shivered.

"Why is it colder now that we're inside?"

‘*Ghoul,*’ Wen Ruohan realized. Unlike the simulated Lan Wangji, the only things they were able to sense were spaces of highly concentrated resentful energy, so it took him a bit longer to notice.

And he was right. None of the farmers could see it, but hanging in the middle of the shed was a ragged figure, hair tangled and tongue stretched out. As wind and rain hit the shed from the outside, the figure swung back and forth, creating a slight breeze within the shack’s walls.

“Why do we keep having to see these things?” Nie Huaisang whined, burying his face into his hands. Although his reasons for feeling that way were entirely different, Wen Ruohan felt the same.

What was the simulation trying to show them?

The roof creaked slightly in synch with the figure’s swings, proving that it was the reason why the farmers had been unable to lift the roof. No ordinary person would ever be able to carry it.

Unfortunately, Lan Wangji didn’t have his guqin with him which he would normally have used to liberate the spirits. Due to the creature’s lack of malicious intent, Wangji wasn’t willing to tear its soul apart, meaning elimination was not an option. Therefore, his only choice was to continue to hold up the roof, and report it to the appropriate people once the rain had stopped.

With a flutter of her eyelashes, Jiang Yanli glanced between the real and fake Lan Wangjis, thinking to herself. Noticing the movement, Jin Zixuan leaned closer to her and gave her a concerned look. She smiled.

“It’s nothing,” she whispered. “I just… thought it was interesting. Both Lan-er-gongzi and A-Xian are refusing to act against non-malevolent spirits. Do you think it was intentional that these scenes were put side-by-side like this?”

“Probably,” Jin Zixuan agreed. “Not many cultivators would bother to check something like that, so I guess this is just meant to show their similarities.”

Yanli thought for a moment, then suggested “Once we get out, we should arrange for the perfect meeting between these two. I want our A-Xian to realize the same thing this version of A-Xian did.”

Somewhat excited by the idea of a group project, Jin Zixuan nodded and said, “If we work together, I’m sure we’ll be able to come up with something better than the emperor’s smile meeting!”

They smiled conspiratorially at each other, and Lan Wangji hid a shiver of fear.

The spirit continued to swish back and forth, then complained, “It’s so cold….”

“...”

The spirit looked around for something warm to lean on, finally landing on one of the farmers. The farmer suddenly shivered, causing Wangji to give the spirit a stern look.

The simulated Lan Wangji's cold gaze seemed to make the room drop in temperature. Quietly, several people sneaked closer to Wei Wuxian's array, which was the only source of heat in the matter-less simulation.

The spirit shivered at Lan Wangji's glare, returning in misery. Still, it extended its tongue and continued to complain.

"Th-the rain is so heavy. And it's so wide-open like this…. It's really so cold."

"...."

Even when the doctor arrived, the farmers couldn't build up the courage to talk to Lan Wangji. When the rain stopped, they moved the injured out of the shed, allowing Lan Wangji to set the roof down and walk away.

Lan Xichen frowned. He knew his brother didn't expect anything else — the virtual Lan Wangji was unsurprised by the distance the farmers kept — but it still made Xichen sad. Wangji spent all his time alone, never with anyone he would consider an acquaintance, much less a friend.

Well, until Wei Wuxian came bounding into his life.

By the time he arrived at the lake, it was already past sunset. Lan Wangji had spent the whole day traveling because he kept stopping to help people, and had never gotten so much as a thank you.

"Oh, I get it now," Jiang Cheng suddenly said. "My future-self said that you 'go wherever the chaos is.' I guess any time you travel somewhere, you do things like this."

"...I wouldn't know. We haven't seen where that saying comes from."

"I suppose that makes sense," Jiang Yanli giggled. "It was quite impressive."

"...Thank you."

Silently, Wen Ruohan considered what the Jiang heir had suggested. If that was indeed the reason for the scene's inclusion, then whoever had designed the simulation must believe that such behavior was normal for the Second Jade of Lan. If that was the case, then Lan Wangji's title — a testament to his character in addition to his power — was all the more impressive. Perhaps he would need to pay more attention to the boy.

Lan Wangji moved towards the lake, but, just as he was about to step onto a boat, was stopped by a voice.

"Hey, hey, hey! What are you doing here?"

"Picking lotus pods."

“It’s just after sundown! We don’t let anyone in when it’s dark! Today isn’t going to work, come again some other time!”

‘*So his so-called righteous actions kept him from getting what he actually wanted?*’ Wen Chao realized. ‘*What an idiot.*’

“I will not stay for long.”

“Don’t talk back to your elders. Do not make excuses.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle.”

“No means no. That’s the rule. I don’t make the rules here, you’d have to ask the owner.”

“Where is the owner of the lake?”

“He went home a long time ago, so there’s no point in asking me. If I did let you in, the owner would be furious with me. Don’t make it so difficult.”

Realizing it was pointless to continue asking, Lan Wangji nodded and said, “Apologies for the disturbance.”

“Such a polite young boy,” Jiang Fengmian complimented softly. Lan Qiren hesitated for a moment, then sighed and forced himself to admit the truth.

“Your Wei Wuxian has taken… righteous acts. When he let the ghoul go, and when he saved the rabbits. I… may have been a little too harsh earlier. My apologies.”

Jiang Fengmian smiled in response.

(Madam Yu frowned, wondering why Lan Qiren’s response was about Wei Wuxian rather than Jiang Cheng.)

As Lan Wangji began walking off with a calm expression, an aura of disappointment was prominent in his steps. The woman frowned slightly as she watched him, then-

“You came too late today. Come earlier tomorrow. Where are you from? The rain was so heavy earlier. You child, you didn’t run over here in the rain, did you? Why didn’t you take an umbrella? How far away is you home from here?”

“Ten and a half miles.”

The woman choked when she heard that.

“For lotus seeds?” Nie Mingjue asked.

“Wangji-xiong, you are a bit terrifying,” Huaisang mumbled.

“So far? You must have spent a long time getting here. If you really wanted to eat lotus seeds, you could have just bought some in the streets. There are plenty.”

“The lotus seed pods sold on the streets do not have stems on them.”

Lan Wangji couldn’t shake the feeling the Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, Jiang Yanli, and Wen Qing were all giving him the identical patronizing-yet-affectionate looks all loving older siblings seemed to develop. He kept his eyes trained forward, refusing to glance over on the off chance that he’d see (and therefore have to acknowledge) their gazes.

“Do they really need to have stems on them? It’s not like they taste different.”

“They do.”

“They don’t!”

“They do. Somebody told me so.”

Unable to resist any longer, Lan Xichen covered his mouth with his sleeve and whispered “adorable” to Nie Mingjue. The Nie sect leader nodded in agreement, glancing fondly at Huaisang for a moment.

“Who in the world told you that? Such a stubborn young master — it’s like you’re possessed by something.”

“By love!” Nie Huaisang sang, hiding behind his brother when Wangji glared.

After a moment, the woman continued, “Is your home really that far?”

“Mn.”

“What if… what if you don’t go home today? Settle down somewhere nearby and come tomorrow.”

“There’s a curfew. I have lessons tomorrow.”

Although he tried not to show how pleased he was, Lan Qiren was overjoyed that, even though the reason for his journey was Wei Wuxian, Wangji had retained his respect for the rules.

The woman hesitated, scratching her scalp as she thought. Then, after a long pause, she gave a heavy sigh and nodded her head once, speaking softly.

“...Fine, I’ll let you in. Just for a little while, okay? Hurry up if you’re going to pick lotus pods; if someone sees you the owner will blame me. It’d be embarrassing to get scolded at my age.”

Jin Zixuan’s eyes widened as he turned to Yanli and said, “The people there are so nice!”

Yanli nodded, “It seems like a beautiful place. Would… would you like….”

She hesitated, glancing away.

Blushing heavily, Jin Zixuan tried to pick up where she left off and asked, “Would you like-to-gotogether?”

She turned back with wide, surprised eyes, before they softened into a cheery joy and she nodded once in agreement.

A moment later, the simulation returned to the Cloud Recesses. Smelling the fragrance of the magnolia trees after the rain, Lan Xichen was struck by a bout of inspiration and set down his papers to instead paint by the window.

Excited, Nie Huaisang quickly snuck over to the painting, only to deflate in disappointment. It seemed the spirits whose memories were being used never saw the painting, so it was just a blank canvas.

How tragic! Shouldn’t he get *some* reward after bravely watching Lan Wangji deal with that terrifying ghost?

Through the window’s hollowed out carvings, Xichen saw an approaching figure. Without pausing in his brush strokes, Lan Xichen greeted them.

“Wangji.”

“Xiongzhang.”

“I heard you mention lotus seed pods yesterday. Uncle happened to have them brought up the mountain today. Do you want some of them?”

“I already have.”

“Already?”

“Mn.”

Although still confused, Xichen nodded and accepted the answer. The conversation ended after a few more words, and Lan Wangji returned to the Jingshi.

Xichen returned to painting, but continued finding his eyes drift to the lotus pods with stems, curiosity flitting by his face every so often.

“Oh my god,” Jiang Cheng sighed. “Wei Wuxian has gotten *both* the twin jades to believe that stupid urban legand!”

The two in question blushed, but had no counter argument.

After much contemplation, Xichen chose not to peel one of the ones with stems and try it for himself. He was still curious about the differences between lotus seeds with and without stems, but he resolved to figure it out another day.

'*If Wangji looks so happy, they must be quite a delicacy indeed.*'

"Unless that's not *why* he's happy," Huaisang cheekily pointed out, getting a glare from his brother.

"In the 19th year of the reign of Xuanzheng, the year of Yimao, Wen Clan of Qishan successfully annexed Wang Clan of Runan, Fu Clan of Hedong, along with dozens of other clans," Sizhui's voice narrated again, sounding like he was reading from a textbook.

The abrupt jump back to the prelude of the Sunshot Campaign startled several people, but Wen Chao perked up in glee. Dozens of clans had been absorbed into the Wen.

How much more powerful were they now?

The scenery around them changed, switching from a field covered with the corpses of the Wang Clan to Wen Ruohan himself, playing a game of Weiqi.

"Where there is conflict, there is bound to be a flood of blood," Sizhui explained. "The other clans do not dare speak for their own safety. That year, a message was sent to all the sects."

Wen Ruohan set down a piece, and a raging fire burned.

By now, the cheerful joy which had spread throughout the interactions between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had vanished, replaced by a tense silence.

Sizhui spoke calmly, "A month later."

A line of Jiang disciples stood on the bank of the river. With bows in their hands, they turned their gazes towards distant objects in the sky; it was obvious what they were doing.

Lan Qiren had never been impressed by Yunmeng Jiang's method of "shooting kites" to practice archery, but if it was able to make someone as skilled as Wei Wuxian, then perhaps he had been a little too hasty.

Jiang Cheng stared at his own kite, glancing at Wei Wuxian's every once in a while. Wei Wuxian's kite had already flown high up in the sky, but he seemed unconcerned and made no move to draw his bow. With his right hand over his brows, he grinned and looked up, as though he felt like it hadn't yet gone far enough.

With another glimpse at Wei Wuxian's beautiful, shameless confidence, Lan Wangji found himself becoming enthralled all over again.

By now, Jiang Cheng's kite had nearly drifted out of the area in which he could be certain he could hit it. Gritting his teeth, he positioned his arrow and drew the bow. When he released the arrow, the kite painted like a one-eyed monster was pierced straight through, and fell downward.

“It hit!” he shouted.

When Jin Zixuan, Nie Huaisang, and Jiang Yanli smiled encouragingly at him, Jiang Cheng felt a reflection of their joy bounding through him. When Madam Yu gave him a single, proud nod, Jiang Cheng felt that satisfaction multiply nearly a hundred-fold — he was overflowing with happiness.

“Is Wei Ying not going to shoot?” Lan Wangji asked, watching the final kite drift farther and farther away.

“Yours has already flown so far,” Jiang Cheng told Wei Wuxian. “Are you sure you can hit it?”

“Wanna guess?”

He finally pulled out an arrow and aimed, drawing the bow back as far as it could go, then released.

A hit!

“I suppose that’s to be expected,” Lan Xichen said, thoroughly impressed. He now understood why the Jiangs were unsurprised by Wei Wuxian’s victory during the archery competition.

“Well, he *is* the to-be Yiling Patriarch,” Nie Huaisang added on, finding that he greatly enjoyed the sound of Wei Wuxian’s future title.

Jiang Cheng frowned.

At the same time, the simulated Jiang Cheng’s brows scrunched up again, a *humph* coming through his nose. All the boys put away their bows and went to fetch their kites so they could rank the distances. The closest kite would, as always, receive the lowest ranking.

“This seems kinda fun,” Jin Zixuan admitted, having only ever practiced by himself.

The one which was closest belonged to the sixth eldest. Some of the other boys playfully poked fun at him for that, but the sixth-eldest didn’t care at all.

“His is always the closest,” Jiang Cheng explained with a fond roll of his eyes. “But he, like Wei Wuxian, is too shameless to care about such things.”

Huaisang laughed at the explanation, feeling a sense of kinship, then asked, “How far do you think Wei Wuxian’s kite got? I could barely see it anymore.”

Wen Ruohan nodded slightly, feeling even more impressed with the boy than he was before.

Both Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng didn’t feel like getting their kites — obviously first and second farthest, respectively — and so went to play in the water instead. A short time later, two young, slender women appeared before them.

Jin Guangshan leered as he looked them over, but quickly backed off when his wife glared. It wasn't like he could touch them, so they weren't worth getting into an argument over.

The two women were dressed as armed maids, carrying short swords. The taller one, holding a kite and an arrow, blocked the boys' path, glaring coldly. Jinzhu and Yinzhu, as always, were displeased with the boys.

"Whose are these?" she demanded.

"They're mine," Wei Wuxian answered.

She laughed, "You're an honest one, aren't you?"

The two women stepped to the side, revealing Madam Yu standing behind them. The corners of her lips lay between a frown and a smile — she was a natural at sneering, just like Jiang Cheng.

"Mom!" Jiang Cheng realized, smiling when he saw her.

Meanwhile, the rest of the boys greeted her with respect: "Madam Yu."

Wen Chao scoffed, refusing to admit to even the slightest intimidation. Really, what was Sect Leader Jiang thinking? Everyone knew how Madam Yu often went out on night hunts, rarely staying at Lotus Pier. Based on the simulation, the few times she *was* home she just went around punishing and whipping disciples! And, most unbelievably of all, he allowed her to call herself "Madam Yu" instead of "Jiang."

In Wen Chao's humble opinion, Sect Leader Jiang offered his wife far too much freedom.

Madam Yu glanced at Jiang Cheng, "Playing around again? Come, let me see you."

When Jiang Cheng went to her side, Madam Yu squeezed his arm with her slender fingers, then slapped his shoulder loudly, scolding "There isn't any improvement in your cultivation at all! You're seventeen already, yet you're still like an ignorant child, fooling around with others all the time. Are you the same as them? Who knows what sewers other people go splashing around in, but you're going to be the leader of the Jiang Sect!"

Jiang Cheng stumbled from the slap, not daring to protest.

At the sight, Wen Chao burst into laugher.

"What? No response? You can't even look her in the eyes!"

"Just like you with *your* father, isn't it?" Nie Huaisang asked back innocently.

"You-"

"San-niang," Jiang Fengmian whispered. "There was no need to be so harsh on him. A-Cheng is doing exceptionally well, he-"

“He didn’t even *place* at the archery competition.”

“Which doesn’t mean he’s bad or that this practice doesn’t work.”

“Oh, of course. So long as Wei Wuxian does well with the Jiang practices, I guess that’s all that matters. A-Cheng’s failings certainly make it easier to make Wei Ying your heir-”

“San-niang, enough! That isn’t what’s happening!”

Both Jiang siblings looked down, trembling slightly.

“Wei Ying, what trouble are you stirring up this time?”

Lan Qiren frowned, wondering if his earlier theory about Wei Wuxian’s punishments was going to be proven yet again.

Accustomed to such accusations, Wei Wuxian stepped forward without complaint.

“You’re always like this! If you don’t seek to improve yourself, then the least you can do is stop dragging Jiang Cheng along to fool around with you. You’re a terrible influence on him!”

Wei Wuxian looked startled, “I don’t seek progress? Haven’t I progressed the most amongst anyone in Lotus Pier?”

“A-Xian, don’t provoke her,” Jiang Yanli whispered pleadingly.

“Wei Wuxian, shut up!” Jiang Cheng hissed, then turned to Madam Yu, “It’s not even like we *want* to shoot kites, it’s just that none of us are allowed to leave!”

“What?” Nie Mingjue asked.

“The Wen Sect took over all the night hunting grounds! Even if I wanted to go out and hunt, there isn’t anywhere for me to go! Didn’t you say to stay at home and not provoke a fight with the Wen Clan?”

Strangely, his virtual-self’s description of the situation reminded Jiang Cheng of the future's Dafan mountain. His older-self had taken over the entire place for Jin Ling, and scared away or trapped the other cultivators. It seemed nearly impossible to imagine a world without the Wen Clan at the top, and yet they’d already seen it, hadn’t they?

Madam Yu smirked bitterly, “This time, you’ll have to leave regardless of whether you want to.”

Without elaborating on the ominous statement, Madam Yu turned and left, Jinzhu and Yinzhu glaring at Wei Wuxian as they followed after her.

“When evening came,” Sizhui explained. “They finally understood. The Qishan Wen Clan ordered the other clans to send their descendents and twenty disciples to Nightless City, in order to correct the sect’s teachings and avoid wasting talents.”

“You dare!” Nie Mingjue shouted, standing up.

But Wen Ruohan only smirked slightly, responding “I suppose so.”

If his other-self was willing to do this, then he must feel prepared for war.

He wondered how much more powerful the simulation’s Wen Clan was, and why they still lost despite that. If his hunch was right, then the whole simulation had been showing him the answer to that exact question.

Wei Wuxian was far more interesting than he could have guessed.

The lotus pier conference room trembled as Jiang Cheng growled.

“The Wen sect really said this? They know no shame, do they?”

Wen Chao opened his mouth to make another comment, but when his eyes passed over an innocently smiling Huaisang, he backed down. He wasn’t sure why — he *obviously* wasn’t scared of the pathetic cultivator — but he suddenly didn’t feel like taunting the Jiangs anymore.

(Huaisang's many passive-aggressive responses were starting to wear at him.)

Wei Wuxian shrugged, “Well, they think they’re the sun shining above all other sects. It’s not the first time the Wen sect has acted so shamelessly. In the past year, they’ve used their power to stop all other sects from night hunting. Just how much prey and land do you think they’ve stolen?”

Jiang Fengmian frowned at them, advising “Watch your words and eat.”

Although both Lan Qiren and Jiang Fengmian had always tried to be careful when it came to speaking openly against the Wen sect, they were suddenly struck by a sense of uncertainty. They had continued not doing anything when the Wen sect took down those other sects, and yet their children had still been told to come to the indoctrination.

They had not provoked the Wens, and yet the war was still going to happen. They had stood by as the Wens took over smaller sects, and now they were targeting to the great sects.

~~Was this their fault?~~

Unlike her children, who had returned to eating at their father’s warning, Madam Yu looked back and forth between the food and her husband, astonished.

“How can you be so calm?” she demanded.

Wei Wuxian frowned, then began nervously biting his lip. At the same time, Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli glanced towards the ground, knowing exactly how this would end.

Both the Jiang siblings unconsciously shifted closer to Jin Zixuan, the only other person who could relate to their family dynamic.

"...Why are you so anxious?" Jiang Fengmian responded.

Instantly, the room seemed to tremble as Madam Yu slammed her hand down on the table.

"Anxious?" she repeated. "How can you be so calm and unconcerned?! What do you think they plan to do if we 'dare' to disobey their orders? Wen Ruohan is pushing his luck!"

It went without saying that, if they rebelled, the Wen Sect would accuse their sect of outlandish things, and wipe it out without hesitation.

Madam Yu glared down at Wen Ruohan, furious at the man's audacity.

"How arrogant," her simulation-self finished. "Either A-Cheng or A-Li must go…. We're literally sending them there just to be hostages!"

"A-Niang, don't be mad, I'll go," Jiang Cheng offered, standing up and saluting her.

"Of course you'll be the one to go!" Madam Yu shouted back. "We can't send your sister, can we?"

A grateful smile crossed Yanli's face as she nodded in appreciation towards her brother, covering up her internal bitterness. If she was just a little better at cultivation, then maybe Jiang Cheng wouldn't be forced to risk himself for her sake. She knew her talents laid elsewhere, but she couldn't help but-

Her thoughts abruptly cut off when Jin Zixuan laid a hand near hers, their pinkies phasing through each other. She glanced over, and made eye contact with him.

Earlier, people had mocked her as unsuitable for him due to her low cultivation; now, he was doing everything in his power to show that he didn't care. She was so, so much stronger than anyone outside her family realized, and her kindness ensured they would never be a copy of either of their parents' relationships.

In a way, she was perfect for him just the way she was.

Yanli relaxed and smiled back.

Head lowered, Wei Wuxian silently ate a few more mouthfuls. Then, he felt a slight tug on his sleeve, and glanced over to see Jiang Yanli holding out a dozen peeled lotus seeds for him to take.

Despite himself, Jin Zixuan couldn't resist glancing over and wondering if Yanli would be willing to peel lotus seeds for him as well.

“Thank you, Shijie,” he whispered with a grin. Jiang Yanli smiled, her somewhat-mild features lighting up with the warm, pale pinks of a sunrise.

“A-Li, stop peeling that!”

Her daughter flinched slightly, setting the lotus pod down. Madam Yu glared harshly, looking down her nose at both her daughter and her ward.

“You’re the master here, not somebody’s servant!” she reminded.

'*Neither is Wei Wuxian,*' several people wanted to say. And yet, with Madam Yu and the lack of an official adoption, he didn't technically count as a member of the family either. With so many mixed signals, it seemed like no surprise that Wei Wuxian's position in the family was debatable.

Wen Ruohan smirked; the more he saw of the Jiangs, the easier obtaining Wei Wuxian seemed to be.

“San-niang,” Jiang Fengmian uttered warningly.

“What? Did I say something wrong?” she asked mockingly, glaring at her husband. “Servant.”

She repeated the word slowly and deliberately, watching Wei Wuxian’s reaction with unconcealed malice.

“Not willing to hear that word? Jiang Fengmian, tell me. Are you planning to let him go?”

Jiang Fengmian sighed, answering “It’s up to him. He can go if he wants to.”

“I’ll go!” Wei Wuxian immediately answered.

Madam Yu glared, about to ask why *only* Wei Wuxian got a choice, when Lan Qiren asked, “You’d let him go?”

Most of the sect leaders were shocked. It was obvious by their interactions that Jiang Fengmian cared for Wei Wuxian on a personal level. An heir would *have* to go, but Wei Wuxian….

“You didn’t even put up a fight,” Lan Wangji whispered without meaning to. Wei Wuxian’s guardian — pretty much the only adult in his life who actually cared about him — was willing to let him unnecessarily become a hostage of the world’s strongest sect, putting up no complaint when he volunteered.

Having expected to have to defend himself on the opposite side, it took Jiang Fengmian a moment to respond, “The… children will be safer if they’re together.”

“Of… of course,” Jin Guangshan nodded, unable to hide his skepticism.

"...How does *anyone* think you care about him more than your son?" Nie Huaisang couldn't resist whispering, making Jiang Cheng do a double take.

After taking a few moments to collect herself, Yu Ziyuan rolled her eyes and spat out "Great. So it's all up to him, huh? He can go if he wants to, but if he doesn't want to, it's definitely possible for him to stay! Why is it that A-Cheng has to go no matter what? Sect Leader Jiang, what a great man you are, raising someone else's kid like this."

"San-niang, you're tired. Why don't you go back and rest."

'*Just avoiding a confrontation for as long as possible*," Wen Ruohan noticed. '*They're really a terrible match.*'

"...Mother-"

"What? Do you want to tell me to shut up as well?" Madam Yu snapped at her son. "You really are an idiot. I told you long ago that you'll never in your whole life be able to surpass the one sitting beside you!"

Madam Jin looked to her friend in confusion. She had thought, based on the rumors, that Jiang Fengmian was the one going around saying those things. What did Yu Ziyuan hope to get out of crushing her son's self-confidence in such a way? And why bring Wei Wuxian into the reprimand?

Were the rumors about Wei Wuxian's real parentage true?

Madam Yu laughed, "You can't pass him in cultivation, night-hunting, or even shooting kites! You'll become the Jiang Clan's leader one day. But look at you. You still haven't improved one bit."

Jiang Cheng flinched in his seat.

"I've told you countless times not to fool around with him, and yet you continue defending him. Just how did I give birth to a son like you?!"

"Enough, San-niang," Jiang Fengmian snapped.

"Jiang-xiong," Jin Guangshan whispered. "Things would be much easier for you if you just allowed her to say what she wanted to say while in private. Women like that can't be reasoned with."

Madam Jin growled.

"I… I'll keep that in mind," Jiang Fengmian accepted, not understanding why anyone *wouldn't* defend their own son in such a situation.

After staring at her husband for a moment, Yu Ziyuan gave a self-deprecating laugh.

"Well, of course," she acknowledged bitterly, standing up and marching out of the room. "You mother is no match for his mother after all."

Wei Wuxian flinched slightly.

The door slammed shut behind her.

Yu Ziyuan growled, threatening everyone away from reading too deeply into her last comment. Wen Chao shrank down in fright.

Although Nie Mingjue didn't have any experience with marriage, he couldn't help but feel exhausted by the scenes before him. Throughout it all, he continued getting the feeling that this was an *avoidable* situation. The things Yu Ziyuan was angry about were understandable, but most of the problems she experienced were made up or self-imposed.

Her anger was causing her to make her life difficult for everyone around her *and* herself.

(Nie Mingjue knew that, in a few short years, he would exhibit similar symptoms as he began to feel the effects of his cultivation. He would need to be careful not to repeat her mistakes then.)

After a tired sigh, Jiang Fengmian continued with, "Let's eat now."

While Yanli continued to watch the direction her mother had just left in, Wei Wuxian turned around to look at Jiang Cheng. His downturned face switched between an unnatural pale and purple, and he trembled with a cataclysmic *hurricane* of emotions.

Jin Guangshan snorted.

"...Is something wrong, Jin-xiong?" Sect Leader Jiang asked, his voice neutral but his eyes cold. Over the course of the scene, Jiang Cheng had moved to sit down, and was now trying to make himself look as small as possible from his curled-up position on the ground.

"Not at all, Jiang-xiong. My apologies, I just thought of something funny."

Hearing the empty appeasement, Wen Ruohan smirked slightly.

"...Tonight," Jiang Fengmian began. "Tonight I'll count eighteen more people. You'll depart tomorrow."

Jiang Cheng nodded, but could not bring himself to ask anything else. He never knew how to speak with his father, while Wei Wuxian was highly competent.

"Uncle Jiang, do you have anything to give us?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Jiang Fengmian smiled, "I've given them to you long ago. Your swords are by your sides, and you keep our motto in your hearts."

"Oh, to 'do what is right, even if it seems impossible!'"

"Which doesn't mean you should stir up trouble even when you know it'll make a mess!" Jiang Cheng immediately pointed out. In an instant, the heavy air over them had lifted.

As Lan Xichen watched the interactions, many things began to make sense. Jiang Wangyin, who took after his mother's personality, had trouble communicating with his father, while Wei Wuxian didn't. Jiang Fengmian didn't seem to know how to fix the problem — or even realize there *was* a problem — so the situation progressively got worse. From there, Madam Yu took her own insecurities and projected them onto the situation, leading to the rumors about Wei Wuxian's parentage and Jiang Fengmian's favoritism.

That was… not an easy situation to fix.

(Though, at the very least, they seemed to be better than his own parents.)

The world around them twitched, flickered, and then reformed into a courtyard with dozens of disciples — hostages — under the care of the Wen sect. Unlike during the archery competition, where they all stood side-by-side, the four sects were gathered inside, while the Wen sects surrounded the field as guards.

Wen flags fluttered in the wind, resting high above the male and female disciples. As Wei Wuxian glanced around, his eyes landed on someone he was extremely excited to see.

Suddenly, a hush passed over the crowd. Someone walked into the head pavilion.

During the discussion conference, Wen Ruohan had been the epitome of lethal grace, not a step uncalculated. He had swept his robes out of the way and glided to his seat, showing the poise expected of the man closest to immortality.

His son's footsteps clunked as he marched to that same seat, collapsing down with a groan and swinging his own feet onto the table, chuckling as he did. Then, he reached out and pulled a laughing woman in. She was Wang Lingjiao, a servant from the recently conquered Wang clan.

Wen Chao gazed appraisingly upon the woman who would soon become his concubine, not noticing the disgusted stares from most people present. Meanwhile, Wen Ruohan smirked. If his future self had put Chao-er in charge of the hostages, then it was obvious what his true intentions were.

He was trying to provoke them.

He would weaken some of the Great Sect's strongest fighters, prevent an attack until the Wen Clan was ready, and probably gain an excuse to attack all in one. It was quite a brilliant move; a pity that it wouldn't work now that the other clans were seeing the results.

"Who's that woman?" Wei Wuxian asked as Nie Huaisang moved to hide behind him.

"Her name is Wang Lingjiao," Nie Huaisang explained. "She was one of Wen-furen's maids, but Wen Chao is a womanizer, and then…"

Both Wen Chao and Jin Guangshan felt a chill creep up their spine when Madam Jin began to growl. The power imbalance between Jin Guangshan and many of his targets had not escaped

her notice, so Wen Chao's relationship with a servant made her highly uncomfortable.

"You just know everything about everyone, don't you?" Jin Zixuan asked Huaisang, awed. The latter had no comment.

Despite the woman hanging off his arm, Wen Chao's mind was focused elsewhere. In the middle of the crowd, a beautiful young woman in a soft pink robe glanced around nervously.

Seeing his gaze, Wang Lingjiao hissed angrily.

"Who is she?" Nie Mingjue asked, glaring slightly at Wen Chao. He lifted his hands in surrender to show that he didn't know, but that only made Mingjue's view of him fall.

"I… think I've seen her before," Jin Zixuan observed. "I think she's either an outer disciple or a maid from my sect. I'm not sure what her name is though."

"Luo Qingyang," Madam Jin answered after a moment of thought.

Inwardly, Jin Guangshan smiled. The heirs had to be sent, but it was best for the other 19 disciples to be low-ranking meat shields; really, he had no idea what Jiang Fengmian was thinking in letting Wei Wuxian go. Jin Guangshan would *never* have sent Jin Zixun or anyone else he was personally attached to!

Glancing between Wang Lingjiao and the object of Wen Chao's attention, Wei Wuxian huffed a laugh.

"Seems that maid is pretty narrow-minded," he decided.

Neither Madam Yu nor Madam Jin were able to hide their absolute disgust. Did that woman have no sense of pride? Hanging off the Wen's second young master and wearing barely anything to cover herself!

How *dare* someone like that try to stand above their children?!

At the sound of a fractured breath behind him, Wei Wuxian turned around. Among the tense Lan disciples, Lan Wangji stood with a slight hunch, clenching the fabric of his robes as he gritted his teeth in pain.

Lan Qiren felt his heart stop.

"Wangji?" Xichen asked, hurrying over to the pained simulation of his brother. Seeing the slight trembles in the virtual-Wangji's body made his heart sink with dread.

What could have happened? If Wangji was injured, why didn't Xichen go to the indoctrination instead? Why would he subject his brother to this?

"Something doesn't seem right with the Lan Clan of Gusu," Wei Wuxian observed. However, before he could go over and investigate, Wen Chao directed the announcer from the archery competition forward.

“Listen up!” the man ordered. “Hand in your swords one by one.”

“*What?!*” Lan Qiren gasped out.

Similar discontent was mumbled throughout the crowd until no one person’s voice could be made out. Among the indecipherable mumble, the simulation specified specific voices.

A Jin inner disciple shouted, “How can we just hand our swords over to you like this?!”

“This is absolutely absurd,” Jiang Cheng agreed.

“A cultivator’s sword should never leave their side! Why should we hand them over?!”

The Wen sect wanted them to just *give up* their main form of protection?

Madam Yu stood up and glared, “How can you have the *audacity* to require-”

“Who said that?” Wen Chao demanded in between getting pieces of fruit fed to him by Wang Lingjiao. The Nie disciple who had spoken glared defiantly up at him.

Then, Wen Chao glanced behind him, and nodded once.

Jiang Fengmian felt his blood turn to ice. Wangji gasped.

“Wen Zhuliu!”

Even before Lan Wangji had finished speaking, Wen Zhuliu had landed before the Nie disciple. He preformed a palm-strike that sent the Nie disciple flying, purple energy slithering around his arm like a snake.

Lan Wangji ran forward and caught the disciple, cringing when he applied too much force on one leg.

Lan Xichen glanced towards his brother again in concern, but everyone else kept their eyes trained on the Nie disciple. Given that it was Wen Zhuliu who had preformed the attack, there was no doubt as to what had occured.

The Core Melting Hand wasn't known for his mercy. Wen Chao now had one of the world’s most dangerous weapons at his beck and call.

Witnessing Wen Zhuliu’s power first-hand filled the other sect leaders and heirs with a sensation of suffocating doubt.

How on earth could the Wen Sect be defeated when they had *him?*

Powerful though many of them might be, they were nothing without their cultivation.

“Wei Wuxian, wait!”

Jiang Cheng's shout was the watchers' only warning before Wei Wuxian ran to the Nie disciple's side, kneeling next to Lan Wangji as the disciple gasped and heaved on the ground.

Suddenly, the world around them turned black except for a golden orb floating in the sky. Soon, the core was surrounded by writhing purple tendrils which dived in, shattering it to dust. It dissipated in seconds.

Back outside, the disciple *screamed*.

He fell over unconscious, and the other hostages were shocked into silence.

"That was quite enlightening," Wen Ruohan murmured, fascinated by the visual representation of a technique which, until now, Wen Ruohan had only understood in theory.

"You… he-"

Wei Wuxian grabbed the now-pale man's wrist, then flinched back in frustration.

"His golden core was… melted."

Everyone sucked in a breath.

Trembling slightly, Jiang Yanli forced herself to sit down so that she didn't fall over. Even to someone with a weak golden core like her, such an act was horrible to witness.

To the other heirs, it was nearly *traumatising.*

Their golden cores were what they spent their whole lives developing. Nearly every waking moment was spent working on them, refining their power so that they could be useful. Cultivators shaped their lives around their cores; losing it meant losing your power, rank, future, livelihood, and, sometimes, your reason to live. After all, what kind of person could possibly accept becoming a shallow husk of their former selves?

The warmth of their cores — that steady thrum of power and *life* — was part of any cultivator who possessed one, no matter how weak. It was thousands of hours of blood, sweat, and tears. In a way, they were nothing without their cores. To just *lose* it-

"I can't imagine anything more horrible."

Their silence was imitated by the gathered disciples. Then-

"It's… it's the Core Melting Hand, Wen Zhuliu!" someone screamed in terror.

Wen Chao immediately burst into cackles, suddenly much more excited about the coming events. If he had Wen Zhuliu with him, then those other heirs would stand no chance!

"Who else dares to disobey?" the simulated Wen Chao demanded amidst his own laughter. "People like you who rebel and act disrespectfully have set bad examples. It is my job to civilize you all!"

Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and Jin Zixuan stood next to each other, all glaring up at Wen Chao. Past grudges and other relationships were being set aside in favor of standing united against the Wen Clan.

Just as Wei Wuxian tensed and moved as if to step forward, Jiang Cheng blocked him, whispering, "Stay out of trouble. There are far too many cultivators whose futures were destroyed because of Wen Zhuliu. You can't risk your life for nothing."

Nie Huaisang frowned slightly. He understood why Jiang Cheng said that — temporarily agreed with it, even — but had trouble supporting it when he *knew* the person who just had their core crushed.

'*Li Chiyan isn't 'nothing,*'" he thought. Yes, during this time of being hostages without backup, it was probably best to cooperate, but-

But they knew for a fact that the war was coming, and every time they made concessions for the Wen Clan that sect only grew stronger.

"Hand in your swords!" Wen Chao repeated.

A Wen servant stepped forward and held his hand out in front of Wei Wuxian. Hesitantly, Wei Wuxian looked back and forth between Suibian and the man, his uncertainty obvious. After several seconds, he held it out.

He glared at the ground, incomparably frustrated by his own powerlessness.

When it was Jiang Cheng's turn, he unconsciously held Sandu tighter, causing the Wen disciple to struggle for a moment before Jiang Cheng forced himself to release it. On the other hand, when someone stepped up to take Huaisang's sword, he handed it over without complaint, smiling as he did.

The sight made Nie Mingjue, who had spent years trying to make sure his brother didn't hide his sword away to avoid practice, smile slightly. Of everyone, this order probably affected Huaisang the least.

Jin Zixuan was the most angry of all with the order, but, when Wen Zhuliu began to approach, he handed his sword over without further complaint.

Worried, Wei Wuxian glanced back at Lan Wangji. Despite the other boy's ice-cold expression, he unstrapped his sword and handed it over.

Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren both breathed out sighs of relief. If Wangji was truly injured, this was not something worth going against the Wens for.

"Gongzi, we have appropriated all the swords."

"Very good. Now, hand that stuff out to them."

Immediately, a paperback book was trust into Wei Wuxian's hands. He blinked several times, reading the title.

Wen Chao explained, "*The Quintessence of Wens* is the collection of the Wen Clan's past generations of Sect Leaders' famous sayings and warnings. From now on, you will only follow these principles in your cultivation. Everyone must be able to recite it backwards fluently and remember it at all times. I will ask someone to recite it at every sunrise, noon, and midday from now on. Those who cannot will be punished in accordance with the Wen Clan's rules. You can begin."

"*Only* those rules?" Lan Qiren repeated, crossly. Even the Lan Sect didn't restrict disciples to that extent. In addition, he doubted every disciple would be able to memorize the book.

On this, at least, Jiang Cheng wasn't worried. Despite his infamously terrible memory when it came to other people, Wei Wuxian could soak up new information and texts like a sponge.

Somewhat-reluctantly, the disciples all opened up their booklates. While Jiang Cheng began reading, Wei Wuxian simply flipped through pages without care.

"Seems all kinds of nonsense can become quotes," he observed.

"Undisciplined brat," Wen Chao hissed. "How dare he-"

"Chao-er. *Enough.*"

He continued flipping through, eyes barely skimming the pages, until he suddenly stopped flipping to look at a quote more closely. An amused smirk crept onto his lips.

"Hm. This is a pretty good phrase."

"A-Xian," Jiang Fengmian whispered warningly despite knowing that it was pointless. He knew that look on Wei Wuxian's face; it only appeared when he was up to mischief.

Back at the Lotus Pier, the Jiang Sect's purple flags fluttered majestically in the fierce wind. Inside, Jiang Yanli sat down at a table, eating in silence. Both of the seats next to her were empty.

"I'm here now, A-Jie," Jiang Cheng whispered when the real Yanli also started looking a bit down. She nodded at him with a smile, but sympathized with the stress her other-self must be going through.

Neither of them had any way to contact A-Xian.

"I wonder how A-Cheng and A-Xian are doing," she told her father.

"Don't worry so much. Disciples of Yunmeng Jiang aren't so weak as to crack under just one of the outside world's waves," he assured.

'*That doesn't mean Wei Wuxian should keep going against the Wens,*' Jiang Cheng protested internally, wishing his brother would just *keep his head down* for once.

As their view changed to mountain paths, Lan Sizhui's voice explained, "Wen Chao's 'special education' turned out to be more than just the memorization. During night hunts, he made the disciples do the brunt of the work, tracking down and subjecting demons, until he swept in and easily took out the prey that had already been beaten to a pulp."

The simulation showed these events, displaying Jin Zixuan and another Jin disciple fighting a dangerous Yao with their bare hands, only for Wen Chao — who still had his sword — to confidently kill the prey that had already been taken down. Once he did, the other Wens congratulated him.

"Thanks to Young Master, we killed the demon!" one said.

"Young Master is really amazing."

"Pft, it was trivial," Wen Chao responded.

"You shameless, *arrogant*-"

"Da-ge," Nie Huaisang whined, cutting off Nie Mingjue's next words. "Don't worry so much, I'm sure it's fine."

"Can't even handle such a weak monster?" Wen Chao asked, glancing down his nose a Jin Zixuan. "Aren't you supposed to be a skilled archer or something?"

"You-"

"Excuse me?" Jin Zixuan demanded, bristling. "If you weren't such a-"

"A-Xuan," Jiang Yanli whispered, "We know. You'll gain nothing from arguing."

"Zixuan, let it go," his friend advised. "It's not worth it."

Both inside and outside the simulation, everyone was walking on eggshells around the Wens. They couldn't push too much without potentially putting their sects at risk, so they didn't.

~~And yet the war happened anyways, didn't it?~~

"Wen Chao had boasted that he would win first place at the archery competition," Sizhui reminded them. "However, Lan Zhan, Jin Zixuan, Lan Xichen, and Wei Wuxian made up the top four. Since Lan Xichen wasn't present, Wen Chao took a special delight in ordering around the three who remained, making sure to scold them every day."

Wen Chao smirked, delighted by the thought.

(Both Madam Yu and Jiang Cheng frowned, frustrated at the additional reminder that Jiang Cheng hadn't made it in the top four. It made the simulated Madam Yu's earlier words ring in their heads again, and, worst of all, Jiang Fengmian seemed pleased by the reminder.)

(Jiang Fengmian, on the other hand, couldn't understand why they would *want* Jiang Cheng to be targeted.)

"Hurry up," Wen Zhuliu ordered as Wen Chao moved on to the next target. Even the brash, arrogant, and pampered Jin Zixuan wasn't willing to risk provoking him; Wen Ruohan couldn't have chosen a better guard dog.

Jin Guangshan almost couldn't believe that Wen Ruohan had managed to secure such loyalty from the Core Melting Hand. Despite being ordered around by Wen Chao, he never even tried to complain. It was truly impressive.

Unlike Jin Zixuan, Lan Wangji seemed to be in a state of inner peace and absolute indifference, as though his soul had already risen from his body. He never reacted to any of Wen Chao's words, and, beyond an unnatural limp in his leg, appeared divided from the physical world.

"Go, Wangji-xiong," Nie Huaisang cheered, getting an exhausted glance back but no further comments. Both Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren internally agreed with Nie Huaisang's cheer, adding words of encouragement in their heads.

Finally, Wei Wuxian, who had been through years of Madam Yu's diverse methods of scolding when he was at Lotus Pier, seemed almost *amused* by Wen Chao's attempts. Several times, he appeared to be choking back laugher at Wen Chao's attempts to humiliate him, hardly blinking an eye to such actions.

As impressive as Wei Wuxian's unwavering confidence was, Wen Ruohan still found himself disappointed. The constant beatings which had been implied to take place at Lotus Pier had refined Wei Wuxian's mental strength to a level beyond what the other people his age were capable of. That would also make it significantly harder for him to break Wei Wuxian's will and loyalty.

The Jiangs had done an excellent job turning Wei Wuxian into the perfect soldier. By giving him a mix of people to be loyal to and people to be afraid of, they could mold him as they saw fit without breaking his affection for them. Wen Ruohan doubted it was intentional on their part, but it would prove to be annoying nonetheless.

(Luckily, the simulation would give detailed instructions on exactly how to turn the boy into the Yiling Patriarch.)

Now the crowd was being herded up a mountain like livestock, surrounded on all sides by Wen disciples, and led by Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu.

"Dusk-Creek Mountain," Sizhui explained.

As they traveled deeper into the forest, the branches over their heads became thicker and thicker, and more and more of the sun became blocked out. Every small noise made by a bug or animal seemed amplified in the silence, until some of the hostages began laughing.

“Ah, what a fragrant smell,” a female disciple said. Wei Wuxian turned to look, and saw a cluster of four girls talking to each other. One was Luo Qingyang, whom Wen Chao had focused on before.

Lan Qiren turned to pay more attention. If the simulation specified her, then the servant girl would surely be an important factor in future events.

“Good thing you brought your perfume sachet, MianMian. The bugs stayed away from us all day!”

“It smells good too. I feel so much more awake~”

Curious, Jiang Yanli drifted closer, only to remember belatedly that they couldn’t smell anything in the simulation.

Luo Qingyang, or “MianMian,” smiled, explaining “The inside is filled with medicinal plants, so it’s both pretty and practical. I’ve still got a couple left. Do any of you want one?”

“MianMian! Save me one too!” Wei Wuxian sang out, skipping over.

Madam Yu only sighed in defeat, knowing she couldn’t do anything to change the simulation.

“Who are you? Why are you calling me MianMian?”

“They were calling you MianMian, so I thought that was your name. What? Am I wrong?”

After a moment of speechlessness, she shouted, “You can’t call me that!”

“Tell me your name, and I won’t call you MianMian anymore. Sound like a fair deal?”

“Does he… *always* do this?” Lan Wangji asked, remembering the Jiang shidis’ earlier comments.

“Flirting?” Jiang Cheng asked, tiredly. “All. The. Time.”

“He never goes any further than that, though,” Jiang Yanli assured the frozen jade.

Scoffing slightly, MianMian asked, “Why should I tell you? You should say your own name before asking for someone else’s.”

“Sure. I’ll tell you, so keep it in mind,” Wei Wuxian promised, crossing his arms casually. “My name is Yuandao.”

Several people scrunched their brows in confusion. Getting it right away, Lan Wangji just sighed tiredly.

“Yundao?” MianMian and her friends repeated.

“MianMian,” one girl spoke, pulling her friend close. “I can’t think of any young master who bears this name. But judging by his look and demeanor, he’s not a nobody.”

The girls frowned and glanced at him, until, finally, Lan Wangji spoke up.

“Wordplay,” he explained.

“Huh? Oh!” Nie Huaisang smiled, delighted. “Oh, Wei-xiong. Good one!”

“No! It’s not a ‘good one!’ I can’t believe he did that!” Jiang Cheng added.

“Very impressive,” Jin Guangshan purred.

All the while, Lan Wangji glared at the ground. “Green, green, the riverside grass // It’s ceaseless bounds yearn for miles and miles,” was turned into “MianMian yearns for Yuandao.” Wei Ying had flirted with her using *poetry.*

Wangji had never been more jealous of someone.

Flushing, MianMian’s eyes went wide as she spun around and shouted, “Who’s yearning for you? You really have no face!”

One of her friends laughed and said, “Wei Wuxian, you’re really shameless! I’ll tell you, her name is-”

The last revelation was cut off by Luo Qingyang’s frantic and flustered movement, shouting “Don’t you dare tell him that! Let’s go!”

Madam Jin had been slightly worried when the flirting began, but her fears were assuaged when Wei Wuxian made no move to chase after the girls. As Yanli said, he really just enjoyed playing around; he wouldn’t push anyone farther than that.

(Not like her husband.)

Smiling, Wei Wuxian crept back to Lan Wangji, who asked, “Do you behave in such a frivolous manner with everyone you meet?”

“...I guess so?”

“Impudent.”

“Jealous?” Xichen whispered.

“*No*,” Wangji snapped back.

Wangji sped away, leaving Wei Wuxian to fall back with Jiang Cheng and a few other disciples.

“Ah, Wangji-xiong, Wangji-xiong. Wei-xiong is never going to understand how you feel if you-”

“Be. Silent.”

There were a few minutes of tension caused by Wen Chao's closeness, but soon people relaxed. They were still far enough away to avoid being heard. Conversation then shifted to insulting their ever-so-gracious hosts.

“Those damn Wen-dogs!” someone grumbled.

“I can’t believe they’re making us do this!”

“Every Wen-dog should go straight to hell,” Jiang Cheng agreed. Wei Wuxian looked like he was about to join in, but a moment later, his eyes inadvertently glanced back instead.

Just like before, Lan Wangji was keeping his face as blank as possible. However, he couldn’t hide the fact that his right leg was hitting the ground lighter than his left, as though he couldn’t put any pressure on it.

Lan Xichen, who had been standing by the simulated Lan Wangji as soon as the indoctrination started, felt relieved when he noticed Wei Wuxian’s eyes. Perhaps they would finally learn what was wrong.

Granting Lan Xichen’s unspoken wish, the simulated Wei Wuxian turned to Jiang Cheng and said, “Hey, Jiang Cheng. Doesn’t it look like Lan Zhan is limping? He’s not putting any pressure on his leg-”

“Stay out of it if you know what’s good for you,” Jiang Cheng hissed.

Xichen understood Jiang Cheng’s hesitance, but he couldn’t help but frown at his warning.

Although he didn’t press Jiang Cheng for answers, Wei Wuxian kept looking back at Lan Wangji as they walked, expression coated with worry. After a few seconds had passed, he finally couldn’t stand it anymore and slipped back to where Lan Wangji was, body language the picture of casual grace.

“What happened to your leg?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Lan Wangji responded, still looking forward.

Jiang Cheng sighed, “You and Wei Wuxian are both such idiots.”

“If there’s nothing he can do to change what’s happened to me, then there’s no point in explaining,” Lan Wangji responded, to the disappointed head shakes of both Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang.

“Wangji-xiong, Wei-xiong is super capable. You can rely on him a little!”

Huaisang’s brilliant argument was seamlessly ignored.

Grinning slightly, Wei Wuxian slipped around Lan Wangji to walk backwards while facing him.

“We’re so close, but you won’t even look at me? How cold.”

“Not close,” Lan Wangji pointlessly refuted, but it was obvious (to Xichen) that even *he* didn’t believe that.

“Come on, is your leg hurt?” Wei Wuxian asked, continuing to pester. “When did it happen? Don’t force yourself if you’re hurt. Do you want me to carry-”

His words were cut off as Nie Huaisang dragged him aside. Allowing himself to be pulled along, Wei Wuxian was brought ahead to where Jiang Cheng and several others waited for him.

“He’s even moodier than usual,” Wei Wuxian complained. “What’s wrong with his leg?”

“Why don’t you worry about yourself before you worry about him?” Jiang Cheng requested again.

Even though Lan Wangji wasn’t looking at him, Jiang Cheng glanced to the ground when he made the comment. Over the course of the simulation, they had slowly started to become… friends.

He prayed his simulation-self wouldn’t ruin that.

But one of the disciples beside them leaned closer to Wei Wuxian and whispered, “Of course he looks pale. Last month, the Wen Clan burned the Cloud Recesses down.”

“Burnt down?!”

“What?” Lan Qiren demanded, growing pale.

“What about Xiongzhang?” Lan Wangji asked, wide-eyed. “I was… the one sent to….”

If the Lan Clan sent him while he had a broken leg, then something even worse must have happened to Lan Xichen. The future Lan Wangji wasn’t Sect Leader Lan; surely, that meant Xichen was still alive.

But, until now, they hadn’t had any reason to question whether that was true.

(Suddenly, the fire that spread from Wen Ruohan’s go game made much more sense.)

As Nie Mingjue moved to stand by and support the shocked Lan Xichen, he thought self-deprecatingly to himself. Of course the Cloud Recess was attacked for the archery competition.

Because the other Four Great Sects had stood by as the Wen Clan decimated smaller sects, they had allowed the Wen Clan to grow powerful enough to attack them.

“By the Wen Sect’s people?” Jiang Cheng asked, having heard similar rumors in the past few days.

“...You could say that. You could also say… that the Lan Sect burnt everything down itself.”

Lan Qiren gritted his teeth in worry.

As the explanation began, their surroundings changed to Gusu at night. Wen Xu stood before a kneeling, captured group of Lan disciples, presumably demanding information on how to get in.

In a voice-over, the watchers heard the explanation continue, “The eldest son of the Wen Sect, Wen Xu, went to Gusu. He accused the Lan Sect’s leader of something and forced the Lan people to burn the down their own home! They said something about cleaning up the place and allowing it to be reborn in firelight. Most of the Cloud Recess and the surrounding forests have been burnt down.”

He had hoped, given the glimpse of the future, that the Lan sect had not been heavily impacted by the Sunshot Campaign. However, Lan Qiren now knew that those hopes were futile. The Lan Sect had been heavily hit by the Wens for no justifiable reason, just like the dozens of minor clans that came before.

The other Clan Leaders frowned in worry; if the Lan Sect had been attacked, then another great sect would surely follow.

Wen Xu, still silenced, seemed to be shouting at the captured Lan disciples. Then, frustrated, motioned to his men. A Wen soldier slit a Lan’s neck.

“Lan Yi!” Lan Xichen gasped out. Cultivators occasionally died in night hunts, but watching someone die from an intentional act of human cruelty was somehow much more unsettling.

One by one, the disciples were dispatched, until finally the one at the front seemed to shout something. Wen Xu grinned and brought down the barrier surrounding the Cloud Recesses. Su She had sold them out.

“That traitor!” Jiang Cheng shouted. “Isn’t he the one-”

“The one who Wei Wuxian and Wangji saved from the abyss?” Xichen guessed, expression even colder than his brother’s. “Yes, he is.”

Right before Wen Xu moved to kill Su She as well, Lan Wangji ran into the grotto, allowing the surviving disciples to escape. Instead of speaking, however Wen Xu immediately motioned to his men.

They moved to burn down the forest.

The disciple’s voice-over continued, “Just like that, hundreds of years of paradise were destroyed. The leader of the Lan Sect was also heavily injured; no one knows if he’s alive.”

“Father?” Lan Wangji asked, unable to add anything else. Quickly, Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang gathered around him in a protective barrier.

“Is Lan Zhan’s leg related to this?”

In his shock, Lan Wangji didn’t even have the mental capacity to be flustered by Wei Wuxian’s fixation on him. All he could see was the fire beginning to spread before Wen Xu’s delighted gaze.

“It is. The first place Wen Xu ordered them to burn down was the Library Pavilion. He declared that he’d teach anyone who wasn’t willing to do it a lesson. Lan Wangji refused. He was attacked by Wen Xu’s people and they broke one of his legs. It hasn’t even healed yet, and he was dragged all the way out here. Who knows what they’re planning.”

The vision changed to the Library Pavilion, showing a limping Lan Wangji standing before the blazing doors, his cracked guqin laying on the floor before him. Despite the soot covering his face and the tremble in his stance, his golden eyes were alive with the most intensity and emotion the watchers had even seen from him. They glowed with unwavering determination.

At the direct contrast between Lan Wangji’s and Su She’s response to the Wen Clan, Lan Qiren turned to his nephew and nodded once. Although he rarely said it aloud, this time he felt it was necessary.

“Good job, Wangji. I’m proud of you.”

There was silence for a moment as Lan Wangji turned to him in shock, not understanding why his uncle was congratulating him after he, obviously, failed to stop the Wens.

He refuted, "I apologize for my failure."

These words made Wen Chao’s snickers turned into uncontrolled laughter that shook the room. He turned his gaze on the Second Jade of Lan.

“Not so arrogant *now,* are you?” he demanded. “Your cowardly tricks during the competition won’t work against the true might of the Wen Clan!”

Lan Wangji glared furiously in response, but no one could make a sound. The Wen Clan’s might had grown large enough to attack the other Great Sects *unprovoked*. They had started by cutting off one of their greatest threats, the knowledge kept hidden in the Cloud Recesses’ libraries. The Sunshot Campaign was starting.

With the exception of Wen Chao, no one mocked the Lan Clan’s weakness. It was a well-known fact that the Wen Clan was almost as powerful as the other great sects *combined.*

And, if they were willing to go against one, attacks on the others couldn’t be far behind.

Wei Wuxian moved as if to go over to Wangji again, only to be stopped by Jiang Cheng.

“What’s wrong with you now? Are you really going to provoke him some more? You’re just digging your own grave!”

“I’m not going to provoke him. Look at his leg. We’ve been walking for so many days — the state of his injury must have worsened. If he keeps walking like this, I doubt he’ll ever be able to use that leg again.”

Lan Qiren flinched again at the declaration of the severity. His only consolation was the fact that the future Lan Wangji had obviously been perfectly capable of moving around.

But to think that the unruly, unscrupulous, rebellious *Wei Wuxian* was the one most concerned with helping Wangji. It was ridiculous. He refused to accept that Wei Wuxian had a crush on Wangji (and doubly refused to accept the fact that it might be mutual).

But, for the first time, some part of his brain whispered to Qiren that maybe Wei Wuxian wasn’t the *worst* person for Wangji to be interested in.

After thinking the problem over for a moment, Wei Wuxian decided, “I’m gonna carry him.”

“What?”

Lan Qiren officially took back every good thing he had just thought about Wei Wuxian.

“It’s not like you’re close to him,” Jiang Cheng protested, pulling Wei Wuxian even closer. “Don’t you see how much he hates you? You’re gonna carry him? He probably wants you to stay as far away as possible!”

When Huaisang gave him an indescribably disappointed look, Jiang Cheng protested with “What? In that future, *everyone* thought he and Wei Wuxian hated each other. It’s not just me!”

“It’s all right if he hates me — I don’t hate him. I’ll get him onto my back the second I grab hold of him. What? Do you think he’ll try to choke me to death when he gets on my back?”

“We aren’t even able to take care of ourselves! We don’t have time to care about the trivialities of others!”

“First, this isn’t a triviality. Second, *someone* needs to do something about this.”

The differences between Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were becoming more and more prominent as time went on. To Jin Guangshan, the most obvious divergence was in their priorities: Jiang Cheng wanted to protect the Jiang Clan, while Wei Wuxian wanted to protect everyone. The former used their pre-existing relationship as a way to determine whether to help, while the latter used his own moral code, an understandable difference due to their upbringings.

He wondered where his son — another heir — would land on this scale.

With that declaration, Wei Wuxian pulled away from Jiang Cheng and walked back over to Lan Wangji. They had been told to search around the mountain for the cave, and Lan Wangji had been forced to sit down because of his damaged leg. Wei Wuxian kneeled in front of him, facing away.

“Lan Zhan, get on. I’ll carry you.”

“Shameless,” Lan Wangji muttered, much more quietly and fondly than his previous outraged declarations.

“Come on up,” Wei Wuxian continued. “Your right leg can’t take much more. Besides, we’re good friends, aren’t we? Don’t be so embarrassed.”

Lan Wangji huffed and turned away, “No thanks.”

“Hey, what are you doing?!” a Wen disciple demanded. “No slacking off!”

Lan Wangji forced himself to stand up and walk. Wei Wuxian stared after him in shock, before another Wen disciple shoved him forward with another reprimand. The look on Jiang Cheng’s face was very much an ‘I told you so.’

In the privacy of his mind, Lan Wangji sent out a quiet ‘*Thank you, Wei Ying.*’

“You all spread out and look for it!” Wang Lingjiao ordered. “The monster’s cave Young Master Wen is looking for is nearby. If you delay Young Master Wen’s night hunt, you’ll regret it.”

“Just look at her,” Jiang Cheng muttered. “Even a lowly maid can order us around.”

The reminder made Madam Yu growl once again. Even Jiang Fengmian’s reproaching gaze did nothing to quell her rage at the audacity of the Wen Clan.

“Just let her be,” Nie Huaisang advised, hiding behind Wei Wuxian. “Don’t mess with her. That branding iron is so scary, leaving scars as soon as it touches your skin! It may even damage meridian points in the worst cases! Anyways, just avoid it as much as possible.”

“Do you think they’re *animals*?!” Madam Yu demanded, unable to restrain herself any further.

Jin Guangshan laughed nervously, “Now, now. We’ve agreed to not punish for things that have yet to occur.”

“And that makes it right?”

“Well, this is a surprise,” Wen Ruohan smirked, raising an eyebrow. “You’re the *last* person I expected to disapprove. Don’t you take great delight in whipping your ward whenever you find the slightest excuse for it? So often that *no one* was surprised when you specifically targeted him?”

“How we train our disciples in Yunmeng is no concern of yours.”

“You mistreat your *most powerful* disciple,” he continued, glancing at Jiang Cheng to make the full insult clear. “A head disciple who embodies the Jiang Sect motto is regularly singled out. Doesn’t that *prove* the necessity of the indoctrination camp? We’re simply using your tools on the right people.”

“The people that object to the Wen Sect's values?” Jiang Fengmian couldn’t resist asking.

“But of course, as your son so eloquently put it, your own motto is just an excuse to stir up trouble even when you know it’ll make a mess.”

“That’s not what I-”

“I know, A-Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian assured. Although he was speaking to his son, he made sure to maintain eye contact with a smirking Wen Ruohan. After several long seconds, Wen Ruohan finally glanced back at the simulation, apparently deciding to hold off on causing another argument.

For now, at least.

A woman’s scream resounded from behind the trio, and Wei Wuxian turned to look.

Jin Guangshan raised in eyebrow, recognizing the tone of that scream intimately.

“Please don’t do this, Master Wen!” Luo Qingyang begged, backed against a tree. Wen Chao loomed over her, grinning down as he laughed and approached.

“You sick, deplorable *beast!”* Madam Jin shouted, turning a furious glare on Wen Chao. He shrank closer to his father, only to back away again when he found no support.

Wen Ruohan didn’t particularly mind what was happening, but he certainly wasn’t going to endorse it in front of the other sect leaders. Even *he* wasn’t that shameless.

As Wen Chao crept closer to the trembling woman, he grinned asked, “Don’t do what? Don’t hold your hands, or don’t kiss your pretty face?”

Right as he leaned in to kiss her, a leaf appeared in front of his mouth. Holding it as a barrier, Wei Wuxian smiled conspiratorially.

“Yes,” Jin Zixuan hissed, disgusted by his father’s comfort in the situation. “Go Wei Wuxian! You can do it!”

Wen Chao scowled.

“It’s not at all funny when you use force, right Wen-gongzi?” Wei Wuxian asked, grinning in a childish mischief that was the opposite of Wen Chao’s earlier smug lust.

“You-”

“What’s the rush?” Wei Wuxian leaned close to whisper, then made a beckoning motion. “Wen-gongzi, I’ve got something even better! The best erotic paintings.”

Luo Qingyang looked back and forth between the pair in confusion.

“I… suppose that’s one way to solve it,” Nie Mingjue muttered hesitantly. To someone like him, who favored direct and forceful solutions, Wei Wuxian’s roundabout teasing were more than a little perplexing.

However, it was notable that Wei Wuxian’s method protected the girl *without* making the Jiang Clan a target. Perhaps Jiang Cheng’s warnings were being heard after all.

As Wen Chao turned his grubby hands on the book, Wang Lingjiao came running over.

“Wen-gongzi, I found it!” she called. “I found the cave!”

“Ah? Where is it? Take me there right away!”

He stood up to follow her, not noticing how Wang Lingjiao’s smile vanished the moment she laid eyes on MianMian. It was clear what had almost happened. As they walked, she grabbed onto Wen Chao’s arm even tighter than usual, turning her simpering maiden eyes up to eleven.

“Wen-gongzi, I went through a lot of trouble to find it~” she sang.

Wen Chao highly approved of his new concubine.

“MianMian, are you okay?” one of the girl’s friends asked.

“I’m… I’m fine.”

“Wei-xiong, where did you get those erotic paintings?” Nie Huaisang asked.

Wei Wuxian smirked, reaching into his robes and pulling out the book he had tempted Wen Chao with just a few minutes ago. It was *The Quintessence of Wens.*

“Clever, clever,” Wen Ruohan muttered, recognizing the boy’s characteristic resourcefulness. In addition, Wei Wuxian’s ability to seem perfectly natural despite making it up as he went along was highly impressive. Though that did mean Wen Ruohan would need to carefully monitor Wei Wuxian at all times.

It wouldn’t due for the boy to slip out of his cage, would it?

Ignoring Nie Huaisang’s shocked exclamation, Wei Wuxian reached down and picked up one of the aforementioned perfume patches off the ground, dropped during the earlier scuffle.

“Woah, this sachet smells so good!” he complimented. “Can I have one, MianMian?”

She turned towards him with a conflicted expression, trying to reconcile her annoyance at Wei Wuxian's "Yundao" comment with how he had just saved her. Seeing her hesitance, Wei Wuxian smirked.

"You're ignoring me? Then I'll start asking around! I'm sure there'll be someone willing to tell me your name!"

"Fine, just take it!" she shouted, storming off with a bright red flush on her cheeks.

As she left, a Wen disciple shouted, "What are you doing? Let's go now!"

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes, but walked towards the cave nonetheless.

"...What do you think is in the cave?" Nie Huaisang asked, suddenly getting nervous. Seeing that, Nie Mingjue tried to offer some reassurance.

"I'm sure it's nothing. At most, a few low-level yao. It would be unreasonable to expect you to fight anything more than that without your swords."

Despite his best efforts, his words did very little to comfort the crowd.

"This must be it!" a Wen disciple shouted as the scenery reformed around the watchers into a large hole in the ground. The hostages all moved to look down the hole, but no one could make out anything but darkness.

Suddenly, Nie Huaisang stepped back in fear and tilted over.

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue shouted.

Two Wen disciples caught him before he hit the ground, and Wen Chao looked down his nose at him. However, due to Nie Huaisang's reputation, no one was surprised; after all the walking they did, the terror of the hunt must have been too much for him, causing him to faint.

"Idiot," Wen Chao cursed, motioning at his officers to take the Nie heir away.

Although he wanted to be annoyed at Wen Chao for the insult, Nie Mingjue was too relieved that Huaisang wouldn't be in danger to care.

(His powerlessness, both inside and outside the simulation, was starting to wear at him.)

Under Wen Chao's orders, the disciples all began climbing down a large tree trunk, soon reaching the bottom. However, even with their torches, they couldn't make out what they were trying to find.

"Why is it so dark in here?" someone whispered. "What are we looking for?"

Huaisang desperately hoped they wouldn't get the answers to those questions.

"Careful."

“Listen, I hear water droplets.”

“Come on, let’s go check it out.”

“Please be safe,” Jiang Yanli whispered, disliking the building tension caused by the search. Opposite her, Wen Chao cackled slightly, eager to see the ferocious beast he would soon kill.

They crept through the empty cave, barely able to make out even the rock formations along the walls. Then, finally, they reached a pool of water which reflected the light of their torches as a blue glow. This light allowed them to make out the island in the middle of the water.

Wei Wuxian gave an impressed sound.

“Ah? What are you standing around for?” Wen Chao demanded, loudly. “Get in here now!”

“Idiot,” Nie Mingjue muttered, astounded that Wen Chao was being stupid enough to shout when he hadn’t identified the location of whatever they were hunting. The insult made Lan Xichen’s lips momentarily quirk up into a smile, before they fell back down again.

He hadn’t forgotten the injury Wangji had; would he even be able to fight with it?

“Master Wen,” Jin Zixuan said. “You should at least tell us what we’re hunting for so we can deal with it together.”

Madam Jin nodded at her son, pleased that he hadn’t been so intimidated by the Wens as to not look out for his own safety. His pride as the Jin heir remained intact.

But Wen Chao just sighed at him, “For the last time, I give the orders, you follow them. You are only working under my commands, so don’t tell me what to do!”

“It almost seems as though you don’t want them to survive,” Jiang Fengmian couldn’t help but observe. Despite his even tone, the tension in the group tripled when they heard his words, all aware of their accuracy.

“I suppose we’ll have to wait and see,” Wen Ruohan dismissed with a wave of his hand.

“Now go!” Wen Chao commanded.

The placements of the disciples immediately changed, alerting the watchers to a flash-forward in time. Sighing heavily, Wei Wuxian ran a hand through his hair and complained.

“What kind of monster are we hunting anyways? It’s been two hours, and it still hasn’t shown up.”

“*Two hours?!*”

"...It must have taken a while to walk into the cave," Lan Qiren supposed, trying (in vain) to cover up his distaste for the poorly run night hunt.

"I hope it's not too difficult to handle," Jiang Cheng responded, continuing to look around. Water continued to drip into the center pool, falling at a steady pace. Jin Zixuan and a few other disciples checked out the far shore of the lake, while Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were by the near shore.

They looked and looked and looked, but couldn't find anything.

"Why is it taking us forever to find it?!" an impatient Wen Chao finally demanded.

"Perhaps it would be easier to find if we knew what we were looking for," Jin Zixuan suggested angrily.

Jin Guangshan immediately turned placatingly at Wen Ruohan and said, "Though Chao-er's method works fine as well. My apologies for my son's words."

The glare Madam Jin sent her husband could boil ice.

"Hey, you!" Wen Chao finally shouted. "Go hang someone up and let some blood drip to lure that monster out!"

"What?!"

"You dare-"

"This isn't even hostages anymore!" Lan Xichen shouted. "Now you want live bait?!"

Wen Chao flinched back slightly, "They wouldn't necessarily have-"

"No," Jiang Fengmian said, his voice gaining a steel-like quality few had heard from him before. "This in unacceptable. For a cultivator to allow this to happen — to order it — is inexcusable."

If someone was made live bait, they would almost certainly die. The disciples there were most definitely *not* hostages anymore.

"I can't wait to have some fun," Wen Chao smirked.

"Completely unrighteous," Lan Wangji declared, glaring at Wen Chao. Before, Lan Qiren or Lan Xichen would have pulled him back to avoid potentially offending the Wens, but now-

If this was what Wen Ruohan was planning, then perhaps attacking sooner wouldn't be so bad after all.

After looking around for a moment, Wang Lingjiao, still hanging off Wen Chao's arm, pointed at Luo Qingyang.

"Just take her," she suggested.

Yanli paled even more at the order, turning to the girl whose sweet-smelling perfume bag had caused several adorable interactions with Wei Wuxian. And she was going to be strung up and forced to *bleed out*.

Seeing Yanli's fear, both Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan frowned.

"Her? Er… how about we chose another one?"

Wang Lingjiao draped herself over Wen Chao, whining, "Aw. But I don't want to. She's the only one I want to pick."

"That disgraceful whor-"

"*San-niang*, enough," Jiang Fengmian interrupted. She turned to him as if to start an argument, but acknowledged, for now, what was most important was paying attention to the simulation.

"Why?" Wang Lingjiao whined. "Don't tell me you'll miss her?"

"Eh… ah, ha. Nonsense. What do I have to lose? We can do whatever my Jiaojiao wants!" Wen Chao assured. "Come, tie her up."

Unconsciously, Jiang Yanli moved to defend MianMian, making Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan follow shortly after. The Wen disciples in the simulation passed straight through them, nearly making Yanli's eyes water with her own helplessness. She turned toward the vision of the terrified girl.

"A-Jie," Jiang Cheng whispered mournfully. "There's nothing we can do."

They *couldn't* interfere with the simulation. They couldn't do anything but watch.

The frightened MianMian soon turned and ran, fearing for her life.

"Whoever dares protect her," Wen Chao warned. "I'll make sure you *never* get out of this cave!"

"And now you're threatening *all* their lives?!" Madam Yu demanded, unable to be held back anymore. If Wen Chao was willing to go that far, then he was willing — and probably *trying* — to kill them all.

One of the Lan disciples who MianMian had hidden behind then frowned, and, slowly, got out of the way.

"Su She!" Lan Qiren shrieked, making everyone recognize the disciple who had not only been saved by both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, but had also *sold out* the Cloud Recesses.

"Unrighteous."

"Cowardly!"

“Foolish,” Lan Wangji finally commented, agreeing with both Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue’s words, but adding on his frustration. If Wen Chao was wiling to kill someone (and, since Wang Lingjiao was the one to chose MianMian, didn’t seem to care about who was killed), then cooperating with him would only delay the inevitable. Not to mention how it would go against everything the Lan Sect valued and taught.

He understood their fear, but it was time to fight.

Wei Wuxian moved forward as if to step in, but Jiang Cheng held him back.

“A-ah, good,” Wen Chao stuttered. “At least the heir is trying to keep a leash on him. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Suddenly feeling disgusted, Jiang Cheng stepped away from the Wens. His other self wasn’t *okay* with what was happening, he was just-

As the other disciples closed in, MianMian made one final attempt to run. She quickly ran to hide behind the only disciples who hadn’t moved away from her.

Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan stood proudly.

“Step aside!” a Wen disciple ordered.

Jin Zixuan just huffed in response, while Lan Wangji remained perfectly still.

“Good job, A-Xuan,” Yanli whispered. She had always been attracted to him, but seeing things like this showed even his pride could be an indisputably valuable quality. He wouldn’t bow to the Wens.

The more she got to know him, the more she fell in love.

Similarly, Lan Qiren nodded once at his nephew, worried beyond belief given Lan Wangji’s broken leg, but grateful for Wangji’s moral excellence. The Lan Sect might have been burned down, but its values were immortalized in Lan Wangji’s actions. Wang Lingjiao allowed her jealousy to cause this, Lan Wangji rose above his jealousy to prevent it.

He wouldn’t hesitate to act.

Wen Chao stepped toward them, laughing as he did and asking “Why are you just standing there? You can’t understand human speech? Or do you just want a chance to save the damsel in distress?”

Jin Zixuan lifted his brows and asked, “Really? It wasn’t enough to use us as meat shields? *Now* you want to let live humans bleed to death to serve as your bait?”

***’Huh,’* Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*So Jin Zixuan has the guts to stand up after all.*’**

At the unexpected compliment from his maybe-one-day-brother-in-law, Jin Zixuan blinked in surprise. It seemed like Wei Wuxian’s anger wasn’t enough to blind him from the good sides of a person.

Underneath Jin Zixuan's fear and desperation, a little celebration took place. Perhaps, one day, they would be friends.

Except, "one day," Wei Wuxian would kill him and Yanli, wouldn't he?

Infuriated, Wen Chao continued "Are you rebelling against me? I've been tolerating you up until now, but — hang the brat up with your own hands, or none of the people from you sect can expect to return!"

Wen Ruohan smirked; that was probably about what his future-self had expected when he allowed Wen Chao to lead the camp. If anything, he was surprised it had taken so long.

Everyone else, however, was frozen. Here Wen Chao was, demanding that they comply with the murder of an innocent, or be responsible for the deaths their martial siblings. But that wasn't his real goal at all, was it? He was just picking them off in groups so that, eventually, none of them survived.

The Wen Sect had asked for their heirs and twenty other disciples. If they were picked off like this, the foundations of the next generation would crumble.

Both Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan glared in response to the demand, realizing the same.

They hadn't expected anyone to help them, but they also hadn't expected their own to go against them. They were proven wrong when a scream forced them to turn around, and they saw Su She trying to drag MianMian away.

"Let go of me! Let go!" she shouted.

Lan Xichen forced himself to breathe out slowly. They had agreed to not punish for things that had yet to occur once they got out, but….

But their motto — everything their lives and rules were based on — was to "be righteous." He wasn't sure he *wanted* Su She in the Lan Sect anymore.

Su She continued to tug at her, only to blink up in shock when sparks of blue light crashed into him and slammed him into the cave wall. Lan Wangji had attacked him.

The disciple moved to stand up again, but shrank down under Lan Wangji's deadly glare. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng tensed.

'*In this situation, it's impossible to only worry about yourself and hope that no blood will be lost.*'

Ferocious glares were sent toward the Wens.

Wen Qing refused to make eye contact, causing Jiang Yanli, who had hoped they were reaching an understanding, to frown.

Wen Chao was enraged.

“How dare you?! Kill them!”

The Wen disciples ran toward the pair, attacking with all their might. However, despite being the only ones with swords, they were unable to beat the heirs of the Great Sects.

“Go, Zixuan!” Madam Jin shouted. “Don’t let up!”

Knowing they would die even if they complied, a large number of Jin disciples also joined the fight, beating back the armed Wen cultivators with their bare hands. Unlike Su She, they were willing to join their heir. The Jin Sect disciples were trained to follow Jin Zixuan’s orders, while the Lans had always been trained to *rely* on the Twin Jades for help. This difference was evident now.

“You dare to disobey me? Just who do you think you are?” Wen Chao demanded. “Kill them! Kill them all!”

Throughout the conflict, the Core Melting Hand remained a steady and silent warning behind Wen Chao’s back, guarding his master’s son. And he was right; he didn’t need to attack.

Not only were the Lan and Jin fighters outnumbered and unarmed, but Lan Wangji, their strongest fighter, was injured before it even began. Although their progress was slower than they expected, the Wen disciples eventually began gaining ground against the rebelling forces, pushing them and MianMian into a corner of the cave.

“Wangji,” Xichen whispered nervously, subconsciously moving closer to his brother. On the side, Jiang Cheng glanced down, ashamed.

He understood why his simulation-self was acting that way, but that didn’t change the fact that he was preventing Wei Wuxian from saving Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji.

The virtual Jiang Cheng didn’t know them, but the real one-

The real one was terrified for his new friends, and starting to hate his virtual self’s decision.

Seeing his approaching victory, Wen Chao’s mood greatly improved.

He spat, “Talking back to me? Just who do you think you are? People like you really do deserve to be killed!”

“That’s right! Those who use their clan’s power to bully others really do deserve to be killed!”

Having almost tuned out the speaker as soon as “That’s right” was said, it took the watchers a moment longer to realize the actual sentiment. They blinked, then turned to the source of the comment.

“Wei Ying?” Lan Zhan asked.

“What did you say?” Wen Chao demanded.

“I said, all those who rely on the power of their Clans to oppress others and do evil should be killed! Not only that, they should be beheaded and cursed by all people as a warning to future generations, right?”

Recognizing the quote, Wen Ruohan snorted in amusement.

Wen Zhuliu seemed to ponder as he glanced at Wei Wuxian.

There was a long pause as Wen Chao thought his words over.

‘*That’s just pathetic,*’ Jin Guangshan thought, wondering how Wen Ruohan could stay so calm and composed despite his embarrassment of a second son. Then, however, he saw the way the man’s eyes were trained only on Wei Wuxian, and realized the answer.

He didn’t *care* about Wen Chao. He'd already decided which one he valued more.

After a half dozen seconds of awkwardness, Wen Chao suddenly tensed and turned to Wei Wuxian with fury and realization on his face.

“You-” he gasped. “Wei Wuxian, how dare you say such absurd, outrageous, and pretentious words?!”

Wen Zhuliu sighed and shook his head in disappointment.

Several people snickered at the reaction.

Wei Wuxian lifted the corners of his mouth, then immediately burst into unbridled laughter. Under everyone’s shocked eyes, he laughed so hard he was out of breath, clutching Jiang Cheng’s shoulder.

“Absurd? Outrageous? I’d say you’re all of those!” he smirked, pulling out the *Quintessence of the Wens*. “Wen Chao, don’t you know who said those words? Let me tell you, this was said by the most famous cultivator in your sect, the one who founded the whole thing, Wen Mao!”

Awed yet entertained gapes spread out across the watchers as everyone realized what Wei Wuxian had done. Wen Chao flushed the shade of a squashed prune.

“And you dared to say your ancestor’s words were absurd and outrageous? Well said, very well said!” he continued through his laughter.

“Told you,” Jiang Cheng whispered, unable to hide his grin. “He never bothers to learn what he’s supposed to, but if he cares he’ll know it better than anyone.”

Nie Huaisang and Jin Zixuan gave a short applause, and Lan Wangji found his mouth starting to creep into a smile as well.

“What’s the punishment for insulting famous Wen Sect cultivators again?” Wei Wuxian asked, his cheerful expression darkening to a more malicious smirk. “It was execution, right? Yes, very well, you can go die now.”

Lan Qiren supposed the boy's annoying nature was much more tolerable when it was being used against an enemy.

Wen Chao couldn't hold back any longer, unsheathing his sword and lunging at Wei Wuxian. With that, he had jumped out of Wen Zhuliu's range of protection.

His guard dog ran after him, but in the half-second it took him to get over, Wei Wuxian had disarmed Wen Chao, grabbed his sword, and captured Wen Chao as his own hostage. Wen Chao's own blade would slide cleanly across his neck at the slightest provocation.

"Nobody move! If you're not careful, I might just decide to let some blood out of your Young Master Wen," he warned, causing even Wen Zhuliu to freeze.

What Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji had done was heroic, but more than likely to fail due to the odds stacked against them. What Wei Wuxian had done….

"How did he have time to plan all that out?" Nie Mingjue asked, shocked. They had practically been in a hopeless situation, and Wei Wuxian managed to turn it around in less than a minute.

Wen Zhuliu had been on the defense the entire time, while Wei Wuxian had expected Wen Chao to attack. Therefore, he had been able to deal with the situation faster than even The Core Melting Hand could react to.

Now, with Wen Chao between them and a sword to the heir's neck, there was nothing Wen Zhuliu could do. One by one, the Wen disciples stopped their fighting and turned to face them.

"Drop your swords!"

They did.

Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji took deep breaths, glancing around at their defeated foes.

"Good job, A-Xian," Jiang Fengmian muttered proudly.

Jiang Cheng flinched.

"Wei… Wei Wuxian, I'm telling you. If you dare to hurt me, none of you will get out of here alive!" Wen Chao warned through his stutters. "Take this sword away from me!"

Wei Wuxian didn't even blink.

Despite herself, Madam Yu found she approved. Her friend's son slash Yanli's newly-motivated fiance had been in danger (as well as the Lan boy who Jiang Cheng had started befriending), and Wei Wuxian had delt with it. The taunting had been immature, but, overall, the situation was resolved in a way that would improve the Jiang Sect's reputation.

Seeing this, Jiang Cheng shrank in on himself, disheartened.

However, just then, a rumble shook the ground and a shadow stretched out from behind Wei Wuxian. The island in the middle of the lake was moving!

“Wei Wuxian, watch out!”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, and, behind him, a crimson eye as large as his head blinked open.

“What?”

The world faded to white.

”What?!”

“What-they-it-”

“They can’t end it *there!*” Huaisang shrieked, eyes wide. The crowd shared the sentiment.

“What was *that?*”

“An-an eye?” Jin Zixuan guessed, mouth agape. “Wait, wait, we have to *fight* that?!”

As cultivators, they had experience fighting giant monsters. However, that was big even for *them,* and they were almost all unarmed. In the earlier scenes, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had both been shown trying to deal with spirits while not having their swords. As expected, they had both elected to contact their sects to deal with them. They couldn't do that now. With Lan Wangji’s injuries on top of that-

“What did you bring them to?” Madam Yu demanded, as fiercely protective as a mother lion. With the knowledge that her *son* was there, any fear she might have had of Wen Ruohan vanished instantly.

“We’ll have to wait to find out,” Wen Ruohan responded as calmly as ever. His mind, however, was working at a rapid-fire pace. This was the second time he had seen Wei Wuxian and Wen Chao interact.

And it was becoming more and more clear which one he should invest into.

He already had Wen Xu as his heir. With the situation as it was, Wei Wuxian was clearly showing himself to be far more valuable than any other piece of the Sunshot Campaign.

Another thing to note was the changing behavior of the watchers. Before, they had hesitated to even imply that the Wens were being unethical. However, the simulation was slowly breaking down those walls.

When they got out, it seemed likely the Lans, Nie, and Jiang would be willing to fight.

Interesting.

As if proving his point, Lan Wangji turned to Wen Chao and asked, “Have you no shame?”

“What?”

“You were perfectly fine getting us all killed!” Jin Zixuan added on, growling in rage, but unable to actually *do* anything while in the simulation.

“I-and so what? It’s your own fault for not cooperating-”

“What had Luo-guniang done that was ‘uncooperative?’” Jiang Cheng demanded. “The only reason you chose her is because your servant was jealous that you couldn’t understand what ‘no’ meant!”

“Shut up! You didn’t even try to defend her!” Wen Chao pointed out. “In fact, you stopped Wei Wuxian from helping! How is that any better?”

Jiang Cheng flinched back slightly, but Lan Wangji stepped forward, “Inaction done out of fear for those under your protection and actions taken intending to hurt others are in no way the same thing.”

“And besides, even if he just hadn’t cared, it wouldn’t make what you tried to do okay!” Jin Zixuan shouted, and, for a moment, unwittingly glanced back at his father. “There is no excuse for trying to rape and murder an innocent woman.”

“There most certainly is not,” Madam Jin agreed, she and Madam Yu both moving to stand behind their sons. “Is this truly the kind of person the Wen Sect has as its heir?”

“It might be,” Wen Ruohan spoke, causing many people to flinch. “After all, if it weren’t for Wei Wuxian, that pair’s actions would have been futile. You would have all gotten killed for nothing.”

Shouting at Wen Chao was one thing, but arguing against Wen Ruohan was something else. Hesitantly, Lan Xichen stepped forward and saluted the Chief Cultivator.

“My apologies, but an action taken to prevent one-sided injustice should always be commended. I don’t believe they did anything wrong.”

“Except wake up whatever was in that cave,” Wen Ruohan pointed out, making most watchers tense yet again. There was silence as they looked between each other, no one knowing how to continue the conversation.

Then, quietly, Jiang Cheng moved towards Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan.

Everything in him rebelled against doing this. He had just been trying to keep Wei Wuxian safe! Nothing he had done was technically wrong! He had no obligation to help MianMian, and no reason to not stand by and watch the two of them die. What he had done was fine!

But someone that sounded a lot like Wei Wuxian told him that if the peacock could apologise to Jiang Yanli for something his virtual self said, then he should be able to apologise to them for preventing Wei Wuxian from helping. He trembled, then bowed once.

“I… I’m sorry for not… not helping.”

“It’s fine,” Jin Zixuan said easily. “A lot of people didn’t help.”

‘*But they weren’t heirs,*’ Jiang Cheng thought. ‘*I should have done something too.*’

“We understand,” Lan Wangji added. “We know why you didn’t.”

“And besides, Jiang-xiong, *I* certainly didn’t do anything, fainting like I did,” Huaisang added. “Don’t worry so much about it.”

Watching the quiet conversation between the heirs left Jiang Fengmian thinking. When he had complimented Wei Wuxian’s actions against Wen Chao, Jiang Cheng had momentarily looked devastated. And more than just guilt, there had been an unhealthy layer of shame.

The Jiang Sect motto of “do what is right, even if it seems impossible,” had always fit Wei Wuxian like a glove. It was how he would act regardless, so there was no need for him to put a tremendous amount of effort into maintaining that state. It made Jiang Fengmian, who had also been close to Wei Wuxian’s parents due to their similar principles, bond with his head disciple. He had heard his wife’s complaints about favoritism before but….

He had never thought Jiang Cheng might believe it.

He prayed he was wrong.

(But the way Jiang Cheng had looked during Madam Yu’s shouting did not leave him very optimistic.)

Other private conversations broke out, with Wen Chao trembling beneath Wen Ruohan, Madam Jin and Jin Guangshan getting into another spat, and Lan Xichen pulling Wangji over to speak.

“Are you alright?” he asked. “With all the revelations that happened shortly after, I never got to check on you. You know Uncle’s opinion on Wei Wuxian doesn’t have to dictate your own feeling’s, right?”

Wangji remained silent for a moment, Lan Qiren’s insistence on the lack of affection between him and Wei Ying ringing in the back of his mind. If his Uncle was this worried, then Wangji knew his behavior must be reminding Qiren of his father’s. He had told himself for years that he wouldn’t follow that-

But he didn’t want to lose Wei Ying either.

So then what should he do?

“I am… fine.”

“Wangji, it’s okay if you’re not.”

“I’m fine,” he repeated. “I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

Lan Xichen frowned slightly at the declaration, but eventually nodded in acceptance.

“Alright. Tell me if you change your mind.”

In the mountains of Gusu, a cool fog swept over the ground.

Lan Wangji — Hanguang-jun — walked alone through the chilled forest, stepping over fields of frost-covered grass without making a sound. Since Wei Wuxian was working with Wen Qionglin on something to help his past self, Lan Wangji had found himself with some additional free time.

He came to a stop in front of a comfortable, self-imposed prison, and knocked twice.

“Xiongzhang, are you there?”

While people in seclusion were generally not supposed to have any visitors, Lan Xichen’s status as sect leader allowed his brother to occasionally visit under a guise of requiring his opinion on certain matters. On days when Xichen didn’t want to talk, he would not answer. On days when he was willing-

“I am. Come in, Wangji.”

Although he didn’t smile, Lan Zhan’s posture relaxed slightly at the words. The days on which Lan Xichen was willing to accept visitors were steadily increasing overtime. Wei Ying had repeatedly and excitedly declared that Lan Xichen’s recovery could be attributed to the persistent and overwhelming kindness of his own husband, but Lan Wangji thought Wei Wuxian was a significant factor too. It was only after Lan Wangji tried implementing Wei Ying's suggestions that Xichen had started to smile, after all.

With a slight creak, Wangji opened the door. Inside the room, Xichen closed A Book of Righteousness by Lan An and turned to face him. Although his face was paler than it used to be, the smile adorned on it was one of the most genuine Wangji had seen since Jin Guangyao’s betrayal came to light.

“You seem pleased,” his brother observed, smiling fondly. “Will you tell me what happened?”

“If that is what Xiongzhang wishes,” Wangji promised. “Wei Ying has been having fun, both in preparing for the wedding and in inventing.”

“I heard one of his inventions caused a problem with Sect Leader Jiang recently.”

Although Xichen could see annoyance flash across his brother’s face for a moment, the emotion was soon covered up by fondness for Wei Wuxian.

“The misunderstanding was corrected.”

“Hm. What *was* the mysterious invention that caused the conflict? When Uncle came to visit me a few days ago, he seemed like he couldn’t decide whether to be proud or scandalized by

Wei Wuxian's creation, and got into a long lecture about the implications of it without actually explaining what it was."

Lan Wangji's eyes softened momentarily, before he responded "Wei Ying has found a way to create and contact parallel universes. In essence, it's a way to send information to the past. Although nothing physical can be sent, it functions as time travel."

There were several seconds of silence as Lan Xichen blinked twice and tried to figure out if he was hearing things. All the while, Wangji made steady, honest eye contact.

"I… could you-"

"Time travel, yes."

More silence. Some part of him — the rational part which had been slowly worn away throughout his seclusion — knew such a fantastical concept was impossible. However the more insane part of him whispered '*If anyone could figure that out, wouldn't it be Wei Wuxian?*'

"You're serious."

"I am. He's tested it. I… don't know if I can bring the proof in here."

"That's fine," Xichen shook his head. "But you, and he, genuinely believe it works."

"Yes."

Time travel. It *couldn't* be true. But if it was-

If he could send information to his past self, what would he change? If his younger self had known of the Wens attacking and Wei Wuxian's innocence and Jiang Yanli's killer and his Da-ge's fate and Nie Huaisang's schemes and Jin Guangshan's plans and *Jin Guangyao*-

What would he have done if he had known the truth about A-Yao?

What would everyone else do if they knew the truth about A-Yao?

A cold, sinking feeling flooded his body. Although Jin Guangyao's motivation and personality had been vastly different from what everyone thought, his goal wasn't to make others suffer. For every time he annihilated a clan on false charges, he had saved just as many people by supporting genuinely helpful policies. Creating watchtowers didn't erase the crimes he had committed, but it did prove that destruction had never been his final goal.

With everything Jin Guangyao had done, his death was not unearned. It was entirely possible that, by that point, there would be no saving what Meng Yao had turned into. But if it was time travel — if everyone got to see him before he became like that — then the situation was different.

Regardless of Jin Guangyao's own faults, it was undeniable that his goals and morals were, in part, a product of his upbringing. If everyone knew what Meng Yao might possibly become,

would they simply take the chance for a better future away from him? Would they kill him before he had even done anything?

~~Or was he just being tricked again? What did he really *know* about A-Yao?~~

Several days ago, Lan Qiren had griped for hours about how Wei Wuxian was corrupting Sizhui. In that rant, he explained how Sizhui went and used one of Wei Wuxian's inventions without permission. Out of all of Wei Wuxian's inventions, what would be the most tempting option for the last remaining Wen?

"DId-did Sizhui send information on A-Y… *Jin Guangyao* to the past?" Xichen asked, hesitantly.

"...He did. Are you… okay?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," Xichen reassured, even as his mind raced. He didn't know exactly what information was sent, but if Nie Mingjue was made to believe the bare-bones of "Meng Yao betrayed Lan Xichen's trust and killed you," then there was almost no chance of anyone stopping him from enacting vengeance on an act that *hadn't happened yet.*

Xichen didn't want his Da-ge to die, but that didn't mean he thought Nie Mingjue's murder at ~~A-Yao~~ Jin Guangyao's hands was *inevitable*. He wasn't just a victim of circumstance, but Jin Guangyao's decision was based on the environment he grew up in, and Nie Mingjue's own actions.

Then again, for all his faults, Nie Mingjue did try to be righteous. Perhaps he wouldn't kill the version who was still Meng Yao. He might see reason.

But what if Jin *Guangshan* found out?

"Xiongzhang!"

Xichen startled.

"Are you alright?" Wangji asked him, lowering his voice once he had Xichen attention. "You stopped responding to me."

For a moment, Xichen didn't answer.

"...I apologise for bringing him up. Should I go?"

"No, no," Lan Xichen shook his head. "I… Sizhui and Jinyi created a parallel universe with the tool, right? How-how much do you know about how that world is doing?"

"I know that there was a minor panic when that dimension's sect leaders fell unconscious and that that world's Wei Ying is doing his best to support the Jiang Sect."

"Anything else?"

Wangji shook his head, "Wei Ying has tried to keep me updated, but I've been a little busy."

As Chief Cultivator and a soon-to-be official husband simultaneously running the cultivation world, the Lan sect, and planning a wedding, it was no surprise that Wangji didn't have time to intricately study the things happening in another dimension. However, that reminder only increased Xichen's slightly-paranoid but genuine concern.

He bit his lip, trying to will his heart rate back to normal.

"Would you be willing to allow Wei Ying to visit?" Wangji asked. "He could explain it to you far better than I could."

When Xichen hesitated, Wangji inwardly frowned. At the beginning, they had preferred to avoid all mention of Wangji's husband. Even though Wei Ying was not at fault, it was hard for Xichen to see Wei Wuxian as anything but the man who had caused his brother's forced seclusion and brought about the end of his former sworn brother. Xichen was mature enough to not take action over something that wasn't Wei Ying's fault, so Wangji had tried to recognize that Xichen didn't want to remember Wei Ying (for what he represented, if nothing else). Over time, Xichen had become more and more willing to discuss Wangji's husband.

It seemed Wangji had moved too fast then.

However, to his great surprise, Xichen followed the long period of silence with a quiet, "I would appreciate that."

Now, a noticeably present smile appeared on Lan Wangji's face.

"I'll ask him to visit you then."

Chapter End Notes

To anyone wondering about the funny watermelon/lotus stealing scenes, it's MDZS's extra chapter 125 on Exiled Rebels Scanlations. Sorry if I was a little too critical toward Madam Yu during this part, but nothing there was really supporting her.
:)

100% of His Plans Involve Becoming a Peacock

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two knocks on the door.

“Zewu-jun? You wanted to see me?”

“Wei-gongzi, come in.”

The door slid open, and a black-robed figure slipped inside. Although he moved with the same grace as ever, there was now a notable awkwardness that didn’t suit him at all.

Then again, considering how their last conversation went, Xichen supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. Based on Wei Wuxian’s expression, he could still hear Lan Xichen’s voice shouting at him.

“In his whole life he had been honest and righteous and immaculate — you were the only mistake he ever made!”

But Wei Wuxian had still come to see him at his request.

“Thank you for your time,” Xichen said, directing him to sit down. He hadn’t spoken to anyone outside his immediate family in the last few month, but that was no excuse to be rude.

They sat across from each other as Xichen debated with himself on how to begin. Luckily, he didn’t have to; Wei Wuxian started for him.

“You… had some questions about time travel?”

“I did,” Xichen agreed. “...Hypothetically, what do you think the people in the past will do with the information they have now?”

After a moment of hesitation, Wei Ying finally responded, “I’m hoping they don’t believe it. I don’t see why they would, especially if it just consists of kids they’ve never seen before explaining something that hasn’t happened. Do you… think something else would happen?”

“I… think you’re being overly-optimistic.”

“Time travel is already unbelievable enough. Even if they were willing to listen, what do you think they’d do?”

“I’m worried they would adapt to a philosophy of ‘better safe than sorry.’”

“Against the Wens? Back then, Wen Ruohan continued to take action after action against the other Four Great Clans and minor sects, and yet the Sunshot Campaign didn’t start until the

Massacre of Lotus Pier. Why would they act based on ‘future information’ they can’t confirm as true?”

“I wasn’t worried about the Wens. I was-”

“Jin Guangyao, then?”

Lan Xichen flinched slightly at the name, but forced himself to nod nonetheless. He knew what Wei Wuxian must think of the man who had kickstarted his downfall. However, if there was a way for Xichen to fix the mess his life had become, then he had to at least try.

Wei Wuxian sighed, “...I’m not sure I’m the best person to ask about him.”

“You’re the *only* person I can ask about him.”

“What?”

Taking a deep breath, Lan Xichen forced himself to utilize his widely-lauded communications skils, hoping they hadn’t gotten too rusty in the past few months.

“You never really got to know him,” he explained. “I will admit that he might have done more wrong to you than anyone else, but you, at least, will try to be objective. Anyone else I could ask is either too personally related to me, or too willing to believe what the majority says.”

“Jin Guangyao did… a lot,” Wei Wuxian reminded. “I admit I don’t completely agree with the complete switch in public opinion, but that doesn’t mean I find him innocent.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything else. So please, if the people in the past believe the message, how do you expect them to act with the information they’ll get?” Xichen continued, making Wei Wuxian frown even further.

However, he still answered: “The juniors said they sent it back to before the sunshot campaign. The Nie Mingjue of that time isn’t feeling the effects of his cultivation all that much yet. I think he might not allow Meng Yao into the Nie Clan, but I can’t imagine Chifeng-jun being so certain in the vision’s truth that he kills Meng Yao. He is, above all else, a righteous man. If Meng Yao is still a teenager at that time, I don’t believe he’ll kill him.”

“I agree. Da-ge has always tried to do what he thought was right. But what about Jin Guangshan?”

The name made Wei Wuxian flinch, his eyes darkening momentarily. Of all the Lan, Jin, Jiang, and Nie people stuck in the simulation, Jin Guangshan was the one Wei Wuxian was most worried about. If Jin Guangshan was made to believe the future, then-

“I suppose it’s entirely possible that Jin Guangshan will send an assassin after his bastard son. If this is before the Sunshot Campaign, then I doubt there’s anything Meng Yao will be able to do to escape.”

Lan Xichen paled. His trembling hands came to rest in his lap as he thought the words over. Little Meng Yao, from before the war and the torture and the Yiling Patriarch, would be killed.

"...Is there anything we can do to stop that?"

Wei Wuxian tilted his head consideringly, observing Lan Xichen as though the Lan Sect Leader was one of his more difficult talisman experiments. Then, he asked:

"Before I answer that, can I ask why you would want to?"

"I… I understand that he has done inexcusable things, but it's not impossible for him to make a different decision. If I had known about his true nature ahead of time, then I could have stopped it."

"How much are you willing to risk on that?"

"I… if you think keeping him alive will result in Da-ge's death, then…. then it's not worth it. Jin Guangyao murdered him. I *know* that, but… but we don't need to end this way-"

"We?"

"They-*he* doesn't need to end this way. I would never be able to forgive myself if I could stop Jin Guangshan from murdering an innocent and *didn't*. I don't trust Jin Guangshan to make a fair choice, and he's the one he's most likely to target is A-Y… Jin Guangyao. And, if we can change who Meng Yao becomes, then everything would be fixed. If he'd just had someone who believed in him, then-"

"You don't think you believed in him enough?"

Lan Xichen flinched at the silent accusation, but continued "My belief was blind. He would need someone like Wangji. He didn't make excuses for you, but he always tried to help."

For a moment, Wei Wuxian's gaze turned almost *unbearably* fond at the reminder of his husband. Then, however, he darkened again and looked back at Lan Xichen.

"Zewu-jun," Wei Wuxian began. "I hope you don't mind me saying so, but I can't shake the feeling that you think *you* were responsible for the tragedy between your sworn brothers."

"I don't think that," he refuted. "But, if I hadn't pushed them into being sworn brothers, they wouldn't have interacted so much. I wouldn't have given Jin Guangyao the means to kill Da-ge with, and he probably wouldn't have a reason to either. If I hadn't acted the way I did, then maybe we wouldn't have had to end up this way."

"So you think that if *you* had acted differently, then everything would have been fine?"

"Do you disagree?"

"...People tend to be much more complicated than that. Maybe you could have prevented it, but it wasn't your responsibility to parent them. They both made their own decisions, and

Meng Yao's fate was based on his choices."

"But it would fix things for you too!"

"Probably not," Wei Wuxian shook his head. "Yes, Jin Guangshan and Jin Guangyao capitalized on the opportunity, but it's like he said: it's entirely possible it would've happened regardless."

"If you don't think killing him would stop it, then we have all the more reason to change Jin Guangyao's fate."

"Putting aside the matter of how much we can change about a place we can't go to, I think it's unquestionable that Jin Guangshan's work wouldn't have been nearly as effective as it was without Jin Guangyao's interference. So, I'll ask again, *why* do you want to go out of your way to make sure Meng Yao survives?"

Xichen was silent for a moment, unable to articulate his feelings.

"Is it wrong to want *both* Da-ge and Meng Yao to be given a chance at a different life?"

"But this isn't about them at all, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

After a moment, Wei Wuxian continued, "My apologies for my brashness, Zewu-jun, but I'll be perfectly honest; I think you're hoping this will be a way to lessen the guilt *you* feel."

Lan Xichen flinched back.

"I… I was-"

"You don't agree?"

"I… no-I… I suppose you might be right."

"Good. That said, I also kinda agree with you."

"I… beg your pardon?"

Wei Wuxian smirked playfully, explaining "I know better than anyone how much circumstances can affect your actions. I agree with you: Meng Yao is a product of his upbringing. There's definitely more than that, but he's not unsalvageable. That parallel dimension's future doesn't necessarily require him to die."

"Then-"

"That said, we need to be aware of *why* we're doing something, and what we hope to accomplish. If you don't mind me saying so, I don't think it would be especially healthy to invest all your time and energy into helping a parallel version of them who you'll never be able to go to."

"...But you've been thinking about this as well?"

"A little. I mean… it's entirely possible that they'll want to kill my younger-self too."

"I doubt anything the juniors sent over would convince them of that," Xichen commented, smiling fondly. Although they hadn't visited, juniors who passed by Lan Xichen's building were often discussing Wei Wuxian's most recent night hunt with overwhelming excitement. None loved Wei Wuxian more than the quartet who used the time-travel array.

But Wei Wuxian just shrugged, not bothering to comment.

"Then what do you think we can do to stop that?"

"I'm still trying to figure out if we *should* stop it-"

"Wei Wuxian, if they kill you before the Sunshot Campaign, we will lose," XIchen reminded. "If you really feel like that's a concern, then we should do something to prevent it."

"And help Meng Yao out on the way?"

"I… I don't know," Xichen admitted. "I can't tell how much of this is just because of guilt. I don't know if it's a genuine concern, or if I just want it to be. I don't even know if my judgement was *ever* right-"

"It was," Wei Wuxian assured him. "You tried to be objective, and gave me a chance, remember? Jin Guangyao tricked everyone, not just you."

The first one to figure it all out was Huaisang, but Xichen wasn't sure he wanted to bring this moral dilemma up with him. Then again, was he just blocking out perspectives he didn't agree with? *Should* he ask the person who saw through the lies? Would Huaisang know Meng Yao best-

"Zewu-jun," Wei Wuxian spoke hesitantly, breaking Xichen out of his thoughts. "Even after everything came to light, do you… still love Jin Guangyao?"

He flinched back.

"It's not love-"

"Remember fondly, then."

A pause, then Xichen answered, "I… I can't… I don't-"

"That's not wrong," Wei Wuxian assured, his eyes momentarily flashing coldly. "Sometimes, regardless of what's happened between you, the fond memories you've shared mean you can't help but love someone."

From his tone, Xichen got the feeling that he was speaking about his own relationship with Sect Leader Jiang.

“But,” Wei Wuxian continued, “that can sometimes lead you to make irrational decisions or sacrifice too much of yourself for something that won’t fix anything.”

“You think I might be try to live vicariously through them?” Xichen asked.

“I think you’re viewing Jin Guangyao as *your* mistake which *you* need to fix. I’m not saying you can’t help me try, I just need you to be aware of what you’re doing and why, because that perspective isn’t right.”

Now, finally, Xichen leaned back, going over the conversation in his head. He supposed Wei Wuxian would be able to recognize guilt better than anyone.

“I… may have been a little hasty,” he admitted.

“Just a little,” Wei Wuxian teased, pinching his index finger and thumb a centimeter apart. “Though, if you’re feeling up to it, we can talk about ways we *could* respond.”

Xichen perked up, and Wei Wuxian pulled out some paper.

“So, any suggestions?”

As impatient and tense as they were, the sudden return to the simulation caused nearly everyone to flinch.

The area they were in darkened instantaneously, returning them to the cave.

Directly behind the frozen Wei Wuxian, a head as large as a carriage blinked its crimson eyes open. A terrifying, low growl escaped the beast as it looked over the panicking cultivators.

It was a gargantuan tortoise.

Wen Chao trembled slightly, a short squeak escaping his lips. After all, his other-self might have brought the other disciples in to kill the beast in the cave, but….

How could he possibly kill *that*?

The enormous tortoise moved its head closer to the crowd, and aside from a handful — Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji, and Wen Zhuliu — everyone kept staggering backwards.

Wei Wuxian, whose movement near it had most likely woken it up, didn’t dare move rashly. Although it was clear that Wen Chao wanted to run, Wei Wuxian kept his hand over the other’s mouth, keeping him still and silent. They remained where they were, and he waited patiently.

“Hm. Not bad,” Nie Mingjue remarked, raising an eyebrow. Even as the monster drew closer and closer, Wei Wuxian remained nearly perfectly still.

Calmly, Wei Wuxian's eyes met the pair of crimson geodes. The pupil was just a slit, its width shifting as though the eyes were switching in and out of focus. It seemed unable to determine what the figures before it were.

'*Looks like its eyesight is about as good as a snake's too,*' Wei Wuxian observed. '*As long as we don't move, maybe it won't be able to notice us.*'

As long as they stayed still, they'd have a chance of escaping.

Then Wen Chao panicked.

"Wen Zhuliu, *help me!*" Wen Chao shouted, rushing away from Wei Wuxian.

"That idiot!" Jiang Cheng hissed.

Growling, the real Jiang Cheng nodded in agreement.

With a shove, Wen Chao was sent flying. Then, the tortoise *attacked.*

It slammed down where Wei Wuxian and Wen Chao had been only moments before, sending an enormous cloud of dust into the air. Wen Chao was only alive because Wei Wuxian had instinctively pushed him out of the way.

He landed face first on the ground, sliding from Wei Wuxian's powerful push.

"Chao-er," Wen Ruohan growled. "Next time, pay attention to what your *betters* have realized."

His son nodded frantically, sincerely wishing that he had allowed Wei Wuxian to deal with the situation. Now that he'd panicked and called for Wen Zhuliu, his life was at risk.

(If only Wei Wuxian had been loyal to them. If the Wen sect had just gotten him earlier and made sure everyone knew Wei Wuxian would keep Wen Chao safe, this wouldn't have happened! If that was his father's plan, then Wen Chao approved; having a Wei Wuxian sounded *great.*)

(Wen Qing glanced over, recognizing Wen Chao's thoughts immediately and frowning. He had truly been trained to simply conform to whatever Wen Ruohan felt about something, hadn't he?)

Trembling slightly, Wen Chao sat up and looked back the way he came, ignoring his bleeding nose. Just a few minutes ago, he would have whined and complained and sentenced them all to death for that.

Now, even *he* realized the severity of the situation.

Wen Qing was privately grateful for his silence. At least she wouldn't have to watch him embarrass her clan for much longer.

Having missed both its prey, the tortoise stood up fully to reach its head high and roar. The cave could barely fit the colossal being. If it were to crash onto the Lotus Pier training grounds, its shell alone would fill up the *entirety* of the martial arts field.

Its shout shook the walls of the cave.

As they weren't actually inside the cave, the watcher's couldn't feel the ground shake. That said, they *could* see it trembling from the monsters yell.

Nie Huaisang looked faint.

Collecting themselves, a half-dozen Wen archers then took aim and fired. Their arrows bounced off the tortoise's skin like raindrops off glass.

The beast opened its enormous jaws.

Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan turned to glance at each other nervously.

Wei Wuxian flicked his arm, making Wen Chao's sword fly with the speed of an arrow to where the beast's heart should be. It only bounced off.

"What the-"

"The scales," Jiang Fengmian answered, understanding his son's question immediately. The answer only made Jiang Cheng pale further. It was undeniable that Wei Wuxian was the strongest disciple in Lotus Pier; if a high-quality blade he threw couldn't even *dent* the tortoise's skin….

What hope did the gathered disciples have of surviving?

Wei Wuxian frowned, glancing analytically at the path the sword had tried to carve into the tortoise. Although there had been a trail of sparks left behind by the weapon's attack, there was no trace of damage on the monster's body.

Wei Wuxian sighed in frustration.

If the sword had belonged to anyone but Wen Chao, Wei Wuxian wouldn't have been able to use it at all. Cultivation swords were fiercely loyal to their masters, even when those masters were comparatively inadequate. He had been able to launch the attack, but, now that it had fallen into the water, there was no chance of Wei Wuxian being able to summon it back.

If anything, Wen Qing was surprised he had been able to do as much as he had. Even if it was Wen Chao's, using someone else's sword was no easy task.

Then again, Nie Huaisang was quite fond of saying "as expected of the to-be Yiling Patriarch," wasn't he? She supposed that was appropriate.

On the side, the Wen disciples continued trying to shoot arrows at the monster. As their attempts proved useless, the fear of the disciples grew.

Wei Wuxian turned, watching a Wen disciple struggle to shoot. Although he was clearly pulling with all his might, he just couldn't pull back far enough to draw his bow.

Wei Wuxian couldn't stand it anymore.

Jin Guangshan snorted.

Immediately, Wei Wuxian grabbed the bow and kicked the disciple to the side. Three arrows were left in the quiver. He set a three onto the bow, drew it back to its fullest, and aimed.

Then, a familiar scream rang out.

"MianMian?" Jiang Yanli realized instantly, turning to look at the girl.

Wang Lingjiao stood before the girl, as three Wen disciples secured her in place.

"Are you-"

"Seriously?"

"*Now?!*"

"Hold her down tightly," the mistress ordered. The red-hot seal of the Wen Sect's branding iron was deliberately lowered towards her.

She flinched away, closing her eyes.

Jiang Yanli felt her heart stop.

Without sparing the tortoise another thought, Wei Wuxian adjusted his aim to shoot down all three of the Wen disciples. They fell to the ground without even getting a chance to scream.

Wen Ruohan lifted his eyebrows in surprise. Even Wei Wuxian's performance at the archery competition hadn't been anywhere near as skillful as that.

It seemed Wei Wuxian only displayed his *true* worth once backed into a corner.

Interesting.

Even before the bow had finished vibrating, Wang Liangjiao was at it again.

"Stop it!" Jiang Yanli begged futily, making Jiang Cheng tense. He understood why his other-self had done so (he was the heir, looking out for the sect was his *job*), but he couldn't forget the way his simulation self had prevented Wei Wuxian from acting.

Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan hadn't hesitated, and his A-Jie wouldn't have either.

Unable to hear both Jiang Yanli's cries and Jiang Cheng's thoughts, the simulated Wang Lingjiao continued, picking up the sizzling branding iron and moving to press it

down on MianMian's face. With the grip she had on MianMian's hair, there was nothing the victim could do.

Wei Wuxian had no more arrows, and no more sword. Any logical person would have then moved to take down Wang Lingjiao, accepting Luo Qingyang's fate as inevitable.

So, of course, Wei Wuxian ran between them.

The iron made contact with skin, and Wei Wuxian's agonized scream shook the hall.

"*Wei Ying!*" Lan Wangji shouted, standing up and running over.

Wei Wuxian reacted almost immediately, landing a kick that sent Wang Lingjiao sliding across the ground several meters away. However, a moment later, he sank to his knees. The seal of the Wen Clan had burned straight through his clothes and seared itself onto his skin.

The watchers were, for once, all silent. They had seen his casual heroism before — it was hard to miss — but this was very, very different. When he had saved Su She, and rescued the bunnies, and threatened Wen Chao, it could almost have been mistaken as arrogance. Perhaps Wei Wuxian thought he'd be able to save whoever he wanted to save without any risk to himself. Maybe he didn't understand the consequences his actions could have.

But, this time, even *Lan Qiren* was forced to admit that was not the case. Nie Huaisang had explained the danger the branding iron posed, and yet Wei Wuxian had still put himself in front of it.

This wasn't someone who thought he'd be able to escape the consequences, this was just someone who looked at his options and decided the consequences were *worth it*.

It was humbling to see.

(Wen Ruohan, on the other hand, was highly amused. The seal burned onto Wei Wuxian could almost be mistaken for a mark of ownership branded onto an animal. How appropriate.)

"Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng called out.

Lan Wangji glanced over in concern.

Enraged, the Jiang heir jumped forward to attack Wang Lingjiao, only to be kicked away by Wen Zhuliu. She was then picked up and brought back to Wen Chao.

Madam Yu fumed, silently promising to tear that girl's skin off with her bare hands.

A weakened gasp came from the side as Wang Lingjiao threw herself into Wen Chao's arms. The furious Wen heir's face was covered in dirt and dust, staining his white robes grey.

His face morphed into fury.

“Get him!” he shouted.

A number of people unconsciously tried blocking the Wen disciples off, the sight of the wounded Wei Wuxian making their protective instincts force them into action.

Their barricade proved useless.

The Wen disciples ran straight through Wei Wuxian’s guards, but, before they could reach him, were snatched up and swallowed whole by the tortoise.

Wen Chao shrieked at the sight, grateful that Wen Zhuliu had stayed behind with his simulated self. He wasn’t the only one to jump either.

(Somehow, the gathered crowd had *forgotten* about the giant, man eating tortoise that started it all.)

Wen Chao stared up in unhidden horror as the tortoise threw the Wen disciples into the air and snatched them as they fell. His trembles were understandable; against something like this, even an army would be useless.

Jiang Cheng shuddered slightly in fear. The goddess statue from the future had seemed dangerous, but Jin Ling had at least been able to damage it with arrows.

How were they supposed to fight *this*?

“They need to retreat,” Lan Xichen realized. “Fighting it would be suicide.”

Sharing the sentiment, Wen Chao turned and fled with a shouted, “Go! Quickly!”

Once again, Wen Ruohan looked between Wei Wuxian and Wen Chao with undisguised judgement.

“Get them!” Jin Zixuan shouted, noticing the Wens’ retreat. He and a handful of Jin disciples chased after, picking up the Wens’ discarded weapons as they went. His control of someone else’s sword would be non-existent, but Jin Zixuan figured any weapon was better than nothing.

However, before Jin Zixuan was able to close in on them, the path was cut off by an avalanche of dust and rock falling from above.

“A-Xuan!” Jiang Yanli gasped as Madam Jin clenched her fists.

Nie Mingjue stood up, “Did you just-”

“They blocked off the entrance!” someone shouted, confirming Nie Mingjue’s question.

Wen Ruohan only smiled slightly, amused by his son’s abject terror at the glares the other sects were giving the boy. It seemed as if they were directing all their anger at Wen Chao, forgetting the person who had ordered him to act that way.

How convenient.

When the cloud of dust cleared, the watchers were outside.

A Wen signal flew into the air, requesting help. Coughing heavily, the Wen disciples forced themselves to stand up, making way for the approaching Wen Chao.

“Wait, what happened?” Jiang Cheng asked.

A hacking Wen Chao was dragged to the surface by his collar. His savior, Wen Zhuliu, showed a shockingly mild expression despite the way he had to literally carry Wen Chao’s weight.

Wen Chao shouted, “Everyone rebelled against us! And disciples from the Yunmeng Jiang sect started it!”

“Once *Yunmeng* disciples started it?” Madam Yu repeated disbelievingly. “The Lans and Jins were the ones who-”

“And that isn’t a problem, is it?” Madam Jin asked, more frostily than she had ever spoken to her friend before. Although he didn’t say anything, Lan Xichen glanced over in clear agreement with Madam Jin.

After all, no one could deny the righteousness in Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan’s actions. After a long pause, Madam Yu finally, begrudgingly, responded.

“It’s not a problem.”

Panting heavily, Wen Chao caught his breath, then glared.

“Get more men!” he ordered. “Have them surround Muxi Mountain! If someone escapes, kill them at all cost!”

“Yes!”

“*Excuse me?*” Lan Qiren swivelled around to face the Wen’s second young master. “Are you intending to declare war on *all* the great sects?”

“They already have!” Nie Mingjue fired back. “From the second they attacked the Cloud Recesses and *started* this stupid camp, they wanted to go to war against us all.”

Wen Ruohan merely smirked at their outrage.

“You have nothing to say in response?” Jiang Fengmian asked.

Wen Ruohan tilted his head, explaining “This has been happening for a long, long time. It’s hardly *my* fault that you were too scared to fight back sooner.”

Everyone flinched.

Wen Ruohan wasn't sure why they were surprised. One of the first things they were told was that the Wen Sect tried to encompass them all, and, even before the simulation, they knew numerous minor clans had fallen to the Wen. What other possibilities were there?

(Then again, perhaps he should be grateful; if it hadn't been for their selfishness, he would never have gotten as far as he did.)

Back within the cave, the last of the falling rocks settled. Luckily, it seemed that Jin Zixuan had dodged the rubble despite how dark it was. However, that also meant they had no way out.

"The passageway has been completely blocked," he reported, then cursed. "I can't believe they did that!"

"At least you're okay," Jiang Yanli whispered, sitting down. "It would be even harder to escape if you had gotten trapped under there."

"Sorry for worrying you," Jin Zixuan responded. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I… even if it won't happen in our world, I'm glad I get to see it."

Oblivious to the humans' plights, the giant tortoise displaced hundreds of gallons of water as it moved back into the lake. Seeing that, one disciple gave a fearful tremble.

"So we're stuck here with-with a man-eating *monster?!*"

"It your own fault!" Wen Chao declared. "If you hadn't fought back-"

"We would have *all* died then," Lan Wangji disagreed.

"That hellish couple really does all sorts of things, huh," Jin Zixuan muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Quiet, Chao-er."

"It's alright if we can't get out…" one of the boys murmured. "My father and mother will come find me. If they hear about this, they'll definitely search for me."

Yanli relaxed slightly, reassured.

Someone else pointed out, "They think we're still undergoing indoctrination at Qishan, why would they search for us? Besides, the Wen disciples who ran away definitely won't tell the truth. They'll make up some excuse while we stay trapped down in here."

Jiang Yanli deflated again, and Madam Yu gave a protective growl.

"So we can only wait down here… without any food… along with a beast," the person finished.

Hearing the last bit, Wei Wuxian laughed, patting the burn mark on his skin and joking, "Jiang Cheng, there's a piece of cooked meat here. You want to eat it?"

"Get lost! You really haven't learned your lesson, have you? Just what kind of situation do you think we're in?! You don't know how much I want to sew your lips together!"

The bit of unexpected lightheartedness caused several people to glance over in shock, hesitant smiles forming on their faces. A few less-innocent smiles formed as well.

(Jin Guangshan, for example, was quite pleased by the boy's pain tolerance.)

As they spoke, Lan Wangji's light colored eyes landed on them, before glancing at MianMian. She followed behind the boys silently, at a loss for what to do. Tears stained her face as she continued to sob, hands clenching her robe.

The repeated "I'm sorry, I'm sorry"s crushed the disciples further.

When Jiang Yanli moved closer to the poor girl, she was surprised to find that Wen Qing had done so as well. The Wen girl hurriedly moved back, but her protective instinct had been obvious nonetheless.

Jiang Yanli almost reached out to her, but the ringing of Wen Chao's orders in her ears kept her silent. She might not have anything personal against Wen-guniang, but….

Who knew what the simulation would show next? Now wasn't really an appropriate time to make friends with a Wen.

The pitiful cries continued, until Wei Wuxian plugged his ears and complained, "Hey, stop crying, alright? I'm the one who was burned, not you. Don't tell me that you want me to cheer you up? Why can't you cheer me up?"

"You're plenty cheerful already, idiot," Jiang Cheng pointed out.

"Yes," Wen Ruohan agreed. "I suppose this must have seemed right at home for him, considering what life at Lotus Pier is like."

Madam Yu huffed.

"Alright, Jiang Cheng. Stop supporting me," Wei Wuxian requested, leaning against the cave wall instead. "It's not like I broke my leg."

The girls gathered around MianMian, and began to sniffle together.

"Come on, let's focus on getting out first," Wei Wuxian suggested.

When Jiang Cheng noticed his father smiling proudly at Wei Wuxian, he glared at the ground.

As they spoke, Lan Wangji turned a considering gaze at the pool of water, stepping closer to get a better look.

Worried, Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren followed their simulated family member. Even though Wangji wasn't moving much, Lan Xichen couldn't help but continuously glance down at the boy's broken leg.

"We can't get out!" someone complained. "The only way out is blocked!"

"It's not the only way," Lan Wangji objected.

Numerous curious gazes turned his way.

"What do you mean?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"There are leaves in the pool."

"What?"

Someone frowned, "Leaves in the pond? What do you mean?"

"I don't get it."

Jiang Cheng frowned at them.

Wei Wuxian understood at once.

"I see, the maple leaves."

Lan Wangji nodded, "Both within the cave and near the entrance, there are no maple trees, but the leaves in the water have recently fallen. Under the cliff, there are maple trees on both sides of the stream."

Recalling the trees surrounding the pair when Wei Wuxian offered to carry Lan Wangji, the gathered crowd relaxed. Lan Wangji was right!

(Wen Ruohan turned to the Lan boy, surprisingly impressed once again.)

Jiang Cheng understood, adding, "So maybe there's a hole in the bottom that connects to the water stream outside."

"But how do we know the hole is large enough to let people through?" someone timidly pointed out. "What if it's just a really small slit?"

"Plus, the monster is guarding the pond," Jin Zixuan added.

As the impossibility of the escape was continuously emphasized, Madam Yu turned to look at Wei Wuxian. She clenched her fists, hating her own powerlessness, and hissed at the simulation.

"Get A-Cheng out of there," she demanded. "Don't you dare value anything before A-Cheng's escape, Wei Wuxian. If you focus on glory or fun before my son, I'll never forgive you."

“A-Niang-”

“Be quiet, A-Li. He knows what he’s been trained to do!”

Wei Wuxian lifted the lapel of his robe to fan at the wound under his clothes and said, “If there’s hope, then let’s move. Even if the hole is too small, it’s better than waiting here and doing nothing. So what if it’s watching over the pool, we can just lure it out.”

This conversation made a large difference between Wei Wuxian and Wen Zhuliu obvious. The latter was an intimidating presence, useful when it came to forcing cooperation through fear.

But Wen Ruohan had never seen him *inspire* anyone.

Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, was a natural leader. One who would have far more uses than a mere obedient weapon, once his loyalty was earned.

The boys moved closer to the beast, hiding in a hole in the cave to watch it carefully. It had moved back into the water, so the boys couldn’t see much of its body, but the snake-like head was still visible.

Then, quick as lightning, the head shot out to snatch a corpse, before sinking back in to savor the treat.

Was it possible to throw up when inside a simulation? Huaisang was pretty sure it wasn’t, but since tears were possible, he wasn’t wiling to wait and finding out. Once he started to taste bile in his mouth, he caved in with all the pride and dignity the heir to a great sect should have, and went hide in his Da-ge.

Carefully, Wei Wuxian tossed a torch. It clattered in a corner of the cave.

“Please be careful, A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli whispered.

In the cave’s dead-silence, the sound of its impact against the ground was magnified considerably. The head of the beast slid out of its shell at once, its thin pupils reflecting the eagerly burning torch. Instinctively attracted to the light and heat, it slowly extended its neck out.

Behind it, Jiang Cheng noiselessly dove into the water.

The earlier lotus-picking scene had established Jiang Cheng’s swimming abilities, but Jin Zixuan found his breathing pick up in frantic worry for his friend/to-be brother in law. Luckily, Jiang Fengmian’s breath was doing the same, so Zixuan felt entitled to his reaction.

With Jiang Cheng’s exceptional swimming abilities, the water barely rippled as he swam. His audience — both real and simulated — glanced nervously between the tortoise and the place where Jiang Cheng had dived in.

Silently, Madam Yu cursed Wei Wuxian. Why would he allow the Jiang heir who he was supposed to be *protecting* to risk himself in such a manner? Best swimmer or not, Wei

Wuxian should be prioritizing Jiang Cheng's safety! Why was her son needlessly risking himself for those other disciples? Was it the *honor* of contributing?

Honor was no where near as important as Jiang Cheng's life! Madam Yu was absolutely furious.

Suddenly, the tortoise's head, which had been investigating the torch, violently flinched back. It's large, black nose had been scorched by the searing flames.

Right then, however, Jiang Cheng was forced to come up for air. Seeing that its territory had been intruded, the giant tortoise turned toward the Jiang heir.

"A-Cheng, run!"

The tortoise plunged toward Jiang Cheng.

Madam Yu would curse Wei Wuxian's line for *generations.*

'*Jiang Cheng!*' Wei Wuxian realized. Jumping out of the cave, he bit his finger and drew something illegible on his palm. Then, he slammed it to the ground.

Directly before him, a fire as tall as a person sprouted from the ground!

"Not bad," Jin Guangshan complimented.

Madam Yu couldn't bring herself to outwardly agree, but stopped aggressively cursing the Wei line nonetheless.

His tactic worked perfectly, distracting the beast long enough for Jiang Cheng to escape the water and join the others in the small cave to the side. Wei Wuxian ran back right as Jiang Cheng began to report.

"There's a hole in the bottom. I think it'll be big enough."

"How big, specifically?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"About half a dozen people can pass at a time," Jiang Cheng reported.

The relief which spread throughout the watchers was nearly tangible in its intensity. There was a chance the tunnel would get too small later, but *some* chance of survival was better than none.

Wen Chao, meanwhile, grumbled to himself and cursed at the disciples' luck. If it hadn't been for the additional exit, Wei Wuxian would probably have died, and the Wen Sect would have won the war!

But then no one would have sent back this information, and the Wen sect would have lost its opportunity to take him for themselves. Considering that, Wen Chao supposed he could accept it.

Relieved, Wei Wuxian turned to the surviving disciples and shouted, "Everyone, listen up! Follow Jiang Cheng and swim through the underwater tunnel! Those who aren't injured watch out for those who are; those who can swim watch out for those who can't. Half a dozen can pass at a time, so nobody rush. Now go!"

It was interesting, Nie Mingjue mused, how in a cave with the heirs to four great sects, everyone unquestioningly followed *Wei Wuxian's* instructions. Then again, Nie Mingjue couldn't blame them. The boy's unwavering confidence and actions against Wen Chao were undoubtedly inspiring.

As soon as Wei Wuxian finished speaking, the flame he had created died down. After moving another ten or so steps to the right, Wei Wuxian hit the ground with his palm again, letting out another burst of fire.

The beast dragged its mountainous body towards the hypnotizing flame.

It was a little perplexing to be presented such clear proof of Wei Wuxian's unique excellence with talismans. The boy had clearly not paid attention to a single one of Lan Qiren's lessons, and yet he could only think of a handful of people who could pull off such a powerful fire talisman without resources. To be injured on top of that….

It was one thing for the simulation to *say* he would one day invent a whole new field, but it was another to witness the background needed to create the spirit attraction flags.

(Still not an acceptable partner for Wangji, but perhaps not as unteachable as he had once feared.)

Jiang Cheng turned to him, astounded, and raged, "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing? Get them out of here!" Wei Wuxian responded. By now, the tortoise had been lured completely onto shore.

"Wait, is he making himself *bait*?" Wen Qing asked disbelievingly.

"A-Xian! Stop! Stop that right now! Leave with them! Don't you dare stay behind!" Jiang Yanli begged, momentarily forgetting that the real Wei Wuxian wasn't there. Jiang Cheng stared at his simulated brother with undisguised shock.

The simulation's Jiang Cheng clenched his teeth, grunting out, "Everyone, come here. Those who can swim alone, stand of the left. Those who can't, stand on the right."

The disciples hesitantly followed that Jiang brothers' orders, but, at the end of a line, one Lan disciple glanced back. He looked between Wei Wuxian and the tortoise, a complicated expression on his face.

"Su She, follow their instructions," Lan Qiren commanded, despite knowing it wouldn't help. A ominous feeling of dread poured over Lan Wangji.

The simulation switched to allow the watchers a closer look at Wei Wuxian, who was now trembling from the energy maintaining the array took. He swayed slightly as

exhaustion began to overtake him.

An arrow pierced his arm.

“Su She!” Lan Qiren shouted.

“A-Xian!”

“Wait, I can help!” Wen Qing offered, kneeling down beside Wei Wuxian, before flinching back and remembering that she really, honestly *couldn't*. Wen Chao glared down at her for associating with the ‘enemy’ and she glared back, nonchalantly returning to the Wen side of the field.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji whispered worriedly.

Wei Wuxian gasped out in pain at the attack, then glared at the shooter.

“I-I’m sorry,” Su She said. “I was trying to shoot the monster.”

He threw down the Wen bow he had picked up, trying to distance himself from the disaster.

“You…” Lan Wangji forced himself to stop speaking, so overcome with rage that his voice had slipped into a growl.

While Lan Qiren supposed the boy’s intentions weren’t inherently unrightous, having an understanding of one’s own limits was *common sense* during dangerous situations.

“What a fool,” Nie Mingjue growled.

(Of course, that was assuming that Su She was telling the truth. Everyone knew escaping was much easier when you had some bait to leave behind.)

There was no time to pull the arrow out. Wei Wuxian instead hit the ground with his palm again. It was only after the flame reappeared that he was able to curse.

“Just leave! Don’t cause me any more trouble!”

‘*Wei Ying!*’ Lan Wangji thought, staring in awe as the crimson fire reflected in his golden eyes. ‘*Be careful. Please, let me help.*’

He had seen some of the head disciple’s heroism already, but nothing like *this*. Wei Wuxian wasn’t caving in under pressure, or prioritizing himself — he was embodying the Lan sect’s motto.

And doing it alone.

Jin Guangshan gazed across the crowd, taking note of the awe and protective instincts being ignited in the cultivation world’s leaders. It almost seemed like Jin Guangshan’s original judgement of the boy’s political worth was too *small*. Truly fascinating.

Concerned, Jiang Cheng turned to Wei Wuxian and shouted, "What are you waiting for? Get over here!"

"I will!" Wei Wuxian responded.

"Hurry up Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang begged, peaking through Nie Mingjue's body.

Gathered around Jiang Cheng were three disciples who couldn't swim. This was the last batch of people to take, so Wei Wuxian needed to hurry over.

Wei Wuxian pulled out the arrow.

The tortoise's head instantly swiveled toward him, attracted by the smell of blood.

"No. No no no no-"

The tortoise's head shot out like an arrow. It's ferocious jaws opened to swallow Wei Wuxian whole, only for Lan Wangji to push him out of the way.

Instead, the tortoise bit down on Wangji's leg.

"Wangji!" Lan Xichen cried out in fear.

Biting down tightly on the leg, the tortoise swung its head up and dragged Wangji away.

The Lan, Jin, and Jiang heirs chased after the tortoise, but could only watch powerlessly as Lan Wangji was swung around. Meanwhile, the second young masters (Nie Huaisang, Wangji and Wen Chao), remained frozen in their seats from shock, forced indifference, or fear. It seemed hopeless.

Wangji tried to escape, but his efforts proved completely futile. The tortoise began dragging him closer so that it could savor its meal within the safety of its impenetrable shell. However, just as the head began to sink inside, Wei Wuxian threw himself over and grabbed hold.

"Thank god," Lan Qiren whispered, watching Wei Wuxian with more respect and gratitude than he had ever exhibited before. Lan Xichen nodded once to the Jiangs in thanks.

"No need," Jiang Yanli muttered back. "He saved A-Xian first."

Despite the light conversation, both older siblings were clenching their robes to the point where their fists looked bone-white.

Normally, even Wei Wuxian's strength wouldn't be able to stand against a monster's. However, the adrenaline given by the life-or-death situation caused strength to flow through his blood.

With one leg bracing against the tortoise's shell, he hugged the largest fang tightly and desperately pushed away. He turned his body into an unwavering obstacle which separated the tortoise's mouth and shell.

Hoping to sink in and enjoy the delicacy offered to it, the tortoise didn't want to eat Lan Wangji until it was all the way inside its shell. It continued fighting Wei Wuxian for dominance.

A meager sliver of hope began to spread throughout Lan Xichen.

Even upside down, Lan Wangji's shock at Wei Wuxian was so potent it was visible in his expression.

Similarly, the real Lan Wangji watched as Wei Ying went above and beyond to save his life. It didn't mean his feelings were reciprocated (he would be foolish to believe that), but a traitorous flutter occurred within him nonetheless.

Now, Wei Wuxian's right arm was wrapped around the tortoise's upper fang, while the left one wrapped around the lower one, pushing them in opposite directions to (hopefully) pry the beast's jaw open.

The exertion caused his face to turn red, and some of his veins looked as though they might pop from the strain. He pushed and pushed and pushed, and, eventually, the jaws which had embedded themselves into Lan Wangji's leg began to be forced back open.

"No way," Jin Zixuan mumbled.

With a crack, Wei Wuxian broke the jaws apart, and Lan Wangji fell into the water.

Nie Mingjue gave a long, impressed whistle.

Then, just as suddenly, the almost-divine strength in Wei Wuxian's body left him. His body had realized Lan Wangji was safe, and decided to shut down the extra power it had been giving him.

Wei Wuxian fell into the water.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji shouted, jumping forward to catch the other boy, only for Wei Wuxian to phase through his body and crash into the water.

A loud smacking sound echoed, and Su She collapsed to the ground.

"Jiang Cheng, attacking him won't help!" a brave Yunmeng disciple pointed out.

"They escaped," Madam Jin realized with a sigh of relief. Madam Yu nodded once at Jiang Cheng, then frowned when she saw that her son was too worried about Wei Wuxian to notice.

"Right now we need to worry about getting out of here," someone else pointed out.

"I… I just wanted to help out!" Su She cried.

"Oh, shut up!" Jiang Cheng shouted. While he knew Wei Wuxian would survive this ~~only to die when Jiang Cheng led an army against him~~, his other-self had no idea what was going on inside. As the real Jiang Cheng had personally witnessed the near-death experience Wei

Wuxian and Lan Wangji had just barely escaped, the real and fake Jiang Chengs' anger equalled each other.

Jin Zixuan huffed, “You know why you did it.”

Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli nodded in agreement, while Jin Zixuan clenched his fists. The simulated Jin Zixuan had no reason to personally care about Wei Wuxian, but the real one had many.

If the illusion of Jin Zixuan was annoyed, the real one was furious.

“What should we do now?” MianMian asked. “The entrance is blocked, and there’s even a monster in the cave!”

Forcing himself to calm down, Jiang Cheng answered, “Let’s call for help.”

The others nodded.

“Good choice,” Lan Xichen commented.

With a rush of bubbles, the watchers were brought back underwater. Wei Wuxian desperately swam towards the sinking Lan Wangji, wrapping an arm around his chest and swimming back up, being careful not to jostle the bleeding leg.

Lan Wangji forced himself to look away.

He quickly swam to shore, throwing Wangji onto his back (now that the other boy wasn’t conscious enough to pointlessly refuse him) and breaking into a run.

When Xichen laughed at the scene, Wangji decided his Xiongzhang was a traitor who would never be forgiven.

Coughing out the water in his lungs, Lan Wangji finally regained enough consciousness to realize what was going on. His eyes instantly widened in horror.

“You-”

“It’s me! Are you pleasantly surprised?”

Both Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang gave simultaneous snorts at the question, and most everyone else rolled their eyes fondly.

“How could this be pleasant? Let me down!” Wangji shouted, his voice becoming unusually unstable.

“Ah, Wangji-xiong,” Nie Huaisang sang. “Embarrassed? See something you like? Living out one of your-”

“*Quiet.*”

Wei Wuxian laughed delightedly, doing everything in his power to cover up his exhaustion and pain.

“If I let you down just because you said so, wouldn’t that make me lose face? Come on!”

“I’m sorry… for him being… *him*,” Madam Yu admitted through gritted teeth.

Through his laughter, Lan Xichen managed to respond, "No need, he saved Wangji's life."

Despite her desire to do otherwise, Yu Ziyuan had to admit that was true.

A tremendous roar shook the cave, vibrating in their bones. Wei Wuxian quickly shut his mouth so that he could focus on running away. Sticking to the thin tunnels that the tortoise wouldn’t be able to get to, Wei Wuxian ran as far as he could. The scenery instantly changed in a flash-forward, when Wei Wuxian had finally gotten so far the tortoise couldn’t be heard.

Jiang Fengmian breathed out slowly, trying to calm himself down. Now that Wei Wuxian was out of immediate danger, he found himself wondering how his son was doing.

He hoped Jiang Cheng had managed to escape the mountain.

As soon as Wei Wuxian’s speed decreased, he scrunched his brows and sniffed the air, smelling something that the watchers couldn’t. Then, he felt something wet.

His hand was now covered with crimson.

Lan Xichen felt his heart stop. He was never, ever sending Wangji to the Wen sect alone, regardless of what they threatened to do.

‘*Lan Zhan’s injury is worsening again,*’ Wei Wuxian realized, the forced cheerfulness in his expression falling at once. As soon as he let go, Lan Zhan fell to the ground, a cold sweat breaking out across his face.

When Lan Xichen moved to kneel down beside his collapsed brother, Nie Mingjue followed. Unable to help herself, Wen Qing sat down as well, and Jiang Yanli followed soon after. The former pointlessly tried to diagnose the patient, and the latter fretted worriedly. Shortly after, Jiang Cheng, Jin Zixuan, and Nie Huaisang gathered around the real Lan Wangji, who was watching his other-self with faked indifference.

Carefully, Wei Wuxian pulled Wangji closer so that the Lan boy’s head laid on Wei Wuxian’s lap. It made logical sense — it was important for patients to be comfortable — but it was also *unbearably* intimate.

“I… I feel like we shouldn’t be watching this,” Jin Zixuan muttered.

“I disagree. We’re never going to be able to help Wangji-xiong unless we know their relationship like the backs of our hands,” Nie Huaisang declared confidently. He laughed and hid behind his frowning Da-ge to avoid Wangji’s glare, but he did have to admit that Zixuan had a point.

This was looking more and more personal as time went on.

Wei Wuxian leaned over to reach a for few straight branches laying nearby. Wangji's breath hitched in pain.

"Wangji," Lan Xichen whispered. He was watching his brother closely, and could see every time his breath faltered from the pain. It filled him with incomparable degree of worry.

"Xiongzhang, I'm fine," the real Wangji reminded, allowing Xichen's frantic heartbeat to calm slightly.

The sound of something ripping startled the watchers.

"What are you doing?" Wangji demanded, opening his eyes to see Wei Wuxian ripping part of his shirt with his teeth. Smiling back at him, Wei Wuxian began rubbing the grim off the logs with the fabric.

Now was absolutely *not* the time to think about how Wei Wuxian's exposed arm looked, so Wangji didn't allow himself to look.

Once they were clean, Wei Wuxian glanced around once, then asked, "Do you know where I could get a rope or a ribbon?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, your forehead ribbon might do the trick."

"Wait-"

The second he ripped it off, Lan Wangji jerked upright and snatched the end.

"You-!"

"'You,' what? You shouldn't worry about that now, what with the mess we're in. You'll lose your leg if it isn't taken care of."

Wangji's eyes were wide and he snarled with the ferociousness of a terrifying *beast.* Any sane person would back off.

So Wei Wuxian obviously remained firm.

"What?" Wei Wuxian asked again, pulling it away. "Even if you like your ribbon, it can't be worth losing your leg, right?"

Seeing that his glare wasn't doing anything to the motivated Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji finally looked away. It was as close to pouting as Lan Wangji had gotten in years.

The Lan brothers turned their gazes toward their uncle, hoping that Wei Wuxian's excuse would be reasonable enough to keep him from spitting out blood. To there surprise, however, they didn't need to.

Lan Qiren was staring intently at the simulated Wangji and Wei Wuxian with a contemplative expression on his face. After a few seconds, he glanced at his younger nephew and spoke.

“There are… worse people.”

Wangji relaxed for a moment, then his eyes darkened to a degree of anger that was similar to his simulation-self’s.

“It didn’t… mean anything to him.”

“Here,” Wei Wuxian offered, pulling out a pouch. “MianMian said the inside was filled with medicinal plants, see if there’s anything you can use.”

“How do you remember *that*, but not….” Jiang Cheng was so angry he couldn’t shout anymore, and simply leaned back in his chair defeatedly.

“Wei-xiong’s brain just works in a special way~” Nie Huaisang sang back.

Wei Wuxian poured the herbs into his hand, then held them out for Lan Wangji to look. After a few moments, Lan Wangji pointed to two of them and explained.

“This one stops blood flow, and this one detoxifies blood.”

“Very impressive, Wangji-xiong,” Nie Huaisang said as he clapped.

Jiang Fengmian nodded once at Lan Qiren, whispering, “All your teachings are paying off, it seems. No wonder he is your best student.”

Lan Qiren bowed back in thanks, then added, “Wei Wuxian’s training has been quite helpful too.”

Hearing the admission without seeing an enormous struggle on Lan Qiren’s part made Jiang Fengmian’s smile turn even warmer than it was before.

(Then his smile faded, and he began fervently praying that Wei Ying would escape the cave without further damage.)

“Hm,” Wei Wuxian looked down. “Who would have thought the perfume sachet would be so helpful. I’ll have to thank her properly once I get out.”

“Don’t you mean *harass* her properly?” Wangji asked, his face now in an undeniable pout.

Nie Mingjue broke into open laughter, shocked to see the usually stoic boy behaving so much like Huaisang.

Wei Wuxian laughed as well, answering, “What are you talking about? When I do those things, it isn’t seen as harassment. It’s only called harassment when someone like Wen Chao does them!”

The aforementioned boy squawked in rage, but everyone else laughed slightly.

“Shameless,” Lan Wangji whispered, still somewhat upset.

Madam Jin wanted to disapprove, knowing full-well that her husband used many of the same excuses, but was also aware that Wei Wuxian’s version of flirting was vastly different from the lengths her husband would go to. After some contemplation, she decided to remain silent. If he truly just meant playful teasing, then she saw no reason to complain.

(Though she couldn’t help sending a pitying glance at Lan Wangji, whose emotions were undoubtedly becoming a convoluted mess.)

After calming down from his laugher, Wei Wuxian’s face gained a more serious tone as he ordered, “Okay, now strip.”

“What?” Lan Qiren squeaked. He might like the boy a little more, but that was *not* permission to go any father than that.

Similarly, Lan Wangji frowned and asked, “What?”

Not wasting another second, Wei Wuxian pushed Lan Wangji’s shoulders and slammed him to the ground.

“What do you think? Take off your clothes!”

“*What?!*”

And, just as he said, his hands grabbed and tugged off Wangji’s lapels, revealing a muscular chest.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji screamed, face flushing.

Jiang Yanli squeaked and looked away.

“What is the meaning of this?!”

“What do you think?” Wei Wuxian responded teasingly, pulling Wangji’s robes off his shoulders. “Right now, it’s just the two of us in here~”

Despite Lan Wangji’s struggles, Wei Wuxian easily managed to tear his sleeves off. Straddling the other boy, he ripped the white cloth to shreds.

Then, he began peeling off his own robes.

There were loud exclamations and discussions occurring around Wangji, but all the noise seemed to be washed out. Instead, there was a strange buzzing his his head that prevented him from hearing any of the words being spoken.

His mind was *entirely* focused on the one who had climbed onto of his other-self. He gazed aghast as Wei Wuxian revealed the entirety of his toned chest.

With deep-set collarbones, the lines of his torso flowed smoothly. It seemed to flaunt its adolescence, full of youthful vigor and strength. Even the deep red sear of the Wen brand did nothing to dim his beauty.

No, instead, as a reminder of his heroic core and bravery, it *enhanced* it.

Lan Wangji forced himself to swallow.

Wei Wuxian leaned forward, resting his hands on either side of Lan Wangji's head as he towered over. All Wangji could do was watch, completely captivated by the tantalizing image on display before him.

Wangji's light-headedness was returning.

Smirking gleefully, Wei Wuxian leaned in.

"Now that our shirts are off," he whispered, "it's time to get rid of everything else."

"You-" Wangji began, only to be abruptly cut off as he began coughing violently. A moment later, a mouthful of blackish blood escaped his lungs and splattered across the floor.

"Alright, the bad blood's out. No need to thank me," Wei Wuxian assured, tapping a few acupuncture points on Lan Wangji's chest with a calm smile.

"...What?"

"..."

"*...What?!*"

No one was entirely sure who had spoken, as they all shared the same thoughts.

"Wait, so-"

"He was just-"

"The blood-"

"This whole time was just-"

"What is *wrong* with you?!" Jiang Cheng shouted at the simulated Wei Wuxian, his cheeks still flushed in a mix of second hand embarrassment and genuine excitement. He had never seen *anyone* act like that.

"That was… very masterfully done," Nie Huaisang admitted his face flushed. Luckily, he was far from alone in that department.

Madam Jin blinked twice, then turned to Yanli.

"You're… you're *sure* he's never been in a relationship?"

She, for once, didn't have an answer.

Then Jin Guangshan sighed in disappointment.

"What a tease," he murmured.

Glaring, the simulated Lan Wangji hurriedly puled his robes back on, trying to process what had just happened.

"Wangji, are you okay?" Xichen asked, knowing their uncle was seconds away from joining other-Wangji in coughing up blood. Luckily, it seemed the revelation of Wei Wuxian's true goal would allow Lan Qiren to recover soon enough.

On the other hand, the real Lan Wangji gave no reaction to his brother's question.

"Wangji?" Xichen asked again. "Are you alright?"

"..."

By now, everyone was looking at him, their faces finally starting to go from apple red to a more human shade. Despite the attention, Wangji remained stubbornly standing tall, staring forward.

"I'm… sorry about A-Xian," Jiang Fengmian coughed twice. "I'm sure that wasn't something you were expecting, even if it was done to help you."

Wangji remained silent.

"Wangji?" Lan Qiren asked, growing genuinely concerned. "What's wrong?"

The boy in question merely sat down and continued to ignore them.

Internally, Wangji's thoughts were filled with a single, continuous, high-pitched scream.

Seeing that his brother was entirely unresponsive, Lan Xichen moved closer, but didn't bother to repeat his question. While in the no-touch simulation, there was nothing he could physically do to help him.

A moment later, the simulated Lan Wangji spoke, "...Can you not make that kind of joke again?"

"Poor, poor Wangji-xiong," Nie Huaisang bemoaned. "I don't know if it's better or worse for it to have all been because of the blood."

"You looked worse than usual, so I figured you had some bad blood in your chest," Wei Wuxian explained. "It's unhealthy to hold it in like this, but a big fright is usually enough to get it out. And don't worry, I'm not into men like that! I wasn't planning on really taking advantage of you!"

"*Ridiculous!*"

Huaisang sighed and repeated, “Poor, poor-”

“Quiet,” Wangji ordered.

Wary of Lan Wangji’s unusually bad temper, Wei Wuxian held his hands up placatingly and said “Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. I’m the most ridiculous of them all.”

“You are,” Lan Qiren furiously agreed.

At the very least, Wen Chao was grateful; the incident between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had temporarily distracted the other sects to the point where they had stopped glaring at him.

(For now, at least.)

Then, a cold draft swept through the cave and made contact with Wei Wuxian’s soaked skin, causing him to shiver. Without delay, he gathered up dead leaves and branches, and used the fire talisman on his palm again.

Once the fire was steady, Wei Wuxian grabbed the herbs which had been picked out earlier, and applied them to Lan Wangji’s leg.

The close proximity so soon after Wei Wuxian’s cruel joke make Lan Wangji shudder. Every time he closed his eyes, he could still see himself being pushed to the ground while Wei Wuxian climbed on top of him.

Except Wei Wuxian had quite clearly explained he wasn’t interested in men. Knowing that, did Wangji have a *right* to fantasize about him?

No, probably not. And that was fine; it was all for the best, really. He had no right to have any such expectations. Getting to know Wei Wuxian at all would be an honor — no, the other boy was nothing more than a troublemaker. They probably shouldn’t meet up at all. Once the simulation ended, it would be best for them to avoid each other.

(He was *not* going to become the version of himself that dragged Wei Wuxian back to the Cloud Recesses in the future.)

Lan Wangji watched silently as Wei Wuxian applied the herbs, his eyes trained on Wei Wuxian’s chest. Then, he raised his arm, abruptly cutting Wei Wuxian off.

“What is it?” the Yunmeng disciple asked.

Without speaking another word, Lan Wangji grabbed some of the herbs from the other’s palm and pressed them onto Wei Wuxian’s chest.

Wei Wuxian winced and hissed in pain.

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli whispered worriedly, before glancing at Lan Wangji and nodding once. “Thank you, Lan-er-gongzi.”

He nodded in response.

Once he got past the pain, Wei Wuxian looked quite confused. Somehow, it seemed like he had forgotten that Lan Wangji wasn't the only one whose serious wound was still bleeding and had been soaked in water.

However, the moment Lan Wangji's hand left, Wei Wuxian began to peel away the herbs on his chest and put them back on Lan Wangji's leg.

"What are you *doing*, idiot?" Jiang Cheng shouted.

"Ah, this isn't really a big deal. Don't worry about it. I get hurt like this all the time, but I'll end up playing around in the lakes of Lotus Pier anyway. There's not a lot of herbs left, and your wounds need them more than I do…. What's with that look? Really, I'm fine. I'm used to it."

"He's *fine*?!" Huaisang screeched disbelievingly. They had all heard his scream when Wang Lingjiao gave it to him. As well as the sound of cooking flesh.

"What is wrong with that kid?" Nie Mingjue couldn't help but mutter. Even the Jiangs had no response.

(Wen Ruohan, however, was fairly certain *he* knew the answer. It seemed obvious that the Jiangs had spent so many years increasing his pain tolerance, he now considered the Wens' torture device to be *inconsequential*. Combined with teaching him that the only one who would help him was himself, his response seemed obvious. His subconscious tendency to value other lives before his own was a natural result of the grooming they had done. Intentional or not, the Jiang Sect had created a perfect guard dog for the heir.)

(But then why had they had a falling out?)

"If you know that it hurts, don't be so rash next time," Lan Wangji advised with a dark frown. "You won't be able to get rid of that thing now, even if you spend a lifetime trying."

"You pushed Wei Wuxian out of the way and nearly got dragged into a monster's mouth by your broken leg!" Lan Qiren growled, enraged by his nephew's carelessness. "You have no room to talk!"

Shrugging slightly, Wei Wuxian easily dismissed the concern with a "It's not like I had a choice, right? Who could've guessed Wang Lingjiao would be so heartless. MianMian's a girl, and quite a pretty girl at that. She'd be devastated if that thing had left her scarred or blind. Besides, I'm a man. I don't mind having a scar."

"You should still be careful, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered. While she was proud of her brother for saving that girl, she wished he wouldn't be so cavalier about *himself.*

Wei Wuxian tossed a few more branches into the fire to increase its brightness, before adding on, "And, if you think about it from another perspective, it could even be a good thing. The scar will never come off, but it proves I once protected a maiden from harm. MianMian will definitely remember me after this."

Lan Wangji forced himself to remain calm.

“Uh, Wei-xiong, you maybe you should-”

“And I'll remember this for the rest of *my* life too!”

Lan Wangji glared down.

“Oh no,” Jiang Cheng whispered.

Wei Wuxian laughed, “If you think about it, it’s actually kind of-”

Not wasting another second, Lan Wangji forcefully shoved him down.

“So you *do* know she’ll remember you for the rest of your life?!” he raged rhetorically.

“I’m sorry, Uncle,” Lan Wangji apologized.

“No, no, it’s… he….”

“The other you isn’t in the Cloud Recesses right now,” Lan Xichen answered, finding a barely-there compromise. Nie Mingjue snorted at the weak defense.

Collapsed on the ground, Wei Wuxian broke into a cold sweat from the pain. He sat up delicately.

Stuck in a cave while injured with no food or backup; Jiang Cheng really, really wished Wei Wuxian had managed to escape with the rest of them. Stupid Su She.

Glaring back at Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian asked, “Lan Zhan, you…. Have I done something to you?”

“You shouldn’t tease people like that if you don’t mean what you say.”

“It’s not like *you* were the one I was flirting with!” Wei Wuxian protested.

“That’s really not the problem,” Lan Xichen sighed.

“Why are you so angry that I was flirting with someone else? Unless…”

The audience perked up.

“Unless what?”

“Unless, Lan Zhan, you like MianMian.”

A loud *smack* echoed in the simulation as a dozen people facepalmed simultaneously. Wei Wuxian was so close yet so *painfully* far.

And Lan Wangji certainly wasn’t *helping* matters by continuously acting like he hated Wei Wuxian. Difficult situation or not, this was exhausting to watch.

The watchers had no right to push them together before they were ready, but it was just so *infuriating*.

"...I'm sorry?" Lan Wangji tried, not entirely sure how to read the expression in his brother's face.

"No, it's-it's not your fault. Or even Wei Wuxian's fault. It's just… hard to watch."

"I *really* don't feel like we should be seeing this," Jin Zixuan pointed out again, cheeks flushed. Yanli giggled and scooted closer to him.

Finally collecting himself, Lan Wangji answered, "Please don't speak nonsense."

"Alright, then, I'll speak some-sense."

"Is it amusing to trifle with words?"

"Very amusing. But believe me, my words are as inconsequential as my actions are. Which is to say, not at all!"

"..."

Before she consciously realized it, Wen Qing had already rolled her eyes and huffed fondly.

Lan Wangji sighed and muttered to himself, "Why am I sitting here having such a useless conversation with you?"

Wei Wuxian sat down beside him without a care for the consequences, responding "Because there's no other choice. We're the only two unfortunate souls here, aren't we? If you don't have useless conversations with me, then who will you have them with?"

At the reminder of their desolate circumstances, Jiang Cheng frowned. He was sure escaping the mountain while Wen troops were in the area wouldn't be *easy*, but it would still be easier than being stuck in a cave with no food and a giant tortoise. For all he knew, Wei Wuxian might end up starving to death in there!

He really, really wished Wei Wuxian had escaped with him.

Wei Wuxian truly seemed to be someone who forgot all past pain as soon as the wounds healed. His relentless positivity was undeniably perplexing.

Wei Wuxian causally rested his arm on Lan Wangji's closest shoulder, and opened his mouth to speak. However, all that came out was an exclamation of pain.

"Ow, ow, ow! Stop doing that!"

Lan Wangji had bitten him!

"Ha! Now he has one mark from MianMian, and one mark from you!"

Lan Wangji glared, then forcefully calmed himself down and repeated, “I’m sorry, Uncle.”

“Well, we… we agreed to not punish for things that haven’t happened yet.”

As Wei Wuxian’s exclamations continued, Lan Wangji only sank his teeth in deeper.

“Alright, stop! I’ll kick you if you don’t! Do you think that I won’t kick you away just because you’re injured? Stop biting! Stop biting! Alright, I’ll go away!! I’ll go away!! I’ll go away!!! Lan Zhan, you’re really mad today! You’re a dog! You’re a dog! Stop biting me!!!”

Jiang Cheng snorted.

Face flushed with embarrassment, Lan Wangji glanced up from the ground he had been relentlessly staring at to see what had caused Jiang Cheng’s reaction.

“Oh, it’s just the dog comment,” Jiang Cheng explained. “He hates them. He can’t stand even little tiny puppies.”

“What, really?! But they’re-they’re so cute!” Jin Zixuan protested, offended by the mere idea that someone *wouldn’t* like dogs.

Jiang Cheng nodded in agreement, “Glad to have found a comrade.”

They smirked at each other with newfound companionship.

When Lan Wangji finally finished his fit and felt satisfied, Wei Wuxian scrambled to the other end of the cave. He raised out his other hand to keep Lan Wangji away, backing up nervously.

“Don’t come any closer!” he ordered frantically

“I’m not going in!” the future Wei Wuxian shouted.

“Let him cry. When he becomes tired, drag him in,” the future Lan Wangji ordered.

Lan Wangji felt his embarrassment crumble at the memory. Knowing what their relationship would one day become, how could he be so stupid as to fall in love with Wei Wuxian?

(And yet, despite his best efforts, it was still happening.)

Thankfully, the other Lan Wangji responded to Wei Wuxian’s request by sitting up and straightening his robes. As he silently tidied his appearance, many people couldn’t help but wonder if it had been someone else who had just bit and tugged and shoved Wei Wuxian.

“It’s a little creepy how he can just turn it off like that,” Nie Mingjue mumbled. While Jiang Yanli giggled a little, Lan Xichen’s smile took on a far more bitter taste. He loved his uncle, but he also knew the Lan Sect rules and expectations as one of the jades had stifled his

brother's ability to express himself. Outside of direct family, Wangji had no one he would consider a friend.

Until Wei Wuxian, at least.

(If you asked Lan Wangji, he would say he wasn't the only jade who had been stifled by those expectations.)

As Lan Wangji continued to straighten everything, Wei Wuxian glanced at the bite mark on his arm and scooted away further, still shaken. His thoughts cried out in agony.

'*How could Lan Zhan do this to me?! He might have saved me, but you could say I saved him as well, didn't I? It's not that I want him to thank me or anything, but why is it that we still can't be friends, even after so much has happened? Don't tell me that… that I'm really as annoying as Jiang Cheng makes me out to be.*'

Jiang Cheng flinched, and the other teenagers shook their heads furiously. In the party at the Cloud Recesses, they received plenty of evidence that Wei Wuxian had a huge number of friends, all varying in rank and position. Lan Wangji was the only complicated one.

Both Lan Xichen and Madam Jin sighed at the misunderstandings occurring between their favorite maybe-one-day couple. And they couldn't even blame Wei Wuxian for that! What was he supposed to think about being constantly pushed away and even bitten?

Lan Wangji stubbornly gazed forward, not showing even a hint of regret in his eyes. He knew full-well how dangerous Lan romance was, and consorting with a demonic cultivator would be the end of the line. He was sure uncle, at least, would agree with him on this.

Unbeknown to Wangji, seeing Wei Wuxian's persistent attempts and friendship and proof of heroism were starting to cause Lan Qiren to *doubt* his earlier claims.

Right as Wei Wuxian's confusion reached its peak, Lan Wangji spoke.

"Thank you," he said.

Wei Wuxian blinked and glanced over.

"Thank you," Lan Wangji repeated. With his clothes soaked and his body still trembling, Lan Wangji appeared more human than most of the watchers had ever seen him. It was only fitting, then, that the first genuine "thank you" between the pair happened now.

(Nie Huaisang nearly squealed in excitement.)

Wei Wuxian frowned.

Seeing how he was kneeling already, Wei Wuxian got worried that Lan Wangji might try to kowtow and quickly made another stopping motion.

“No need to thank me,” he rushed to say. “I really can’t stand when others thank me, especially not when they do it so seriously. It gives me goosebumps. And kowtowing is even more unnecessary.”

Silently, Wen Ruohan crossed “lure him away with praise and flattering” from his mental list of ideas.

Lan Wangji indifferently replied, “You’re thinking too much. Even if I wanted to worship you, I wouldn’t be able to move.”

Wei Wuxian laughed, “No need! I got plenty of worship from the other students in the Cloud Recesses!”

While the watchers frowned in confusion, Lan Wangji gave Wei Wuxian a deadly glare.

“That wasn’t a good thing.”

“Hey, I didn’t force them to do anything!”

Lan Qiren got the feeling that his newfound appreciation for Wei Wuxian was going to be tested very soon.

The watchers returned to a faded memory of the Cloud Recesses. As Lan Wangji and Lan Qiren walked down a path of steps, Jiang Cheng passed by. Even though the clothes were the same as always, it took the watchers a minute to recognize him.

This Jiang Cheng was much, much wider.

“Wait, is that *me*?!” Jiang Cheng demanded, cheeks flushing.

Jiang Yanli laughed, “A-Cheng, you look just like you did when you were six!”

Noticing Lan Qiren and Lan Wangji, Jiang Cheng turned to bow to them. Unfortunately, with his uniform the same size as usual, trying to bend over proved to be quite a struggle. He stretched and stretched and stretched.

And his belt ripped.

“Jiang Cheng!” Madam Yu shouted as the simulated version panicked. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Calm down, San-niang,” Jiang Fengmian recommended with a smile. “This is back in the Cloud Recesses. He obviously returned to normal without a problem.”

“Is that even possible?” Wen Qing asked. “It’s harder for a cultivator’s body to change than a normal person’s, so I don’t think such dramatic alterations would be possible in this much time.”

“Well, it is a story Wei Wuxian is recounting to Lan Wangji,” Nie Huaisang reminded everyone. “Maybe, because of that, some of the details we’re seeing were… embellished

slightly by the spirits."

Nie Mingjue nodded proudly at his brother.

Their view changed to the Cloud Recesses at night.

As Lan Qiren and Lan Wangji approached, a round Nie Huaisang relaxed against a tree, observing a shimmering pond. In his hands was a snack he was gleefully devouring.

Nie Mingjue raised an eyebrow, causing Nie Huaisang to hide behind Jin Zixuan with a shouted, "I haven't technically done any of that yet!"

Upon noticing Lan Qiren, Nie Huaisang immediately stood up, hiding his snack behind his round body and giving the man an unconvincing attempt at an innocent smile.

"That will never work," Lan Wangji informed him crossly.

Nie Huaisang smiled back and said, "Gotcha! I'll do my best to get better at lying!"

Lan Wangji glared.

Chuckling nervously, Nie Huaisang looked left and right for an escape. He leaned over the water, then suddenly began flailing his arms back and forth! He tipped over and rolled down!

The water splashed as he fell in.

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue exclaimed in concern amidst the deafening laughter of the crowd (and Huaisang himself).

The two Lans flinched back in shock. Shortly after, Huaisang's body began to float on the water like a corpse. Luckily, he had valiantly lifted his snack in the air, saving it at the cost of his own life.

As the simulated Huaisang waved the snack triumphantly, the real Huaisang was forced to sit down due to the laughter which shook his body. Both Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng were starting to turn red.

Lan Qiren sighed heavily.

In the early morning, Lan Qiren and Wangji begin travelling back up the steps. At the top, they found three equally round disciples from the *Lan Clan*.

"Even them?!" Lan Qiren bemoaned.

The first disciple to notice the main branch members stopped immediately, moving to bow. The second one followed.

The third one, distracted by something behind him, didn't stop.

“Oh, no.”

Upon collision, the force passed through the trio like a newton’s cradle, and the one at the front came tumbling down, accidentally dragging the middle one with him.

As their round bodies bounced and rolled down the hill, they quickly spoke.

“Hello, Master!”

“Goodbye, Master!”

Just like his simulated-self, Lan Qiren’s expression could be described as nothing short of dumfounded. Meanwhile, Lan Xichen couldn’t help but laugh a little (a meager showing compared to the hysteria in most of the other watchers, but far more than the other Lan Clan members).

“He certainly brings life to the Cloud Recesses.”

“He brings trouble,” Wangji stubbornly corrected. Lan Xichen’s amused smile told Lan Wangji exactly what Xichen thought of his paltry rebuke.

Walking back and forth in his office, Lan Qiren tugged at his beard in contemplation. Lan Wangji stood before him, listening intently to his words.

“The pupils are behaving outrageously and slacking these days,” Lan Qiren explained. “Wei Wuxian must be up to something again. Go and investigate it.”

“Understood,” Lan Wangji agreed with a bow.

“This’ll be good,” Jin Zixuan whispered to Jiang Cheng. The latter, who had long-since decided nothing the simulation showed about Wei Wuxian could make Yunmeng Jiang’s reputation worse than it already had, suddenly became nervous.

Lan Wangji walked into Wei Wuxian’s dorm room. The watchers could only see his back, but even from here it was obvious he was eating rice at a near-inhuman rate.

(Though, unlike everyone else they had seen, Wei Wuxian’s body was the same as it always was.)

“No more than three bowls of rice in the Cloud Recesses,” Lan Qiren reminded tiredly.

“Do not eat more than three bowls of rice in the Cloud Recesses,” Lan Wangji reminded calmly.

Snickers at the parallel reactions erupted throughout the crowd. Neither Lan Qiren nor Lan Wangji acknowledged them.

Chewing unabashedly, Wei Wuxian glanced back at Lan Wangji without a trace of guilt on his face. Seeing that, Lan Wangji frowned and continued.

"...You got too much rice," Lan Wangji explained, presumably thinking Wei Wuxian must not have *realized* he was breaking a rule.

The real Lan Wangji, who had watched Wei Wuxian in private and even gotten to hear his thoughts, sighed at his simulation-self's naivety.

As if proving Lan Wangji's point, Wei Wuxian smirked. Then, he looked back, bringing the spoon to his mouth like a child and turning the world's most adorable eyes on the Second Jade.

"I didn't Lan Zhan. This is still my first bowl of rice."

Glaring at the blatant lie, Lan QIren stormed forward, intending to count the number of bowls before Wei Wuxian could hide them. It would be important to know if he wanted to ~~feel better about his argument~~ analyze the simulation.

He looked down at the bowl, and his mouth dropped open.

Rice covered by an intense, flaming red sat in a bowl *half a meter* in diameter.

"...Oh." Jin Zixuan blinked.

"Well, I mean…."

"I guess technically, but…."

Nie Huaisang beamed, "You are truly unmatched in your brilliance, Wei-xiong!"

Later, Wei Wuxian stood in the Gusu mountains, holding a dead pheasant. Just as he moved to tie it to a stick, a voice berated him.

"Do not kill animals in the Cloud Recesses."

This time, the real Lan Qiren and Lan Wangj did not join the virtual one in listing off rules.

(Huaisang was thrilled. We-xiong was training even the *Lans* to hesitate before disciplining!)

Once again, Wei Wuxian remained calm. Yes, it was undeniable that he had killed the animal. However, he then tapped his stick against a nearby sign.

A large line drawn by the spirits appeared half way between the boys.

Inside the Cloud Recesses | Outside the Cloud Recesses.

Smirking, Wei Wuxian left behind a glaring Lan Wangji, saunting off to cook the meat.

"That-that doesn't-"

"Uncle, you won't be able to speak to him," Lan Xichen reminded.

"But he-that's against the *sprit* of the rules! If he bends these one-"

“I think it’s already been proven that, no matter how many of these he breaks, he’ll still be one of the most righteous people out there,” Nie Mingjue observed. “I have no idea whether that’ll still be true in the future, but for now, at least, it’s true.”

Lan Xichen mentally prepared to defend his friend, but, to his great surprise, Lan Qiren paused, then nodded in acceptance and posed no further argument. Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue exchanged a glance, confused.

(Unbeknownst to them, Lan Qiren was recalling his observations of the Jiang family. Most especially, the realization that Wei Wuxian didn’t care about other people’s rules, but would follow his own sense of morality regardless of the danger it posed to himself.)

In the middle of the night, amid pouring rain, Wei Wuxian ran to the wall of the Cloud Recesses. With a leap, he easily jumped on top of the barrier which separated the sect from the rest of the world.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji called out, glancing up at him. The other boy glanced back and tilted his head in confusion.

“You two are so cute!” Nie Huaisang squealed.

Still frowning, Lan Wangji recited, “Don’t go out by climbing over the wall in the Cloud Recesses.”

“But I didn’t climb over the wall,” Wei Wuxian responded with faked innocence. “*I* climbed over the door.”

“That explains the 4000 rules,” Lan Qiren acknowledged helplessly.

Jiang Fengmian smiled sadly and nodded, “Yes. The demonic cultivation is only a small piece of who A-Xian is.”

Jin Guangshan didn’t entirely agree, but decided not to comment on the matter.

As Wei Wuxian laughed and sprinted away, Lan Wangji sighed tiredly.

Making his way through his patrol, Lan Wangji passed by a pair of round disciples who spoke to each other in appreciative but hushed tones.

“*How to Survive in the Cloud Recesses* is indeed useful,” one said.

“Yes, Wei Wuxian is really something.”

Although Lan Qiren gave a tired growl, he did not jump into another tirade.

Watching them leave, Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes, repeating ‘*How to Survive in the Cloud Recesses?*’

“Yeah, that sounds like something he’d do,” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, secretly pleased at the reminder of this version of his childish, idiotic brother.

~~It was much nicer to see this one than the one fighting for his life against an unstoppable monster.~~

The next morning, Lan Qiren trembled with rage as he read through a book. When the watchers got close enough to read the turning pages, they immediately realized the content: Wei Wuxian had made an entire book of exploitable loopholes found in the Lan Sects rules.

"Ah, I wish I had that last year!" Nie Huaisang declared, easily ignoring his Da-ge's disapproving-yet-affectionate gaze.

"*Wei Ying!*" Lan Qiren furiously shouted, slamming the book on a table.

"What an irresponsible…." the real one began, then finished with a sigh. Unlike what many had expected, he showed nowhere *near* the level of rage his simulation self had.

If anything, his anger seemed almost… *fond*.

Whitening out as if shrouded by a thick fog, the simulation transitioned to emptiness before darkening again and returning the watchers to the cave.

Wei Wuxian tended the fire, giggling happily.

"Remember that, Lan Zhan?" he asked.

"I do," the grumpy boy responded as calmly as he could. "*And* I remember having to confiscate those books for weeks after until we modified the rules."

"Oh yeah, that was hilarious!"

"It was not."

"Sure it was! I'm sure even *you* enjoyed some of the things the other disciples did to try to hide the books!"

Not a single person present believed that.

(When Lan Xichen saw the hidden sorrow in his brother's face, he was again reminded of the burning of the Cloud Recesses. The reminder might have seemed cruel from someone else, but, from Wei Wuxian, it was clearly just an attempt to remember happier times while in a bleak situation.)

Ignoring Wangji's deadpan expression, Wei Wuxian began to shake with laughter.

"How does he stay so obnoxiously chipper all the time?" Wen Chao asked, only to receive glares from all sides.

They had to admit that he had a point, however. How dire would a situation have to be for Wei Wuxian to stop joking and laughing? At this rate, he would keep teasing even if he died!

(And then they remembered the first two segments, and how cheerful Wei Wuxian was despite his gruesome death.)

“Ah, the disciple exchange was so exciting.”

“You hated going to class.”

“Yeah, yeah, but Jiang Cheng was there, so that was fun,” he argued, and his smile became a touch more forced. “Now that Jiang Cheng and the others have escaped, it’ll take them a day or two to get down the mountain. After they get down, they’ll definitely head home instead of reporting to the Wen sect, but, since their swords were taken, I don’t know how long it’ll take them to find help. We’ll probably be here for quite a while. We’ll need to search for ways to solve a few issues.”

While the adults nodded along with Wei Wuxian’s analysis, impressed by how realistic he managed to be despite the desperate situation, Jiang Cheng grew even more concerned.

‘*Stupid Su She!*’ he cursed. ‘*If it hadn’t been for him, Wei Wuxian would be safe with the rest of us instead of stuck in a hopeless situation!*’

Supposedly, Wei Wuxian wouldn’t die for another few years; that didn’t change the fact that Jiang Cheng wished more than anything that Wei Wuxian hadn’t been stuck down there.

After a pause, Wei Wuxian continued, “It’s a good thing that monster stays in the pool and doesn’t chase after us. The bad thing is that it also doesn’t come out. So long as it’s guarding the hole under the pool, we won’t be able to get out.”

“...It might not be a monster,” Lan Zhan disagreed.

Several people perked up at that, having made their own theories. The real Lan Wangji was especially curious to see if his theory was the same as his other-self’s.

“What does it look like to you?” he continued.

“A tortoise.”

“There is one divine creature that takes on that form.”

“The divine beast Xuanwu?”

With every word, the Jiang siblings’ worry multiplied.

When Lan Wangji nodded, Wei Wuxian frowned, “How can a divine beast look like this? It’s got a mouthful of fangs and eats human flesh. Isn’t that too different from the legends?”

“It’s not a proper Divine Xuanwu. Rather, it’s a semi-completed result of failing to rise to divinity and being transformed into a yao. In other words, it’s a deformed Divine Xuanwu.”

“Guess all that reading is paying off,” Jin Zixuan said, hoping desperately that his new-friend and eventually-going-to-be brother in law would manage to escape. Maybe they’d be able to lure the beast out somehow?

“How sure are you of this?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“...Four hundred years ago, a ‘fake Xuanwu’ rampaged through Qishan. The divine beast known as the Xuanwu is meant to resemble both a snake and a tortoise. However, having failed to complete its transformation, this one became a Yao and grew addicted to human flesh. Thus, it came to be called the ‘Tortoise of Slaughter.’”

“*That’s* what you sent them to fight?!” Lan Qiren demanded, recognizing the title instantly.

Wen Ruohan merely lifted an unimpressed eyebrow and responded, “If my other-self had known what it was, why would he send Chao-er after it? Especially with such comparatively insignificant backup.”

The reminder that Wen Chao’s forces — which had kept the unarmed other disciples in line for days on end — wouldn’t be enough to take down this monster filled the watchers with even more dread.

“So the prey Wen Chao was after was this four hundred year old tortoise of slaughter all along?” Wei Wuxian asked after thinking it over for a moment.

“It seems larger than the one depicted in the text, but it should be.”

“It’s been four hundred years already, so of course it’s grown. Wasn’t the Xuanwu of slaughter killed back then?”

“No. A few cultivators made an alliance and prepared to kill it, but they failed. One winter day that year there was a heavy snowfall. The Xuanwu of Slaughter disappeared and was never seen again.”

“It was hibernating,” Wei Wuxian realized. “But even if it was hibernating, it didn’t need to sleep for four hundred years, did it? You said the Xuanwu of Slaughter eats live humans — just how many do you think it’s eaten?”

Nie Huaisang clasped his hands together in worry. How many could such a big monster have eaten? Fifty? Dozens more? *Hundreds* more?

“The record states that back then, whenever it appeared, the number of humans consumed ranged from hundreds to entire villages and cities. From the handful of times it rampaged, it consumed at least 5,000 people alive.”

“Oh, so it overate.”

To the people who hadn’t known the number, it instantly crushed any hope they might have had. Jiang Yanli squeezed her hands together, praying desperately.

“Speaking of eating, have you practiced inedia?” Wei Wuxian asked. “That’ll let us go for days without eating or drinking anything. Though, after that, our strength, vitality, and spiritual energy will drop.”

“He’s quite good at adapting to circumstances,” Jin Guangshan observed, making Wen Ruohan hum in agreement. Three days would normally be a generous estimate; the fact that he was thinking about what would happen after meant he was assuming Wen Chao would interfere.

Picking up a branch, Wei Wuxian sketched out a mountain.

“Dusk creek is relatively close to Gusu, so your sect will probably reach here first. We can just wait it out and-”

“There’s no point,” Wangji interrupted. “They won’t come.”

“*What?!*” Lan Qiren demanded.

“What do you mean?”

“The Cloud Recesses has been burnt down.”

Despite already knowing that, the reminder disheartened the crowd further.

“Did… everyone survive?”

There was a soft thumping sound, and Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened in horror.

The glow of the firelight reflected off Lan Wangji’s face as though he was made of warm jade. It illuminated, with the upmost clarity, the tears that ran down Wangji’s cheeks.

“My father is dying,” Lan Wangji whispered. “My brother is missing.”

With every word, horror careened into the watcher’s minds. They had already known the Cloud Recesses had been burnt down, but-

Xichen had questioned why Wangji had been sent despite his broken leg. He had wondered if it was political (as much as he abhorred that thought). Perhaps Xichen looked worse, so Wangji volunteered in order to present a stronger front before the Wen to show they had recovered. That theory made sense to him.

But that wasn’t it at all; he was *missing*.

And Wangji had kept all his grief bottled up inside. It was no wonder that it was starting to spill over.

After panicking for a moment, Wei Wuxian spoke, “Um, Lan Zhan-”

“Shut up.”

Where before Xichen would have teased his brother's poor flirting skills, he now sat, disheartened. Silently, Nie Mingjue moved closer to show support.

(And, all the while, Wen Ruohan's arctic eyes swept across the other watchers, gauging their reactions.)

Wei Wuxian quieted himself and shifted farther away as the tears continued to fall down Lan Wangji's face. Where most people would turn red-faced and sniffly as they sobbed, Lan Wangji cried silent streams of clear liquid.

Silently, Nie Huaisang, Jin ZIxuan, Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli, and even Wen Qing moved protectively around the real Lan Wangji.

"Wei Ying, you really are… the kind of person I hate most."

"Oh…."

'Why is he here?' the future Wei Wuxian thought.

Then, later, Hanguang-jun had saved Wei Wuxian from Jiang Cheng, and nodded once in respect. The future Wei Wuxian had been confused.

'Back then he was strongly against my cultivation method. He was desperate to catch me. Why is he so polite now?'

Slowly, the reasons for the future Wei Wuxian's thoughts were becoming clear.

Turning to look at the ground, Wei Wuxian thought, '*I see. With everything that's happened, it's no wonder Lan Zhan's this mad. He didn't have the energy to hit me because of his leg, so he had to resort to biting me.*'

With that perspective added on, the formerly-lighthearted scene gained a tone of helpless frustration. Trapped in a cave with a monster and no way to know whether his family was alive, Lan Wangji had reacted.

Trembling, the real Wangji moved to the ground, trying to understand how the situation described was *possible*. They had seen the Cloud Recesses in the future. It was still beautiful, but-

But all the buildings were different. And the plants. And the grounds.

Then everything he had ever known as home was just *gone*.

"Three days."

"Hm?" Wei Wuxian glanced over.

Taking a deep breath, Lan Wangji wiped his tears and continued, "Rest for three days. If no one comes to help us…."

Wei Wuxian nodded in agreement.

The world faded to black; the simulation had frozen. Just like it had during Jin Zixuan's confession, it was giving them time to come to terms with everything they had seen.

Unnecessary; no amount of *time* would make this seem any more feasible. After all, hadn't they just seen the Cloud Recesses? Not ten minutes ago, Wei Wuxian had been gleefully recounting his escapades and misadventures during the disciple exchange. And now they were supposed to believe that it was so gone that, even a month later, *no one* would be sent after their second young master?

(No, if Xichen had disappeared, then he was their heir, wasn't he?)

(And if Qingheng-jun was dying, then he would soon be the Sect Leader.)

The only thing Wangji could use to reassure himself in light of those terrifying possibilities was the glimpse of the future. He hadn't been "Sect Leader Lan," just Hanguang-jun. Xichen was fine. Everything would be fine.

They would win the Sunshot Campaign with Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation.

Just then, a snicker came from the side.

Afraid of his father's rage, Wen Chao was trying to hide his amusement. He wasn't doing a very good job.

"How *dare* you?!" Nie Mingjue shouted, standing in front of Xichen. "You attack the Lan Sect unprovoked, cause the death of their Sect Leader and the disappearance of their heir, and then drag all the sects into your camp for 'reeducation!' Are we a joke to you? Or is the Wen Sect made entirely of amoral *monsters*?"

"Wha-" Wen Chao stood up. "My brother did that! And the arrogance of the twin jades was their own fault-"

"Their *own fault*?" Madam Yu repeated, standing up as well. "The only one to blame for the attack on the Cloud Recesses is *you*. If you were incompetent compared to them, that's your own fault!"

"Then, if they weren't able to fight back against us, isn't that *their* own fault?" Wen Ruohan asked, curious as to whether the others would back off once he spoke.

To his surprise, they didn't.

"You attacked a sect for *no reason!*"

"How can you excuse this on those grounds?"

"Even demons wouldn't be so callous! How many people need to die to satisfy your greed?"

“What? So because Wei Wuxian called you out for cheating, you went home and asked your brother to bring an army instead?” Jiang Cheng asked, glaring at Wen Chao. Now, every negative emotion the watchers had spent the last few hours bottling up began boiling over.

“W-well, it’s not like any of you really tried to fight back! If Wei Wuxian hadn’t been in the Xuanwu cave, you would all be dead by now! Some great heirs you are!”

“Compared to you, yes! At least we stood up against injustice!” Jin Zixuan shouted. “You were going to string up a girl because you caved into your maid’s jealousy!”

“You were going to kill them all!” Jiang Yanli clenched her fists.

“Evil Wen-dogs!” Jiang Cheng agreed.

“Why are you so surprised? We knew from the beginning that war was inevitable.”

Growling, Nie Mingjue turned to Wen Ruohan and shouted, “That doesn’t make what you did *right!*”

“You didn’t fight back when we did it to other sects.”

“And when we *do* fight back, you lose. You lose the Sunshot Campaign; you’ll lose the war *you* started. We’ll wipe out every last Wen from *existence* just like you tried to do to us!”

Wen Qing frowned.

“You won because of Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation,” Wen Ruohan reminded them. He wasn’t completely sure that was true, but based on the way people in the future talked about his power, it seemed likely.

“What’s your point?”

“If you’re truly as righteous as you claim to be, I would have thought that you’d accept *anything* before that.”

After hesitating a moment, Lan Qiren responded, “We now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Wei Wuxian we see now is righteous. If he thought he had to use demonic cultivation to defeat you, then it doesn’t matter how corrupted he ends up — he was more righteous than the Wen Clan.”

Such a statement coming from *Lan Qiren* of all people left many watchers stunned. But, upon reflection, it made a certain amount of sense. The Cloud Recesses getting burned down was one thing; Lan Qiren’s brother dying and Lan Xichen getting who knows how hurt was another. And now Wangji was in a cave with a deformed Xuanwu and no way out.

The Wens had come very close to wiping out the entirety of Lan Qiren’s family; his patience had run out.

None of this was to say that Lan Qiren wouldn’t stop Wei Wuxian from developing demonic cultivation. It was still wrong for someone to abandon spiritual cultivation when the

additional power they got corrupted them. He swore to himself that he would put an end to it before it began.

However, between Wei Wuxian and the Wens, it was now obvious who he respected more.

Wen Qing clenched her fists, slowly starting to see why Wei Wuxian decided to kill Wen Ning. It didn't matter that *they* hadn't done anything, they would be persecuted regardless.

"What? You don't regret it at all?"

Wen Ruohan merely tilted his head in a half-shrug, "Even if I did, what can I do about it? Unless we're willing to give up access to this information, we can't leave. If there's nothing that can be done, shouting empty threats is pointless."

When Nie Mingjue bristled at the implied insult, Nie Huaisang and the other Lan and Jiang leaders shook their heads. Reluctantly, everyone sat back down.

Nearly four minutes later, the simulation resumed.

Across a dark chasm, Jiang Cheng and a dozen other Jiang disciples traveled desperately. Most of them were leaning on each other for support, and Jiang Wanyin was forced to use a walking stick, having traveled continuously for hours.

Both Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan jerked back at the scene. While Jiang Fengmian went to stand closer to the real Jiang Cheng — quickly and illogically scanning him for injuries — Madam Yu turned to fiercely glare and a now trembling Wen Chao.

(He knew she couldn't hurt him, but some animal instinct within him identified her as a dangerous predator. Oh well, he was sure his simulation-self would knock her down a peg.)

'*Wei Wuxian, you must hold out,*' Jiang Cheng thought.

"Worry about yourself first!" Yu Ziyuan hissed.

Then the watchers returned to the cave, and, as if time was speeding up, witnessed Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji moving around in a pieced-together montage.

"The two waited for an entire three days," Lan Sizhui explained.

'*And I still wasn't back?*' Jiang Cheng wondered helplessly. Similarly, and although his other self had no reason to return, Jin Zixuan found himself angry. Lanling Jin had the resources to help out, and those two had stayed behind so that everyone else could escape!

(But, unlike the real Jin Zixuan, the simulated Jin heir had no reason to care about them.)

Lan Sizhui continued by explaining, "There was no trace of the sun or moon in the cave. They only knew it had been three days because of the consistent sleep patterns of Lan Wangji."

“Huh. Who would have thought *that* could be useful?” Nie Mingjue muttered, finally starting to cool his temper.

Their view changed to show Lan Wangji seated in a lotus position, meditating expertly while being careful not to put any strain on his leg.

“As they had spent the past few days conserving energy, the injury on Lan Wangji’s leg was slowly healing.”

“Hanguang-jun is so cool!”

“Be quiet, Jingyi! Sizhui’s recording!”

“Oh, *shut up,* Young Mistress-”

“*Guys*,” Sizhui warned.

The reminder of Jin Ling’s existence made Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan glanced at each other warmly, causing Madams Yu and Jin to lift their heads proudly despite the future boys’ immature antics.

After clearing his throat, Sizhui finished with, “This was already the fourth day.”

Jiang Yanli clasped her hands together nervously.

“Did you go to explore the pool again?” Lan Wangji asked, breaking out of his meditation.

“Yeah, but I still haven’t found the tunnel Jiang Cheng was talking about,” Wei Wuxian answered, carrying arrows in one hand and using the other to sling a quiver over his bare shoulder. “That thing’s still asleep, so I bet it’s covering the entrance.”

“Mn. We’ll need to think of another way,” Wangji agreed. He picked up one of the bows Wei Wuxian had brought over, testing the strength of the string.

Wei Wuxian nodded, “We can’t get out of here without killing it.”

As much as Jiang Fengmian wanted to protest the recklessness of the goal, he couldn’t disagree. They wouldn’t be able to get past the Xuanwu without killing it — with only the two of them there, distracting it would be far too dangerous — and they were running out of time. Sooner or later, they would starve to death.

When in danger of starvation, people could be convinced to do all sorts of things.

“I might have a solution,” Lan Wangji said, breaking off the bow strings and trying them together into a long cord.

Lan Xichen’s brows furrowed in confusion, before his eyes widened in realization.

“Although the monster’s skin is hard, there’s a circle of relatively soft scales under its neck,” Lan Wangji continued.

Wei Wuxian brightened, “An old wound? Great! Then let’s aim for that area!”

“That will be extremely difficult. This monster is extraordinary.”

Right as he finished speaking, Lan Wangji whipped the energy-infused strings to the side, completely demolishing a larger stalagmite.

“The chord assassination technique?” Wei Wuxian realized.

“Oh? You trained him in that?” Wen Ruohan asked, making a question that would have sounded innocent from anyone else come across as a threat. Lan Yi’s technique was famous, even outside the Lan Sect.

“Is that a problem?” Lan Qiren responded.

“Not at all. Those two truly do make a perfect pair.”

Jin Guangshan agreed; even their first meeting proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the two were prodigies born once in a thousand years. With the added guarantee of their accomplishments as adults, quite an enticing picture was formed.

Despite having originally been used to assassinate defectors, the chord assassination technique was one of the most powerful and vercitile fighting techniques of the Gusulan Sect. Wei Wuxian’s shock was warranted.

“We’ll breach through from within the shell.”

Yes, Xichen could acknowledge that it was possible to reach the aforementioned softer bit by piercing through from there. However, given Wangji’s current condition-

“I agree,” Wei Wuxian nodded. “But the inside of the shell is too cramped for you to use the technique properly, and your leg injury hasn’t fully healed yet.”

After a moment of hesitation, Lan Wangji nodded, understanding that if they weren’t careful, both of them could easily become liabilities.

The stress of the situation was aging Lan Qiren by decades at a time.

Wei Wuxian smirked and leaned closer, exclaiming “Hey, I got it!”

The watchers were then shrouded by darkness, flashing forward in time and cutting off Wei Wuxian’s next words.

“Oh, come on! *Seriously?*” Nie Huaisang cried, practically vibrating from the stress.

Jin Zixuan sighed, “Well, let’s hope *this* plan doesn’t involve self-sacrifice.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Jiang Cheng responded, making his sister’s clasped hands clench tighter.

Wen Chao grinned, about to add on (mock), only to shriek when a thin silver chord suddenly pierced through him. Of course, the thread had (unfortunately) only phased through, and he wasn’t injured whatsoever.

A moment later, three more threads branched out, going from wall to wall of the cave like a man-made spider web. Every time one appeared, muted thumps resounded as if an arrow had made contact with the cave wall.

Then he aimed at the area above the tortoise.

Strings five, six, and seven weaved a maze on top.

Filled with intrigue, Wen Ruohan began walking towards the tortoise; he was eager to see the boys’ plan in action.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian whispered from behind a stalagmite. “The chord formation is ready.”

“Mn.” Lan Wangji responded, standing atop another stalagmite slightly farther away.

Nie Huaisang, who hadn’t been able to see anything in the darkness, jumped when he suddenly heard Lan Wangji’s voice from behind him.

The crowd’s tension grew.

“Okay,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “I’ll go lure the creature out of the water.”

“Be careful.”

Jiang Fengmian sighed, ‘*He does this often enough that even Jin Zixuan noticed.*’

Barely making a ripple in the water, Wei Wuxian dived in. He deftly swam through, unhesitant even when he approached the mouth which had devoured thousands.

“Why does Wei-xiong always have to be doing dangerous stuff?” Huaisang cried. Nie Mingjue nodded in agreement; it seemed that even before demonic cultivation, he was often risking himself.

And always for causes that he believed in.

(So what did that say about his demonic cultivation?)

As Wei Wuxian swam closer and closer, he observed the beast to the best of his ability.

‘*Are those… bones covered in slits?*' he wondered. And, moving closer, he found that he was right. Between the tortoise’s head and shell were hundreds of skulls and other

bones left behind by past victims. He even saw a rotted half-leg with a boot from just a few days ago.

It was quite a messy eater.

"It's too bad he's not already the Yiling Patriarch," Jin Zixuan mumbled. "With all these dead corpses around, I bet it would be child's play for him to deal with this monster."

Several people nodded before they could stop themselves, then flinched back in shock.

"We *won't* let him develop demonic cultivation," Lan Qiren hissed. Wen Ruohan rolled his eyes at the comment.

As he continued to look, Wei Wuxian's hair flowed freely in the water. In fact, it almost seemed as if the current was pushing him away from something.

He moved closer to the current's source, and saw a faint red glow from a spot between the bones.

The watchers couldn't do anything to the simulation. Usually, they couldn't feel anything in it either.

But they *could* feel resentful energy.

And what they felt now brought half of them to their knees.

'*What is that?*' Wei Wuxian wondered.

"Please don't investigate it, Wei-xiong." Nie Huaisang pleaded, gasping under the energy's strain.

As if deliberately ignoring the request, the simulation simply brought the watchers through the skeletons to allow them to see first-hand. Behind the meters and meters of various bones, was a rusty sword *glowing* with resentful energy.

Although he hadn't done anything to it, it recognized Wei Wuxian's presence.

And exploded.

"What the-"

Gallons of water sprayed into the air, and Lan Wangji was nearly thrown back by the resulting wind.

"Wei Ying!" he shouted.

Back underwater, the resentful energy sent his hair flying back, to the point where his ribbon came undone. It was swiftly pulled away by the current, allowing Wei Wuxian's hair to flow freely.

It was-

“The Yiling Patriarch,” Lan Wangji recognized, his eyes narrowing in concern. Wei Wuxian hadn't fully changed — not yet — but he was now a step closer than before.

The red energy rushed past him, nearly pushing him away. Nevertheless, he held on tightly to the rusty sword buried deep within, trying to control the chaotic energy as best as he could. If he could get an actual sword for a weapon (resentful energy-filled or not), he would be much more effective.

Shrill screams resounded in his ears.

Even with his obvious struggling, it was clear that Wei Wuxian’s resistance to resentful energy was much higher than a normal cultivation’s.

However-

Surrounded by so much commotion, it was no surprise when the tortoise’s enormous eye cracked open.

“Oh, no.”

Wei Wuxian was then assaulted by more resentful energy than most people — most *cultivators*, even — would witness in their entire lives. It surged into him, and began attacking his core.

When his unusually bright golden core started to be invaded by reddish-black spirits, Nie Mingjue felt his heart stop. He knew, given his unavoidable future, that his eventual qi deviation would likely look similar to that.

“Why would he give up spiritual cultivation for demonic?” he wondered, running a frustrated hand through his hair. Lan Xichen shook his head in equal confusion.

Over the course of the simulation, they had both begun to like Wei Wuxian; they truly wished he would stop messing with things he didn’t understand.

Proving them right, Wei Wuxian soon began to feel the effects of the corruption seeping in. He gasped out, losing his last bit of air as he continued to battle with the sword underwater. Then, a shadow began to cover him.

“No. No. No. No-”

The Xuanwu opened its gargantuan jaws and dived in.

With a snap, they closed down around Wei Wuxian.

“*Wei Ying!*” Lan Wangji was frozen.

“No, no, nononononononono-”

The internal organs of a beast as old as this one could usually melt someone to smoke in an instant.

"No. *No!*" Jiang Cheng shouted. "No, I quit. I don't believe-why didn't he just come *with me!* Why is he always the bait and why-"

A spurt of resentful energy seeped out from the Xuanwu's mouth.

Then it exploded.

The Xuanwu reared its head back in pain, jumping out of the water.

'*It's coming,*' Lan Wangji realized.

The watchers spun towards the commotion, staring in shock.

The tortoise spun its head around, battling the concentrated energy. Finally, its jaw could no longer contain the pressure, breaking open and releasing a blazing stream of resentful energy. It was so powerful, many were sure that in that instant it was the most intense source outside of the Burial Mounds.

'*Did he-*' Lan Wangji realized, then immediately bookmarked his thoughts and pulled an end of the string. It immediately wrapped around and tugged the struggling Xuanwu back.

Lan Wangji swung around on another string to reach the Xuanwu's back, improvising to make up for the lack of Bichen. Once he landed on it, he knocked his hand against the shell and shouted.

"Wei Ying! Can you hear me?"

"Please, please, please-" Jiang Yanli prayed.

Unwillingly, the watchers were then dragged inside the Xuanwu's mouth. They traveled through, moving down its throat until they found Wei Wuxian.

Using the sword, Wei Wuxian had kept himself from falling down by spearing into the Xuanwu's throat.

"Brilliant, brilliant boy," Wen Ruohan whispered, his eyes fixated on the soon-to-be Yiling Patriarch.

Right as Wen Ruohan finished speaking, Wei Wuxian's eyes cracked open. The determined fire in his silver orbs was enough to make *anyone* hesitate.

'Relatively soft scales under its neck,' Lan Wangji had said.

Nie Mingjue laughed, "Well I suppose that's one way to get to them."

The sword stabbed straight through the Xuanwu from the *inside.*

“Unbelievable,” Madam Jin gasped out.

As the head he was crouching on roared in pain, Lan Wangji was sent swaying back and forth. Despite that, he focused his mind, and activated their trap.

The net of strings which had been nearly invisible up till now abruptly lit up, cutting into the Xuanwu’s body and making its pained cries grow even louder. Pieces of its shell and the bones in its crevices began to fall to the ground.

Then, the strings *contracted.*

Dozens of flaming, unbreakable chords wrapped themselves around the Xuanwu’s neck just above where Wei Wuxian had stabbed through. Lan Wangji swung around the neck and added to the number of strings, before grabbing onto them all and pulling as tight as he could.

“No way.”

“They might actually….”

The threads glowed red-hot, then a blinding light flashed as the energy reached its peak.

The Xuanwu’s decapitated head fell to the water.

“They just….”

“They actually did it.”

Wen Ruohan’s eyes reflected the bright light with unhidden fascination.

Then, Huaisang cheered.

“Go Wangji-xiong! Go Wei-xiong!”

“They did it!” Jiang Cheng repeated, his mouth stretching into a wide but genuine smile. “They actually did it!”

“Attempt the impossible, huh?” Jin Zixuan asked, laughing.

“Wangji, good work,” Xichen whispered, hating the fact that he couldn’t hug his brother.

“...I didn’t actually-”

“Don’t ruin the moment! This is amazing, Wangji-xiong!”

Wen Chao scowled in a corner of the room.

Rocks everywhere were sent flying by the force of the attack, and the Xuanwu’s head crashed into the water below. Unlike the watchers, the simulated Wangji wasn’t interested in celebrating.

“Wei Ying,” he whispered.

“He’ll be just fine,” Jiang Cheng promised, still giddy about his brother surviving such impossible odds. “He always is!”

The Xuanwu’s head sank down into the water, and Wei Wuxian fell with it. Next to him, the resentful-energy filled sword sank down as well.

Even with their excitement, the state of Wei Wuxian’s undone hair served as a sharp reminder.

The Yiling Patriarch was still to come.

“If *this* wasn’t enough to make him turn, what could be?” Madam Yu couldn’t resist asking.

“Maybe, next time, I won’t be there,” Lan Wangji suggested grimly.

The world faded back to white.

Now that the simulation was over, the watchers were left time to talk with each other.

Awkward didn’t even *begin* to describe it.

The Wen sect had all but declared war when they revealed that the purpose of the camp was to kill all the disciples. They weren’t even hostages! They were *meant* to die to weaken the other sects.

Even Jin Zixuan was almost killed. Jin Guangshan had been nothing but cooperative with Wen Ruohan, and did care for his son more than one might expect. If the Wens were willing to kill even him, then there were no doubts as to what the Wens’ final goal was.

They wanted a war.

And now the watchers were stuck in a room with each other.

(Nie Mingjue almost wished they *could* fight.)

“Quite an impressive showing,” Wen Ruohan complimented, speaking to Lan Qiren and Jiang Fengmian. “You’ve trained your disciples well.”

Then, he sent Lan Wangji a look that seemed to stare directly into his soul. Xichen moved between them.

“Thank you,” he spoke coldly. “I wish I could say the same.”

Wen Chao bristled at the insult, but Wen Ruohan remained unphased. Unlike his simulation-self after the archery competition, the real Wen Ruohan had no reason to feel offended. After all, from what he had seen of the Jiangs, Wei Wuxian was an exception, not the norm. As for the Lans?

“I’m sure Su She would agree with you,” Wen Ruohan said, smirking deeper when Lan Xichen’s eyes narrowed at the reminder. They may have agreed not to punish, but their resolve would surely be tested in the coming segments.

“Well, at least the boy got A-Cheng to safety,” Madam Yu acknowledged. Her family turned to her with startled expressions, not have expected such a (relatively) positive response from her.

Jiang Cheng scowled, “I could have helped!”

“Helped against *that?*” Wen Chao mocked. “You kept telling Wei Wuxian to not interfere against us! Wouldn’t you have just sat on the sidelines against the Xuanwu too?”

“You-”

“The important thing is that you managed to get out,” Lan Qiren interrupted, hoping to present an unnecessary argument. “The sects will be alerted to the….”

He didn’t finish, unsure of how to phrase it. They had known from the beginning that the Wen Sect would cause them to start the Sunshot Campaign.

Knowing and *understanding* those words made all the difference.

Uncomfortable with the pause, Jin Zixuan turned to Yanli and muttered, “I can’t believe 90% of his plans amount to making himself the bait.”

She laughed and added, “And the other 10% are undressing to scare Lan-er-gongzi.”

“Either way, he likes attracting attention!”

Lan Wangji’s ears flushed pink as the engaged couple began to snicker at his expense.

“Yes, that was quite well-done,” Madam Jin admitted with a roll of her eyes, then look at Wangji. “You’ll probably enjoy yourselves quite a bit when you’re older.”

The pink turned to red.

“He doesn’t… feel the same.”

Jin Guangshan laughed, “I might have believed that if he hadn’t been mentioning you nearly 24/7 during the lotus picking segment. In my experience, anyone who thinks that much about a person while *also* getting distracted by their appearance is far from uninterested.”

His words made Wangji flush deeper in embarrassment, and Madam Jin flush in rage.

“Oh, of course you’d know that-”

“Dear, I was just saying-”

“Don’t you *dare* try to excuse this, Guangshan!”

As the pair got into their latest shouting match, Jiang Yanli moved closer to Lan Wangji and whispered, “Please take good care of my brother.”

“Uh, yeah!” Jin Zixuan added, eager to join in. “Please take care of my soon-to-be brother-in-law.”

It was obvious he had mostly interjected to be able to say “brother in law,” but no one commented on that.

“Wait, are you planning to take Wei Wuxian away?” Jiang Cheng asked. Despite the Jins’ loud argument going on in the background, Jiang Cheng had been close enough to hear the conversation.

“Don’t worry, A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli laughed. “Our A-Xian hasn’t even met Lan Wangji yet. It’ll be a long time before you need to worry about him leaving.”

“But why would he leave? He’s supposed to…. You can’t just… just sell him off!”

“I would never take Wei Ying against his will,” Lan Wangji objected.

“But future you *did*.”

Abruptly remembering the encounter, Lan Wangji flinched back. Although he had hesitated to get involved in another family’s interactions, when Nie Huaisang saw the horror and realization flashing across Lan Wangji’s face, he decided to interject.

“I mean, to be fair, there weren’t many other options,” he said. “Wei-xiong had already done his little flirting-bit, and if Wangj-xiong had let him go… well, that world doesn’t seem to be especially kind to demonic cultivators.

’Haven’t I told you? When dealing with those without honor, just kill them and feed them to your dog!’

Now, Jiang Cheng was the one to flinch back in horror, remembering clearly just who had caused the situation. And had the future Wei Wuxian even had a plan beyond anger-everyone-and-run-away?

(Attract a certain kind of attention, same as all his other plans.)

To Lan Xichen, there was even more at play.

There were still several years they hadn’t learned about yet. Who knew what happened between them? Perhaps the future Lan Wangji had information they didn’t know. No one else had been able to tell, but the future Lan Wangji’s reaction to Wei Wuxian’s flirting was more than a little odd.

In addition to the shock, there had been a half-second of genuine hurt. As if Wei Wuxian should have *known* this wouldn’t disgust him. Dragging him back to the Cloud Recesses had also slightly seemed like revenge for the words.

But what could have caused a misunderstanding like that?

A dimension away, Wei Wuxian sat across from another Lan Xichen, deep in discussion.

There were two knocks on a door.

“Come in,” Lan Xichen said.

Hanguang-jun stepped through, quickly scanning the two of them for any traces of injury or distress. He hadn’t heard of a fight, but it couldn’t hurt to be careful. He had been rather busy negotiating with clans who wanted to destroy Jin Guangyao’s watchtowers on the basis of the man’s involvement, so he had been a little distracted.

Luckily, it seemed his husband and brother were getting along just fine.

“Did it go well?”

“Great!” Wei Wuxian answered. “Your brother and I are starting a coup!”

Xichen balked at the deliberately incorrect phrasing.

Relaxing at the teasing, Lan Wangji sat down next to him and said, “I left you alone for less than a day.”

“I know, right? Shame on you!”

Wei Wuxian’s smile had grown nearly three times as large as it was before. Lan Xichen was faced with the uncomfortable realization that Wei Wuxian’s happiness while with him had been at least partially faked.

Well, Xichen supposed he ‘at least partially’ deserved it.

“Who are you planning a coup for?”

“We were a little worried about the actions the people in that parallel world might take, so we thought we could try to get a bit of political power there. Not a ton — it’s not like we can *physically* go there — but just enough to lessen the effects. What do you think? Would I make a good emperor of a parallel universe?”

“Of course you would.”

Wei Wuxian laughed in delight.

Wangji turned his gaze on Xichen and asked, “Do you feel better now?”

“Yes, I do,” he nodded. “It was a very… insightful conversation.”

“Do you want to help more?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Befuddled, Xichen asked, “Help with what?”

“Interfering with the parallel world. So long as you keep what I said in mind, it could be fun. Besides, it might be… good for you to get another goal.”

Hearing that, Lan Wangji turned a disturbingly pleading gaze on his brother.

“If… if you’ll have me, I would be honored.”

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji shared a smile.

Chapter End Notes

When I first started this series, I was only planning on including the archery MDZS Q episode. Then, I rewatched some of them, and cursed myself for not including this one! And besides, it was important. I wanted to make sure that Lan Qiren didn’t seem like he had forgotten the kind of person Wei Wuxian was. Hope you enjoyed! :)

Wei Wuxian is Proven Right (Again!)

Chapter Notes

> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tSDKeYFckI ← When we get to that part, LISTEN TO WANGXIAN!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Welcome back, Wei-gongzi, Hanguang-jun," the Ghost General greeted with a formal bow. Huffing fondly, Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes and moved Wen Ning upright again, then walked back to his lab.

"Did anything go wrong while I was gone?"

"No, everything's stable. Did your talk with Zewu-jun go okay?"

"Yeah, it actually ended up being pretty helpful," Wei Wuxian explained, pulling out the notes he had taken. "I think we might try to gain political power in the other-dimension to influence its behavior."

"We will?" Wen Ning asked, tilting his head (as much as a corpse was able to).

"That's the plan!" the Yiling Patriarch answered cheerily. "Still not sure how we're going to interfere with Meng Yao and my other self — or if we're going to interfere at all — but, for now, gaining political power sounds smart."

"But-but how will we do that?"

At that moment, Wei Wuxian's expression turned terrifyingly devilish, and Wen Ning felt a chill run up his undead spine.

"We'll use you, of course!"

"..." Wen Ning stared silently, certain he'd misheard.

"Wei Ying, explain properly," Hanguang-jun corrected.

Wei Wuxian laughed, sitting across from Wen Ning and elaborating, "We can only send across information, but that's more than enough. Because we, by virtue of being a future with me in it, know a lot of stuff they don't! I can give information on talismans and different versions of the Compass of Evil in exchange for their cooperation. For example, if the Jiang Sect strikes a deal with us to help keep little-me alive, then we can give them instructions on how to make Spirit Attraction Flags. If the Jin sect breaks a deal with us, then we can give every other clan instructions on a new and improved compass for free. The secret will

probably be leaked soon enough, but those months where only one clan has an advantage will be important to them."

As Wei Wuxian had spoken, Wen Ning's eyes lit up in understanding like an excited lamb. Once Wei Wuxian finished, however, he turned confused.

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Ah, well, I sent over instructions on how to add… emergency precautions, I guess? But little-me wants something a bit more complicated. Apparently, some of the things being shown are things not everyone wants to see — they probably only care about what the juniors tell them about their own sects. So, we need something that can think to figure out when that's happening, but doesn't have opinions that will complicate matters. And that is where you come in!"

"It is?"

"Yup. When you go into battle-mode, you know how to fight and adapt to your surroundings and/or opponents, but your critical thinking is cut into about a fiftieth of what it normally would be. If we send something like that over, not only will it take less memory than a full consciousness would, but it might help us connect to the array later. Anyways, the privacy-thing will sneak inside the time-travel array like a parasite, and both keep track of the watchers' heart rates — an emergency safe guard little-me is working on — and read intentions to see when they don't want to watch. Then, the consciousness will need to find similar moments in the memory package sent over, and make them go asleep during those moments too. If we can just figure out the-"

"Wei Ying, you're rambling," Lan Wangji informed him calmly, his lips twitching up in amusement. When Wei Wuxian was teaching juniors, he was the best possible option; when he was working through his thoughts while inventing, he tended to get about a kilometer off topic.

Wei Wuxian laughed, "Sorry, sorry. Anyways, if we send that over, then the people on that side will know we're capable of inventing things they need. Then, we'll have a lot of political weight amongst the sects, as whoever we support will probably do the best in night hunts and such. Therefore, we'll get power."

"That's amazing, Young Master Wei!" Wen Ning cheered.

"I know! And the best part is that even with our influence, we won't need to go to any boring conferences! They literally can't make us go!"

"...That's the best part?"

"Absolutely! I'll be an emperor with all the power, and none of the boring posturing!"

"Good job, Wei Ying."

“The only downside is how hard it'll be to apply something like that when no one who actually knows how to use resentful energy is there,” Wei Wuxian added, continuing his thoughts aloud. “Maybe it would be easier if that past's Wen Ning was there? Oh, well. I’ll just have to mention that to little-me next time!”

“Will you need any additional texts for your work?” Lan Wangji asked, ever the doting husband.

“The only ones I might want are the ones on empathy, but I won those back for Lotus Pier during the Sunshot Campaign, so Jiang Cheng has them now. We probably shouldn’t ask.”

Lan Wangji and Wen Ning both frowned at the bitter expression on Wei Wuxian’s face, but didn’t press the matter. A moment later, Wei Wuxian brightened again and hopped over to his workspace, gesturing for the other two to follow.

“Come along, come along. Lan Zhan, while Wen Ning and I are setting this up, will you tell me about your day? I feel like I haven’t heard enough of you today.”

“Alright,” Lan Wangji agreed easily, sitting across from his husband. “Would you rather hear about the discussion on the watchtowers, or a nighthunt I brought some juniors on?”

“The night hunt! The night hunt!” Wei Wuxian begged. “As much as I love hearing your voice, even *it* can’t make Sect Leader Yao’s complaints sound any less obnoxious!”

Wen Ning wanted to blush at the casual affection and teasing smirk Wei Wuxian sent Lan Wangji.

Contrarily, Lan Wangji only nodded once and began, “I took a class of thirteen-year-olds just outside Caiyi town, and we saw….”

Wei Wuxian sank deeper and deeper into the water.

Seeing his still-closed eyes, Lan Wangji felt a beat of concern pass through him.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t swimming up.

Luckily, he didn’t need to.

There was a splash, and the watchers could see Lan Wangji’s legs sticking into the water. From the way his body was moving around, he was obviously searching for Wei Wuxian.

“Wei Ying!” he called.

“Down here, idiot!” Jiang Cheng shouted, trying to direct the simulated Wangji towards his simulated brother. Yes, he knew that was pointless and embarrassing to do in front of the other heirs and clan leaders. No, he didn’t care.

(It was hard to mind too much when they had *already* seen the Jiang family at some of their worst.)

Fortunately for the kids' sanities, the simulated Lan Wangji checked underwater next. As soon as he saw the sinking Wei Wuxian, he swam forward and grabbed him, pulling him to the surface by wrapping an arm around his waist. It was a near-perfect recreation of how Wei Wuxian had saved him three days ago.

"What was it you said again?' Nie Huaisang asked, sneaking closer to Lan Wangji with a conniving grin on his face. "That you, 'don't touch strangers,' right?"

"I suppose Wei Wuxian can't count as a stranger after he climbed on top of you like that," Jin Zixuan muttered, causing a light pink glow to spread across Lan Wangji's ears.

Even though Lan Wangji had pulled him out of the water, Wei Wuxian hadn't moved.

Growing concerned, Lan Wangji repeated, "Wei Ying!"

Wei Wuxian merely continued to lean against Lan Wangji's chest, his long, untied hair fanning out in the water around him. The scene gained an almost *intimate* tone from how closely Wangji was holding Wei Ying's waist.

Madam Jin thought it would have been romantic, if not for the enormous Xuanwu corpse right next to them.

The affectionate atmosphere doubled when Lan Wangji moved slowly and tenderly to brush some hair off of Wei Wuxian's cheek. The sensation made Wei Wuxian twitch.

Then, he woke up.

"What happened?! What's going on?!" he asked frantically, instantly breaking the romantic aura they had previously had. "Has it died?! Is it dead?!"

"How can he be so hyper after nearly drowning?" Lan Qiren grumbled, making Jiang Fengmian chuckle. Wei Wuxian's eyes were wide and bloodshot, but his energy made him look as healthy as a pampered prince.

"It's dead," Wangji answered.

Unfortunately, Wei Wuxian's constant flopping started causing both their bodies to sink deeper into the water. It forced Lan Wangji to tighten his arm around Wei Wuxian's waist.

Now, Lan Wangji knew it would be foolish and illogical to be jealous of his other-self. Future Wangji had just fought a Xuanwu with a broken leg, and nearly died multiple times.

But it was getting hard to remember that when he could clearly see other-Wangji's tight hold on Wei Wuxian's waist.

(During the cold spring scene, Wangji had seen how small it was. Now, various undesirable fantasies were creeping into his mind.)

After several-second pause, Wei Wuxian's blank eyes returned to focus and he replied, "Dead? It's dead… Good, it's dead!"

"A-Xian, you should take a break and rest."

Everyone knew Jiang Yanli's words couldn't change the simulation, but they all understood why she had said them. Their complete and total *powerlessness* was getting exhausting.

"Ah, right, the hole!" Wei Wuxian added, scanning the water. "Quickly, let's go. We can escape through it!"

"Is something wrong?" Lan Wangji asked, seeing his strange behavior.

"...It's nothing. Let's hurry, there's no time to lose!"

If it hadn't been for the pause which had transpired before his answer, no one would have been able to tell Wei Wuxian was bothered by something. His ability to sound completely natural while lying was fascinating.

After another pause, Lan Wangji decided, "I'll carry you."

"Oh, my, Wangji-xiong. You're so-"

"Not. Another. Word."

"I… there's no need…."

But Lan Wangji had already taken in a massive inhale, puffing up his cheeks into an adorable expression. Wei Wuxian stared for several seconds, then sighed and also took a deep breath.

A moment later, they were underwater.

Huaisang stared in awe.

The simulation had adjusted to the change in brightness, giving the watchers a full view of the dark pool. The purplish-blue background contrasted nicely with the dimmed colors of Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's clothes. Amid a torrent of bubbles, the pair moved deeper and deeper into the cave. As they went, their hair flowed freely around them, making them resemble the underwater yao which lured sailors into jumping off their ships. Mystical yet attainable all at once.

"Da-ge, why can't I have my paints?!" Huaisang complained as Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji searched. "It's not fair to have to watch this without being allowed to copy it down!"

"You'll survive," Nie Mingjue heartlessly responded. Even Huaisang's best pout didn't earn him any extra sympathy.

Finally, the pair resurfaced again.

Wei Wuxian spat out a mouthful of bloody water, coughing as Lan Wangji began bringing them both back to shore. Blinking open tired eyes, Wei Wuxian scowled.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Why is there no hole?”

“The Xuanwu,” Lan Wangji responded. Although he didn’t like it, Wei Wuxian was forced to agree: the Xuanwu must have dislodged some rocks while thrashing around and filled up the entrance.

“You should have just escaped with me!” Jiang Cheng shouted pointlessly, frowning. Seeing first hand the level of danger and desperation Wei Wuxian was in made him sincerely wish Wei Wuxian had gotten out with the rest of them.

“Let’s get out first,” Lan Wangji decided, aiding Wei Wuxian in climbing out of the water.

Trembling heavily, Wei Wuxian took off his clothes and began wringing them dry. The more he thought about everything, the angrier he got. He whipped the end of his robe against a rock.

“Are we being toyed with or what? I didn’t think we’d be able to kill it at all. And now that we did, that bastard made the hole collapse. Fuck!”

All the teenagers (and some of the adults) stepped back in shock.

Wei Wuxian was relentlessly positive. He had nearly drowned recusing Su She from the abyss, and joked with Lan Wangji immediately after. He had accidentally used resentful energy to save the bunnies, and cheerfully brought them to Lan Wangji regardless. He had been kicked out of the Cloud Recesses, but played around with ants right after. He had heard the Jiangs’ argument and apologized to Jiang Yanli, but gleefully made fun of Jin Zixuan during the conversation. No matter what he experienced, he remained unflinchingly positive.

Genuine, uncontrolled anger directed at nothing couldn't be further from who he was.

That, more than anything else, proved how serious the situation was. If *Wei Wuxian* was throwing a temper tantrum, then anyone else would be bawling on the floor, begging God for salvation.

Luckily, both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were highly adaptable to even the most bleak of circumstances.

So long as Wei Wuxian got out of there without further harm, Jiang Cheng was willing to not make fun of him for an entire day — no, an entire week! He reverently prayed for Wei Wuxian’s safety.

Wei Wuxian flung his clothes away as he cursed, not noticing the twitch Lan Wangji made every time he did. Suddenly, his legs gave out.

In an instant, Lan Wangji had lunged forward and caught him.

"It's fine, it's fine. Used up all my energy," he muttered. "Oh, right, Lan Zhan, did you see the sword I was holding? Where did the sword go?"

"I think it sank underwater. Is it important?"

"If it sank, then nevermind."

For a brief moment, however, the watchers were pulled into Wei Wuxian's memories. As he had speared through the Xuanwu's neck, he had heard unending screams of agony from within the sword.

"Don't be so curious about something so dangerous," Wen Qing muttered, glaring when Wen Chao sent her a skeptical look. On the other hand, Wen Ruohan was pleased; having his best medic personally invested in keeping Wei Wuxian alive could be nothing but an advantage.

Wei Wuxian had wanted to examine the iron properly, but now it had sunk and he and Lan Wangji were trapped. It seemed appropriate to let the matter drop.

Sighing in disappointment, Wei Wuxian stood up again and resumed the walk, Lan Wangji following behind him. A few steps later, Wei Wuxian's legs gave out again.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli screamed, even as Lan Wangji caught him. It was becoming more and more clear that Wei Wuxian had hit his limit. If he didn't rest soon, there was no telling what would happen.

The sight was incomparably strange for Jiang Cheng. Yunmeng Jiang's head disciple was Wei Wuxian. Regardless of the complicated feelings Wei Wuxian's position left him with, Jiang Cheng could acknowledge that no one fit their motto better than him. As the simulation had shown, he always did what was right, even if it initially seemed impossible. And, over and over, he had succeeded. Wei Wuxian never struggled; Wei Wuxian never quit; Wei Wuxian never got hungover or sick or tired or hurt or bullied or attacked.

Someone like Wei Wuxian wasn't *supposed* to have limits.

But there he was, arm bleeding from Su She's arrow, lungs full of water mixed with Xuanwu blood, and legs so tired he couldn't make himself *stand*, much less walk.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji whispered, resting a hand against Wei Wuxian's forehead. "You're burning up!"

Wei Wuxian grinned and rested a hand on Lan Wangji's forehead too, responding, "You're really hot too."

The revelation of how much damage Wei Wuxian had sustained kept Nie Huaisang from making any inappropriate remarks.

"That's because your hands are cold," Lan Wangji explained. "You have a fever."

“I do feel a bit dizzy,” Wei Wuxian admitted. Clear droplets of water dripped from his hair.

Outwardly, Wen Qing was indifferent; inwardly, she was more worried than Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Yanli looked *combined*. Why would that stupid, *stupid* boy think it was a good idea to constantly risk himself for everyone else?

They better be grateful for what he did.

“How did I get a fever? I haven’t gotten one in years.”

“Lie down,” Lan Wangji commanded again, but his words were muted. The world became fuzzy and started swaying back and forth, then tipped up as if they’d fallen.

The watchers were inside a recreation of what Wei Wuxian was seeing.

Then the fuzziness cleared, and the watchers could see Lan Wangji dutifully forcing his spiritual power into Wei Wuxian. Soft blue light surrounded them.

“Thank you,” Jiang Yanli repeated, finally unclenching the folds of her robes. Nodding once, Lan Wangji turned back to the scene, concern starting to be visible on his face.

Before, he had continuously gotten flustered by Wei Wuxian’s shirtlessness; now, all it did was remind him of the Wen brand Wei Wuxian had gotten burned into his skin.

‘*Stupid, reckless, selfless, brilliant idiot,*’ he thought, unusually spiteful.

A moment later, Wei Wuxian pulled his arm away.

Jin Zixuan glared, “What is he-”

“You don’t need to give me any. You don’t have much left yourself.”

Although his nephews frowned at the explanation, Lan Qiren was grateful. It was wonderful to know that his nephew’s friend would show the same level concern for him as he did for them.

But Lan Wangji shook his head and ordered, “Lie down properly.”

Despite his dizziness and cold sweat of exhaustion, Wei Wuxian then threw a tantrum:

“It’s too hard, it’s too hard!” he complained, banging the ground with his fist. Although such rambunctious movement would usually indicate a patient’s returning health, the level of dizziness shown earlier proved that was not the case.

Having grown used to Wei Wuxian’s carelessness with himself, Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, Jiang Yanli, and Wen Qing all gave simultaneous sighs at the boy.

After a few seconds of Wei Wuxian’s tantrum, Lan Wangji caved in and asked, “What do you want?”

“I want to lie somewhere else!”

“Where else can you lie in here?”

“Let me borrow your lap for a while, will you?”

Suddenly recalling when his own head had lain in Wei Wuxian’s lap just a few hours before, Lan Wangji’s ears gained a healthy pink glow. His ungrateful other-self disagreed.

“Stop fooling around.”

Ungrateful, ungrateful, ungrateful.

“I’m serious! My head is so dizzy! It’s not like you’re a girl, why can’t I borrow it?”

“Digging your own grave, Wei-xiong,” Nie Huaisang warned.

“I’m not fooling around, you’re the one who should stop fooling around,” Wei Wuxian protested, energetic despite the way he was probably becoming delirious. “I refuse to accept this. Lan Zhan, tell me, why?”

“Why what?”

“Amongst all other people, there isn’t anyone who doesn’t secretly like me despite saying I’m annoying.”

Madam Yu scoffed, about to refute that with herself, only to hesitate. After all, Wei Wuxian *had* made sure Jiang Cheng got out safely, even at great cost to himself. She still didn’t *like* Wei Wuxian, but….

Perhaps he wasn’t quite as bad as she always made him out to be.

Wei Wuxian continued, “Why is it that you won’t give me even a second glance? We’ve lived through a life-or-death situation together, haven’t we? You won’t lend me your lap and you’re lecturing me again. Are you an old man or what?”

“You’re delirious.”

“And very, very wrong,” Nie Huaisang laughed, glancing teasingly towards Lan Wangji. “Lucky you, Wangji-xiong! It seems he feels the same way as you do!”

“What?”

“They don’t like each other!” Jiang Cheng protested.

Laughing, Jiang Yanli disagreed, “I think they might. Sorry, A-Cheng.”

While Lan Wangji glanced down, flustered by the implication, Jiang Cheng scowled. It seemed like everyone was convinced that as soon as they got out, Lan Wangji could simply

swoop down and snatch Wei Wuxian away! He was the Yunmeng Jiang Sect's head disciple! Second Jade or not, Lan Wangji couldn't have him!

Distressingly, it appeared Wei Wuxian really was delirious, as he didn't respond. Instead, he turned over, allowing his eyes to flutter shut as an unhealthy heat rose in his cheeks.

Once he was too incapacitated to really pay attention to what was happening around him, Lan Wangji crept closer and pulled Wei Wuxian's sleeping head onto his lap.

The grins being sent Wangji's way by the other heirs were resolutely ignored.

"Two days later," Sizhui explained.

Hearing that, Jiang Cheng scowled; how long would it take his other-self to get back?

"Ah, it's so boring," Wei Wuxian complained. "Really, so boring. Way too quiet too! Lan Zhan you're so boring"

Two days ago, he had a terrible fever. That he had recovered enough to move was a testament to the unusual power of his golden core. That did *not* mean he should be rolling around on a cave floor!

The moment they got out of the simulation, Wen Qing was going to tie Wei Wuxain to the ground and give him a full check-up to make sure that he hadn't accidentally killed himself while unsupervised.

Sighing lightly, Lan Wangji responded, "Wei Ying, be quiet. You're still burning up. Conserve your strength."

"You won't talk to me or even look at me! You just sit there and meditate!" Wei Wuxian complained. As Lan Wangji had said, his cheeks were still red from the fever and exhaustion. That didn't stop him from pouting dramatically and collapsing into a heap on the ground

Nie Mingjue snorted, finding the behavior strangely parallel to Huaisang. Then again, if Huaisang was injured and exhausted and "still burning up" it would be almost impossible to get him out of bed, so maybe not.

Wei Wuxian's ability to act positive even in the most desolate of circumstances was still as stunning as it ever was. Though Nie Mingjue was fairly certain Wei Wuxian wasn't anywhere near as recovered as he was pretending to be.

(His still-flushed cheeks all but confirmed that theory.)

"Lan Zhan-"

"Rest."

Wei Wuxian curled up into a shrimp again, facing him and demanding, "Are you serious?! I just woke up and you're telling me to rest? Do you hate seeing the awake version of me that much?"

'*No*,' Lan Wangji thought.

"You're overthinking it," the real one responded.

'*Maybe he'd be thinking more clearly if he weren't already half-dead,*' Wen Qing thought angrily. '*If he just woke up and already needs to sleep again, then he shouldn't be moving around so much.*'

"I'm sick! I'm feverish! Lan-er-gege, can't you say something nice to make poor old me feel better?" Wei Wuxian asked, then, in response to Lan Wangji's silence continued, "You won't say anything? Well, I figured. Alright then, how about you sing me a song?"

It was clearly an offhanded, joking remark. Wei Wuxian hadn't said it thinking Lan Wangji would actually agree. And, for a moment, it seemed like he was right. Then, Lan Wangji cleared his throat once.

As everyone else stared in shock, Jin Guangshan perked up. He usually preferred female singers, but the Twin Jades of Lan were well-known to be musical prodigies. This would be a treat.

Pulling out three chords left over from the chord assassination strings they'd assembled, Lan Wangji played a few openning notes.

A moment later, he began to sing.

~♪🎵♪~

As Lan Wangji flushed red, nearly every other mouth gaped open in shock.

The Second Jade continued to hum, transmitting a wave of tranquility through his audience. Unlike his guqin skills, Lan Wangji's voice was not especially famous.

(It *should be*. It was one of the most beautiful things Jin Guangshan had ever heard.)

It flowed smoothly from note to note, wrapping warmly around the listeners. It kissed their foreheads, wiped their past tears, and carried so much affection that, for a moment, Huaisang felt like he was choking on it.

Comforting, peaceful, caring — *longing*.

It channeled the raw emotion of love.

The listeners all basked in its beauty.

Then, Lan Qiren frowned.

“I recognize this,” he declared, trying to rack his memories for where.

Broken out of the haze caused by the song, Lan Xichen thought over what his Uncle said. Yes, it did seem a little familiar, and yet Lan Xichen couldn’t recall its name. He knew the name of every song he had ever learned, so why-

“Wei Wuxian,” Lan Wangji answered.

Everyone turned to him, but his eyes were completely trained on the simulated Wei Wuxian.

As Wangji's song continued, Wei Wuxian finally relaxed enough to stop hiding his exhaustion. Hunger, cold, and fatigue caused him to tremble slightly, but the song eventually lured his fevered mind into a deep sleep.

A genuine smile formed on his face.

“Wangji?”

“In the future. It’s the song he used to calm Wen Qionglin,” Lan Wangji explained, allowing the watchers to remember.

’I need a calmer, quieter tune,’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘Calmer, quieter.’

Blurry, as though from a long-ago memory, their surroundings shifted to a dark cave. It was only lit by a small fire, so the two figures present were difficult to make out.

“And that’s how you recognized him,” Wen Qing assumed. “Do you know what this song is?”

Lan Wangji shook his head, and the two other Lans looked equally uncertain.

“Maybe *you* wrote it,” Nie Huaisang suggested, causing everyone to look at him in confusion. “Well, if he knew it was Wei-xiong, then it must be something no one else knows. If no one else could recognize it, then only one person could be its author.”

The melancholy melody drew to a close, and everyone turned their eyes on Lan Wangji. If Nie Huaisang was right, then the emotions conveyed by the song had a very different meaning.

‘*Love*,' Lan Wangji realized, his eyes widening in horror. ‘*My simulation-self knows he’s in love with Wei Ying.*’

“That’s nice,” Wei Wuxian whispered. “What’s it called?”

Lan Wangji seemed to murmur something, but Wei Wuxian couldn’t focus enough to hear what he said. The firelight dimmed until nothing could be seen.

Concern flooded through Xichen, and he prayed once again for his brother and Wei Wuxian’s safety.

The light returned, and Wei Wuxian blinked tired eyes open from where he rested on a bed. Following his searching gaze, the watchers were allowed to see a few scrolls, then a poster, and finally a person they could recognize.

"A-Li!" Jin Zixuan declared happily, more for the joy of getting to use her name than anything else. The adorableness of the action made Jiang Yanli laugh delightedly.

The simulated Yanli lit up as well, noticing Wei Wuxian returning to consciousness.

"A-Xian, you're awake!" she observed, leaning closer.

"Shijie?" Wei Wuxian asked disbelievingly.

Now that they were in the light, it was easy for the watchers to make out the dark circles under Wei Wuxian's eyes. Although his golden core had allowed him to recover from the fever, it was now exhausted. He would need several days of rest.

But it had kept him alive.

For once, Jiang Cheng felt nothing but gratitude for the powerful core his brother possessed.

As Wei Wuxian looked around, recognition filled his mind.

"I'm… home?"

"You are," Jiang Yanli agreed, smiling happily. Their family had been brought back together again; nothing would separate them now.

Once the unchanging walls proved to Wei Wuxian that he wasn't hallucinating, panic instantly sank in.

"Where's Lan Zhan?!" he demanded, immediately sitting up. A second later, he curled in on himself, wincing in pain and clutching the place where Wang Lingjiao had sealed the Wen brand onto his skin.

As Jiang Yanli sat close, Wei Wuxian forced himself to look up.

"Where's Jiang Cheng?" he added frantically.

Privately, Jiang Cheng tried to not read too deeply into the fact that Lan Wangji was the one Wei Wuxian had asked about first.

"Still have the strength to yell?" Jiang Cheng's voice asked from behind the door. "Guess you're not hurt all that badly. I shouldn't have bothered to come back for you."

"He *is* hurt," Wen Qing immediately disagreed. She knew Jiang Cheng was joking *and* that she couldn't interfere with the simulation, but found the statement too infuriating to ignore. Wei Wuxian was careless enough already; he didn't need any encouragement. Wen Qing was definitely going to examine him no matter what once they got out.

(Then again, after they escaped the simulation, it seemed likely none of the other sects would be willing to work with a *Wen.*)

"You… come here!" Wei Wuxian ordered angrily.

"What for? You gonna kneel down and thank me?"

"Alright, alright, let's stop arguing," Jiang Yanli interrupted, halting them in their tracks.

No matter how many times he saw it, it amazed Jin Zixuan how easily his fiancée was able to control her brothers.

Jiang Yanli gave Wei Wuxian a bowl of lotus and pork rib soup, making him beam brighter than the sun.

"Thank you, Shijie!"

Seeing Jin Zixuan's inquiring gaze, Jiang Yanli blushed and told him, "It's my own recipe. Would you… like to try some when we get out?"

Her voice was scared and hesitant, still recalling the scornful mocking Wen Chao had directed at her earlier. She knew it wasn't exactly proper for a young mistress to work in the kitchens like a servant, but-

"Yes please," Jin Zixuan nodded furiously. "I would love to try it!"

But it allowed her to help the people she loved in a way no one else could.

After several seconds of Jiang Yanli helping him eat, Jiang Cheng glared and snapped out, "Do you need her to feed you?!"

Wei Wuxian paused for a moment, then stuck his tongue out childishly.

"Behave," Yanli laughed, then left the room to put everything away.

"He's right, A-Li," Madam Yu lectured. "You really shouldn't do things like that for him."

For once, neither Jiang Fengmian nor Jiang Yanli frowned at the statement. In fact, they thought they might have been hearing things for a moment.

Because, despite the harsh words, Madam Yu's voice had been perfectly even. There was no trace of anger to be found.

(In Madam Yu's eyes, Wei Wuxian had gotten hurt allowing Jiang Cheng to escape. She wasn't forgiving him or accepting him, but *hate* might be a little strong.)

Wei Wuxian then sobered up and his expression grew grave.

"Where's Lan Zhan? He was rescued too, right?"

Some small part of Lan Qiren did have to admit that he had always wanted Lan Wangji's eventual partner to put him first. But Wei Wuxian was different from what he wanted. Very different.

(By this point, the only excuse he had to not approve of Wei Wuxian was the demonic cultivation. Friendship was one thing, but when it came to the possibilities of romance Lan Qiren clutched the "demonic cultivator" reminder like a lifeline.)

"Is Lan Zhan here?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Jiang Cheng told him. "Lan Wangji isn't part of our clan, why would he be here? He went back to Gusu of course!"

"...Ah…."

The circumstances were very, very different, but Wei Wuxian's dejected pout reminded Nie Mingjue slightly of Huaisang. His mind was making these comparisons more and more often lately.

Before anything else could be said, the scenery altered.

Qiong Qi drums were beaten furiously, and the Nightless City faded into view. Directly in the center of the courtyard, the gargantuan Xuanwu shell towered over everything else.

Wen Chao began to grin.

"Master Wen killed the beast!" the disciples cheered unanimously. "His heroic deed will go down in history!"

The action was so disgusting — so *shameless* — that it took Nie Mingjue a moment to realize what was being implied. The second he did-

"How *dare you?!*" he shouted, making Wen Chao jump back.

"Father, you should know this," the simulated Wen Chao began. "On Muxi Mountain, the Lans, Jiangs, Jins, and Nies disobeyed my orders. They were led by the Jiangs into rebellion!"

"If *everyone* revolted, maybe that says something about *you* instead," Madam Jin hissed.

Nie Mingjue stood up fully, "You try to use live bait, order the deaths of everyone in the Lan and Jin groups, run *away* from the monster, seal off one of the *only exits*, and *then* claim *you* were the one to kill it 'despite rebellion?' You're not just taking credit, you're-"

He cut himself off, so full of fury that he was *shaking.* He couldn't hurt Wen Chao while they were in the simulation, but right now he wanted nothing more than to abandon the promise they had made to not punish for things that had yet to occur.

While this was happening, Wen Chao explained the way he valiantly managed to regain control of the situation despite the insurrection. For extra credit, he even made sure to explain to his father how he had slain the beast in his name. The look he got in return was more than a little skeptical.

“Oh, really?” Wen Ruohan asked.

But it didn’t matter whether he believed it; Wen Ruohan would still use it as an excuse to attack. Furious, Madam Yu gave a low growl that made Wen Chao look away.

“What? Wen Chao said *he* killed it?” Wei Wuxian demanded.

The abrupt return to Lotus Pier left quite a few people startled, but the rest agreed with Wei Wuxian’s exclamation wholeheartedly. It seemed absurd that the Wen Clan would try to get away with lying so shamelessly.

But, if they were willing to destroy the other clans, then perhaps they didn’t need to cater to them any longer.

“He did. A-Die hasn’t even been able to get back our swords. They’re celebrating Wen Chao’s victory in the Nevernight,” Jiang Cheng added, explaining the last scene.

“That shameless liar,” Wei Wuxian scoffed. “Lan Zhan’s the one who killed it!”

“What?” more than one person asked.

Lan Wangji frowned, “But Wei Ying’s the one who killed it.”

“*What?*” those same people asked again, this time looking at Lan Wangji in disbelief.

“Really?” the amused voice of Jiang Fengmian asked. “Coincidentally, Young Master Lan told me you were the one to kill it.”

Several disbelieving gazes were turned his way, and Lan Wangji looked back in confusion. All he had been able to do was suffocate it from the outside due to his broken leg. Wei Ying was the one who had lured it out and speared through the old wound from the inside. Wei Wuxian's contributions were both more dangerous and more effective.

Obviously Wei Ying was the one who killed it.

(Wen Ruohan glanced towards his son. Both Wen Chao and Wei Wuxian had lied to their Sect Leader about who killed the Xuanwu, but their reasons couldn’t be more different.)

“A-Die,” Jiang Cheng greeted with a salute.

“Jiang-Shushu!” Wei Wuxian beamed, moving to sit up only to stop when Jiang Fengmian raised his hand.

“Sitting is fine,” he assured. The words made Wei Wuxian’s smile even brighter, while Jiang Cheng seemed to frown slightly.

Sect Leader Jiang had never taken the time to really notice before, but there was a distinct difference in the level of comfort Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng felt around him. For the longest time, he had put that up to the difference in their personalities. Wei Wuxian was bright, cheerful, and had the same values as his parents — the kind of person Jiang Fengmian got along with most easily. Jiang Cheng, on the other hand, had a personality and values more similar to that of his mother's.

Until the simulation, Jiang Fengmian had never thought to read too deeply about what that difference might mean.

As Jiang Cheng moved to get some tea for his father, Jiang Fengmian sat down next to Wei Wuxian and asked, "So? Which was it?"

"I guess both of us played a part, but he did most of it. I only went inside the beast's shell and chased it out, he dealt the final blow."

"Those two idiots are perfect for each other," Nie Mingjue grumbled, burying his face in his hands out of frustration. Both Lan Xichen and Jiang Yanli laughed at his comment, while Wen Qing rolled her eyes fondly.

Lan Wangji flushed warmly, finally understanding what they were talking about.

Sighing as if in agreement with them, Jiang Cheng responded, "What's yours is yours. Since you two killed it together, why did you give him all the credit?"

The real Jiang Cheng nodded resolutely. Why would both of them have said the other did it? They both put in a ton of work, why would they *want* someone else to take the credit?

"I just think when compared to him, I didn't do all that much," Wei Wuxian answered as Jiang Fengmian took a cup of tea from his son.

For a moment, Yu Ziyuan was furious. With the way things were laid out, it almost seemed like Jiang Cheng was the servant, and Wei Wuxian the son! Why was Wei Wuxian just sitting down and allowing Yungmengjian's heir to do all the work?!

Then, she remembered the fact that he had woken up from a burning fever less than 10 minutes ago, and that he had gotten that fever helping Jiang Cheng escape.

Jiang Fengmian hummed once, then looked warmly at Wei Wuxian and said, "Well done."

Jiang Cheng froze.

"Wow you… don't really give full compliments, do you?" Jin Zixuan asked. Normally, he would know better than to speak so casually to the leader of the Jiang Sect, but the simulation made it hard to remember those social niceties.

"...I suppose?" Jiang Fengmian answered. Everyone else was in complete agreement with Jin Zixuan.

Killing the Xuanwu of slaughter without their swords seemed to deserve just a little more than a simple "well done." Having seen the struggle it took first hand, most were astounded by the understatement.

On the other hand, Jiang Cheng looked away. The expression on his other-self had been off when Jiang Fengmian congratulated Wei Wuxian. He hoped no one would read too deeply into that.

Frowning further, Jiang Cheng added "You killed the a four hundred year old beast at the mere age of seventeen. Congratulations."

Unlike his other self, the real Jiang Fengmian stood at an angle that allowed him to see his son's expression. The downcast frustration there was as clear as day.

Seeing Jiang Cheng's folded hands and raised brows, Wei Wuxian instantly knew what Jiang Cheng was thinking.

Madam Yu knew as well.

Jiang Cheng was making a fuss in silence, defiantly asking why *he* wasn't the one who had stayed in the cave to kill the beast. If it had stayed, he could have definitely done the same.

So Wei Wuxian laughed off the congratulations with a, "Too bad you weren't there! You could have gotten some of the credit! Plus, you know how to talk. Spending all that time with Lan Zhan nearly bored me to death!"

Jiang Cheng glared. Being read so easily made him feel like a child who had to be coddled.

And he had seen what Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had to do to survive. Unlike his other-self, he wasn't sure he would have been able to manage that.

Huffing once, Jiang Cheng added, "It serves you right to be bored to death! You shouldn't have played hero, and you shouldn't have cared for such a hell of a thing! If in the beginning you didn't-"

"Jiang Cheng," Jiang Fengmian interrupted sternly.

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?!" Madam Yu hissed.

This time, however, her friend wasn't willing to support her.

From what Madam Jin had just heard, it almost seemed like Jiang Cheng thought Wei Wuxian *shouldn't* have saved her son from the Wens. Glancing back at the sudden awkwardness between Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji, and Jin Zixuan, she knew they had all realized the same.

Also knowing he had said too much, the simulated Jiang Cheng fell silent.

Jiang Fengmian didn't look like he was blaming him for anything, but his expression had turned from calm to more solem, "Do you understand why what you just said was

not appropriate?"

"...Yes."

"He's just angry and speaking without care," Wei Wuxian interjected.

The more she saw, the more Madam Yu got the feeling that Wei Wuxian wasn't at all interested in upstaging Jiang Cheng. Luckily, she knew that wasn't right.

(It *couldn't* be right.)

Ignoring Wei Wuxian's words, Jiang Fengmian observed his son. Seeing that his mouth and heart were still at odds with each other — how he still felt defiant —Jiang Fengmian shook his head.

"A-Cheng, there are some things that should never be said even if you're angry."

Lan Qiren nodded. Even beyond his own anger due to Lan Wangji's involvement, he knew that when Jiang Cheng became Sect Leader, he would need full control of his emotions.

Though, from the red rapidly spreading across her face, Madam Yu disagreed.

Jiang Fengmian continued, "If you say those things, it shows that you still don't understand the principles of the Jiang Sect. That you still don't-"

"Yes, he doesn't understand. But what does that matter, so long as Wei Ying understands?"

Like a purple bolt of lightning, Madam Yu swept inside.

With her years and years of experience with these sort of things, Jiang Yanli instantly knew what was about to happen. It was bad enough for her parents to argue while the boys were in the room, but….

Now, *every* sect leader would witness the worst of their relationship first hand.

Madam Yu stormed forward to stand directly before Wei Wuxian's bed, brows raised, and shouted, "To uphold justice at all costs is exactly how he is, isn't it? Fooling around even though he knew it would bring trouble to the sect!"

Astounded by the phrasing, Nie Mingjue turned to her and repeated "*Fooling around-*"

"Sect Leader Nie," Jiang Fengmian interrupted. "As we are all aware that this is private, I would rather you don't think too deeply about-"

"What, you don't think I mean it?" Madam Yu demanded.

"That's not what I meant."

Without pause, the simulated Madam Yu continued, "Wei Wuxian knew it'd put our family in danger, but he still did it! One day, he'll bring about the end of our Clan!"

Wei Wuxian flinched slightly and stared intently at the ground.

Lan Wangji subconsciously stepped closer.

"San-niang, what are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? Ridiculous!"

"What *did* you mean then?"

"San-niang, we should listen for now," Jiang Fengmian requested, stopping their argument so they could pay attention to the simulated one. As per usual, it was an attempt to halt the symptoms, rather than deal with the source.

Wen Ruohan gazed over judgmentally.

Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng looked down, refusing to look at either version of their parents.

Infuriated my Jiang Fengmian's silence, Madam Yu continued, "Do I need to remind you that I'm *also* a master of Lotus Pier?! Do you still remember that every inch on the earth here is my territory?! Do you still remember, between the one lying there and the one standing here, which one is your son?!"

"San-niang, that isn't-"

"What? Am I wrong?"

"Of course I do," Jiang Fengmian answered, having been asked that question countless times over the past few years.

Madam Yu laughed bitterly, "So you do remember. But what's the use if you simply remember? Wei Ying, he really can't go a day without stirring up some trouble, can he?"

Amused by the conflict, Wen Chao slowly began to snicker.

"If I had known Wei Ying would do something like this, I would have made him stay in Lotus Pier no matter what! Would Wen Chao really have dared to do anything to the two Young Masters of the Gusulan and LanlingJin sects?"

"He was actively trying to," Jin Guangshan calmly reminded.

"Even if he did, that'd just mean they ran out of luck! Since when was it his turn to play hero?!"

"*Ran out of luck?!*" Madam Jin repeated disbelievingly, turning to her friend with shock clearly written across her face. "You think my son should have laid down and died for the *sin*

of trying to do the right thing?!"

Infuriated at the accusation, Madam Yu responded, "If he brings down the Wens on your sect, that's his fault, but if Wei Wuxian directs their attention on us-"

"Are you really so terrified of us that you'd rather blame a *child* for our actions than your own incompetence?" Wen Ruohan wondered, making Yu Ziyuan turn her fury onto him.

The other teenagers, who had been slightly angry at Jiang Cheng for suggesting that Wei Wuxian's actions were wrong, slowly began to see where his mindset came from.

Unwilling to anger, Wei Wuxian stayed silent, not protesting for the sake of Madam Yu's face. Internally, however….

'*He wouldn't have dared do anything to them? That's far from certain.*' he thought.

"Cheeky brat," Madam Yu hissed, now spinning away from Wen Ruohan to glare at Wei Wuxian. Feeling attacked on all sides, Madam Yu's talons sharpened into needle-point arrows.

"Just wait and see!" Madam Yu continued. "One day he'll land our clan in some serious trouble!"

Not wanting to have this conversation before their kids, Jiang Fengmian stood up, "Let's talk after we go back."

"Talk about what? Go back where? I'll be talking about it right here! I have nothing to be ashamed of, anyways! Jiang Cheng, come over here!" she ordered as she dragged her son closer.

Jiang Cheng buried his face in his arms, praying desperately that the gods would grant him mercy and allow him to sink into the floor, never to return.

"Sect Leader Jiang, take a good look at your biological son! Jiang Cheng is your flesh and blood!" she shouted, and Jiang Cheng turned away from his parents to stare at the floor with a wince.

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened in concern.

"Stay quiet, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli advised, hoping to simply weather the storm like usual.

"Even if you don't like him because I'm his mother, he's still your son!"

The anger which had been building up in Madam Jin and Lan Qiren's bodies did an odd tumble at those words. They were still furious, but it did put things into perspective.

Madam Yu was using Wei Wuxian as a vehicle to project her feelings onto. No matter what Wei Wuxian had done in the cave, she would have found fault with it. That wasn't *better,* but it required a different response.

And affected the children differently.

Lan Qiren sighed, "Don't put things like that into their heads."

“I’m sure you know about the rumors. They say that even after all these years, you still can’t get over a certain someone and even treat her son as your own. Some people even think Wei Ying is your-”

“Yu Ziyuan!” Jiang Fengmian shouted, outraged.

"Jiang Fengmian! Do you think anything will change just because you've raised your voice?"

The real Jiang Fengmian looked away. What had he done to make his wife question his honor? He had been nothing but faithful to her.

(And literally nothing else, a little voice inside him said.)

As the spat between his parents continued, Jiang Cheng glanced back. Vulnerability was etched clearly across his face.

‘*No one here should be seeing this,*’ Lan Xichen thought again.

"Do you think I don’t know you? That I don’t know what you think?”

Jiang Fengmian’s expression became even more disapproving.

And yet, some small part of Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but wonder if his mother was onto something.

Unwilling to speak anymore, Jiang Fengmian stood up and walked out of the room. A moment later, Yu Ziyuan followed after, and the pair continued their argument outside.

“Jiang Fengmian, why are you leaving?!” she demanded. “You feel guilty? It’s a shame that the woman you loved chose another man! Whether you admit it or not, it’s true!”

Aside from Wen Chao’s continuing laughter, there was an unbreakable silence that transpired as the argument between the Jiangs passed through the wall. Based on what the others already knew (and what they had seen so far in the simulation), it was clear a confrontation like this had been building up for a while.

Such a serious matter deserved their respect.

Then, Wen Ruohan smirked.

“If he’s really so much trouble, why not lend Wei Wuxian off to someone else for a bit?” he suggested, knowing full-well that removing Wei Wuxian would not solve the problem. “Unlike the Lans, I can personally assure you that we won’t send Wei Wuxian back before the agreed upon time."

Or at all, went unsaid.

“That won’t be necessary,” Jiang Fengmian forced out, knowing his wife was too filled with rage to respond properly.

Outside, Madam Yu’s angered voice became louder and louder, and Jiang Fengmian argued back while trying to suppress his rage. Jiang Cheng stood still, blankly staring at the wall.

Then, he glanced at Wei Wuxian, and turned to leave.

Seeing the expression on his son's face, Jiang Fengmian took a step back. He had known for years that his relationship with Yu Ziyuan made a difficult environment for their kids to grow up in. A-Li became too much of a mother too young, and A-Cheng didn’t know how to deal with his emotions. But every time he tried to help Jiang Cheng grow into the Jiang Sect Leader, his wife and son took it only as disapproval and criticism.

‘*But that was fine,*’ he had told himself. He should just focus on getting through each day.

And yet, when he saw the expression on his son’s face, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he had made the wrong decision.

Wei Wuxian frowned, “Jiang Cheng!”

Jiang Cheng gave no answer, continuing to walk towards the door.

The real Jiang Cheng breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that the scene was almost over.

“Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian continued, leaning forward as far as he could to grab Jiang Cheng’s sleeve. “Jiang Cheng!”

Wei Wuxian’s body trembled from the exertion.

Just like in the Xuanwu cave, Wei Wuxian was prioritizing Yu Ziyuan’s son over himself. When she made that realization, a burning hot anger even more frightening than the previous one surged through her body.

Every time Wei Wuxian did something like this, Madam Yu’s brain lied to her and whispered that she might have been wrong about him. She knew she wasn’t wrong and knew she wasn’t guilty, but Wei Wuxian was hurt because he distracted the Xuanwu so Jiang Cheng could escape and now *she* was ~~hurting her son~~ making him realize he needed to be stronger and *Wei Wuxian* was trying to help him and she couldn’t have been wrong and she knew she was right because if she was wrong then everything she was had done was for nothing and if it was all for nothing then what was she-

But she knew she wasn’t wrong; Wei Wuxian had done everything she said, and, as she predicted, would bring destruction to the Clan. It had been confirmed by the gossipers during the first segment.

Once the watchers saw what had caused the tavern guests to say those words, they would surely agree.

Coughing sporadically, Wei Wuxian glared, "Answer me if you've heard me! Are you looking for a fight?"

"Lie down properly!"

'*Listen to him,*' Wen Qing mentally hissed. She was absolutely certain that Wei Wuxian was going to be one of her most infuriating patients ever.

Proving her point completely, Wei Wuxian responded, "I can't do that! We need to set things straight!"

Jiang Cheng sighed, "Wei Wuxian-"

"Don't believe those stupid rumors!" he shouted.

"What rumors?" Jiang Cheng asked in faked-ignorance.

"Those things will dirty your mouth if you say them! Both of my parents are real people! I won't let anyone assign me to other Clans!"

Hearing that, Madam Yu and the two Jiang Chengs both froze.

Seeing that he had Jiang Cheng's attention, Wei Wuxian let go of his brother's sleeve.

"Let's be honest with each other. Uncle Jiang is always strict with you, but that's because you're his *son*, the future leader of the Jiang Clan! But I'm different. I'm someone else's son, so-"

"He's not strict with me," Jiang Cheng whispered. "He just doesn't like me."

"...What?" Jiang Fengmian whispered in shock, making Jiang Cheng flush and look away. His father's rapidly paling face went completely unnoticed.

(Jiang Fengmian had had suspicions for a while, but here was undeniable proof that his son thought he was unloved.

For a moment, Jiang Fengmian mind shut down.)

"What kind of person can't stand his own son? Of course he likes you!" Wei Wuxian insisted.

"It's true," Jiang Cheng shouted back. "He can't stand my mom, so he can't stand me either."

That was hard to refute. The entire cultivation world knew about their opposite personalities — one gentle, one harsh — and few interactions. The Meishan Yu sect had pressured the then-young Jiang Fengmian into the alliance, even after multiple refusals.

A little while after, Cangse Sanren got married to Wei Changze, and Jiang Fengmian finally gave up.

It was true that Jiang Cheng's looks and personality were far closer to his mother's, and Jiang Fengmian's continuous attempts to imbue the Jiang Sect values in him had proved fruitless.

'*Because of that, Jiang Fengmian has always seemed like he doesn't favor Jiang Cheng,*' Wei Wuxian thought.

"*Seemed* like he didn't?" Jiang Cheng repeated, too quietly for anyone else to hear. '*Why would you say it like that?!*'

As the silence between the pair stretched longer and longer, the tension began to spill over.

"I know," Jiang Cheng whispered, gradually raising his voice. "I know that I don't have a personality he likes. I *know* I'm not the heir he wanted! He thinks I'm a coward, not good enough to be a leader, that I don't understand the principles of the Jiang Sect. He thinks I'm not worthy of my name!"

'*At least he realized it,*' Madam Yu thought. '*Maybe he'll finally become like his future-self, and stop allowing Wei Wuxian to hold him down.*'

For some reason, that thought filled her with a whisper of something she had never experienced before.

(Something that felt a lot like guilt.)

"Yeah," Jiang Cheng laughed, then began to shout. "You and Lan Wangji killed the Xuanwu of Slaughter and bathed in its blood! How great is that? You fought bravely! You're heroes! But what about me? I've been running around for days, completely exhausted. Without a moment of rest!"

He punched the wall.

"Is this the beginning of the rift between those two?" Xichen asked, glancing between the brothers solemnly. The question made every Jiang flinch slightly and turn away.

No longer interested in continuing the conversation, Jiang Cheng began walking out, trying and failing to reign in his insecurities.

Jiang Yanli was sad to see her brother hurting so much, but knew this was a wound they couldn't heal. She could offer to help comfort Jiang Cheng, but the scab would just be torn open again the next day.

Nothing would actually fix this.

Then, a loud *thump* crashed down.

"*Wei Ying!*" Lan Wangji shouted in alarm, rushing over.

Jiang Cheng turned around, and saw Wei Wuxian trying to pull his sore body off the ground.

"What is he *doing?!*" Wen Qing couldn't resist screeching.

"Not good enough to be a leader?" Wei Wuxian repeated, straining as he pushed himself up. "Who says a leader must follow traditions? Among all the past leaders of the Jiang Clan, how many *actually* followed the motto?"

Jiang Cheng did a double take towards Wei Wuxian and froze, just as confused as his alternate-self.

"Just look at the Gusu Lan Clan! They have three-thousand rules, but they managed to produce outliers like Lan Yi! Who could deny her ability or position? When talking about famous Lan Clan leaders, who would dare to skip over her chord assassination technique?"

Finally, Wei Wuxian managed to get close enough to grab onto Jiang Cheng's shoulder.

"Jiang Cheng, listen up. When you become the leader, I'll be your subordinate. I'll follow your lead, just like my father followed your father," he declared, then smirked. "The Lan Clan has the Twin Jades of Lan; our Jiang Clan will have it's Two Prides of Yunmeng!"

Having recovered his breath, Wei Wuxian made his shaky smile turn cocky.

"If anyone dares to say you're not good enough, I'll beat them up *myself!*" he declared, then winced when he moved too quickly. All the while, Jiang Cheng's glistening eyes remained directed at Wei Wuxian, unable to look away.

Similarly, the real Jiang Cheng stood frozen, watching Wei Wuxian with eyes as wide as the moon.

Then, he laughed once.

"Look at the shape you're in. You'll be the one who gets beaten up."

Wei Wuxian grinned back. A pair of leaves floated by the windowsill, and then everything froze. They were getting another break to speak.

"...Wow. I didn't expect that."

There was another minute of silence.

Then, a nearly-*deafening* cheer from the Nie side.

"Yes, Wei-xiong! That was *exactly* what you needed to say!" Huaisang screeched. "Perfect! Ten-out-of-ten! Full stars! You did it! You almost couldn't have done better than that!"

Jin Zixuan laughed, “He’s quite good at improvised speeches, isn’t he?”

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli gasped out, her mouth slightly open in shock. Tears filled her eyes, but the smile on her face was equal parts disbelieving and ecstatic.

“That… he…” Jiang Cheng couldn’t finish his sentence — didn’t even know what he was *trying* to say. He turned and walked towards the frozen simulation of Wei Wuxian, staring into its eyes as if that would help him understand.

“What an exceptional brother,” Madam Jin observed.

But then….

“What could Wei Wuxian have done to destroy their friendship?” Jin Guangshan wondered aloud. Those words made Lan Wangji and Jiang Yanli want to snap back denials, but they couldn’t deny the flash-forward.

Wei Wuxian *would* do demonic cultivation; Wei Wuxian *would* betray the Jiang Sect; Wei Wuxian *would* kill Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan. Wei Wuxian would become something so awful that Jiang Cheng spent the 13 years after his death trying to hunt him down.

What on Earth had turned Wei Wuxian into such a despicable monster?

On the other hand, some watchers felt the answer was obvious.

‘*Of course their relationship fell apart,*’ Wen Ruohan thought. ‘*That promise was the culmination of years and years of conditioning at the hands of the Jiangs. I may expect the same of Wen Zhuliu, but I also treat him with enough respect to ensure his promise is kept. Wei Wuxian has far more options than Wen Zhuliu does, and is constantly blamed for things that aren’t his fault. With the way things are now, it’s inevitable that Wei Wuxian will eventually break under the pressure. He’ll kill Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan, and he’ll betray Lotus Pier in a way that ends their friendship forever.*’

He couldn’t wait to see it.

“I’m sure we’ll see the cause,” he decided.

Disliking the flippant tone Wen Ruohan used, Jiang Cheng was about to respond, when his father spoke up instead.

“A-Cheng, A-Li, can we talk?” he asked.

As soon as the words registered, Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen ushered the members of their Sects out of the way. A moment later, Jin Zixuan and Madam Jin glared Jin Guangshan into submission, and they left as well.

Finally, deciding that this wasn’t worth starting an argument over, Wen Ruohan directed the Wens away. In such a small space, leaving would only serve to create the *illusion* of privacy.

But if that was what the Jiangs wanted, then he had no reason to object.

The two children joined their waiting parents.

“What is it, A-Die?”

“I’d like to… speak with all of you about something.”

“What?” Madam Yu demanded. “You want to brag?”

Startled, Jiang Fengmian didn’t know how to respond to that.

“San-niang-”

“If you care so much about getting me to admit I was wrong, then fine. You win,” she glared. “That doesn’t excuse anything you’ve done to the two of them. If anything, it makes it worse, so don’t expect any apologies from me!”

No one in her family had any idea what she was talking about.

“I think you’re misunderstanding-”

“Like I always am?”

“*San-niang!*”

“*Fine!* Wei Wuxian’s isn’t your son!” she snapped. “I subconsciously knew that all along! Are you happy now? You win; we all know you were right! I was an idiot for believing it, and I’m the main reason so many people know about those rumors. What else do you want me to say? I have-”

“San-nian, I never betrayed you-”

“I *know*! Did you listen to a word I just said?”

“I did, I just…” he took a deep breath. “I… that isn’t what I wanted to talk about.”

“*What?*” Madam Yu hissed. “I’m not interested in hearing you weave together a poetic appreciation of that son of a… of that boy’s actions. God knows the simulation does more than enough of that-”

“I’m not trying to say that. If you would just *listen*-”

“Oh, of course, so it’s my fault again.”

“A-Niang!” Jiang Yanli yelled, her voice surprising even herself. When her parents and brother turned their eyes on her, she almost shrank back and apologized for speaking.

Jiang Yanli had long-since learned that the easiest way to live in Lotus Pier was to maintain the status quo. She had become an expert at redirecting her family’s attention somewhere else or dealing with the aftermath. Trying to argue back would just make the situation worse for everyone.

And yet, in the back of her mind, she heard a certain, well-placed attack on repeat.

Wen Ruohan looked down at the brand marring Wei Wuxian's chest and smirked, 'I'm sure this must have seemed right at home for him, considering what life at lotus pier is like.'

Some part of her understood that the Chief Cultivator had his own reasons for saying so, but the other parts of her wondered if he was right regardless. She often tried to calm her mother down or alert her Father so that he could help Wei Wuxian, but that was dealing with the symptom — she never tried to tackle the cause.

And for years that had been fine.

If she didn't say something now, then everything would probably revert to normal when they got out. For years, that had been fine (anything that wasn't worse was good). But now?

"A-Jie?" Jiang Cheng asked.

Straightening herself up, Jiang Yanli looked them all in the eyes and said, "Please, can we… can we talk about this? We… have a lot of things we need to say, I think."

Madam Yu glared and reached forward to pinch her cheek, but her hand phased through and her efforts were meaningless. In a way, the no-touch feature of the simulation was exactly what they needed to have this conversation.

Stuck in a place with no way to hurt each other and nowhere to run; if they didn't speak now, when would they? After thinking it over for a moment, Jiang Fengmian began.

"San-niang, I never betrayed you, but… I see why you might have thought that."

He coughed once, then turned to his children.

"I was… neglectful. I hurt you, and I always-I never intervened. Never corrected your assumption."

"A-Die, I wasn't trying to-"

"I know, but… if I've genuinely allowed you two to think that I don't love you, then I've failed in my role as a parent. A-Xian is… similar to Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze. We value the same things, and operate under similar mindsets. I've always found it easy to speak to him. But if I've allowed you to doubt yourselves because of that, then I've failed you as your father."

"A-Die," Jiang Yanli smiled, then shook her head. "You've done fine. We just-"

"A-Li," Jiang Fengmian paused, taking a moment to gather himself and turning towards her with gentle eyes. "The reason the other-me undid your engagement was because I was worried about what the future would hold for you if you and Young Master Jin were forced into a relationship. I could have asked you first, but I made the decision on my own. You've had to accept things like this and grow up… faster than you should have because of me. For that, I'm sorry."

Jiang Yanli stepped back, shock clear on her face.

“I never did any of that because I didn’t love you,” Jiang Fengmian declared.

She nodded, a warm smile spread across her face. She had already known all that — her mother had made the engagement without asking her as well, so her father breaking it was hardly uncalled for — but hearing hearing his reasons spoken aloud filled her with so much warmth that, for a second, she couldn’t breathe.

“...A-Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian began, swallowing again before turing to face his son completely. “You are my heir, and you are my *only* heir. I have never wanted anyone but you. I’ve tried to guide you towards what I felt were the principles of the Jiang Sect, but I have never once thought that you didn’t deserve to be the Jiang Sect’s Leader. Wei Wuxian was right: there have been many leaders, with many specialties. I was… wrong to make you doubt yourself, and not fix it when you started to. I wanted to help teach you, but I *never* wanted my heir to be anyone but you.”

Jiang Cheng looked away, unable to face such genuine words from his father.

“I love you both,” Jiang Fengmian concluded.

Jiang Cheng’s eyes widened at the proclamation, then closed as he felt the words begin to sink in. Before he could stop them, tears started rolling down his cheeks. He flushed further and hurriedly wiped them, but no matter how hard he tried, new ones kept forming.

A weight he hadn’t even known was there suddenly lifted off his shoulders.

“But… but Wei Wuxian-”

“I do love A-Xian. But my love for him has *never* been more than my love for the two of you.”

Rather than acceptance, Madam Yu’s response to this was a spiteful laugh.

“Are you truly so desperate to win against me?”

“San-niang?”

“I know, alright!” she shouted. “I know half the things I said about him were wrong! The simulation couldn’t have made that any more clear! Fine!”

“That isn’t what-”

“I get it! Your precious, perfect head disciple was right once again. He knew you loved A-Cheng, and he knew he was right to step up against the Wens because he *always* knows *everything*, doesn’t he?”

Concerned Jiang Fengmian stepped forward, and began, “San-Niang, I was only trying to say-”

“That Wei Wuxian is perfect beyond compare?” she demanded, raising her voice until she drowned out JIang Fengmian’s. “Just like his oh-so-perfect mother, isn’t he? Ah, yes, I can see why you get along with him! You must have found my shouting amusing! How many times did you laugh behind my back at the hysterical cries of the delusional Madam of Lotus Pier?!”

“*Never*. I wasn’t trying to imply *anything*.”

“But you thought it, didn’t you?” she laughed. “Ah, yes. Poor, poor Wei Wuxian; stuck in a household with me as if he’s just a victim and I’m *wrong* about him. Don’t pretend I’m not right! Regardless of this, he’s still a reckless, insubordinate, arrogant-”

“A-Xian has nothing to do with this,” Jiang Fengmian countered sternly.

His comment only infuriated Madam Yu further.

(The traces of doubt creeping into her mind had doubled her defensiveness. She wouldn’t admit to being in the wrong no matter what. Not to Jiang Fengmian, and certainly not before the audience gathered around them.)

Then, Jiang Fengmian continued, “San-niang, I… if you’re angry at me, then be angry at *me*. It’s not A-Xian’s fault-”

“Will that excuse still work when he becomes the Yiling Patriarch? I’m sure you’ll still pity him when he abandons the Jiang Sect and causes its near-destruction! How many excuses will you make for A-Li’s murderer?”

There was nothing Jiang Fengmian could say to that.

Similarly, Jiang Cheng was struck silent by the reminder. With everything that had been going on, he had almost forgotten about the Yiling Patriarch. It seemed like everything was starting to go well in the simulation! Wei Wuxian had even promised to stay with him forever!

...No, he had promised to follow him, “just like” Wei Changze had followed Jiang Fengmian.

But didn’t that mean that he would help the Jiang Sect in the beginning, and then leave? It seemed like it would end up being for power instead of love, but that didn’t make the abandonment any less true.

“We’ll-we’ll just need to convince him!” Jiang Cheng declared, cutting his mother’s next rant off. “We just have to show him that we want him to stay, and he will! I’m sure of it!”

(Despite having moved farther away, the enclosed space of the simulation didn’t offer much privacy. When Jiang Cheng shouted his suggestion, several people frowned at it, and became lost in their own thoughts.)

When every member of her family sent her an uneasy glance, Yu Ziyuan nearly hissed at them. Normally, she would be furious at the suggestion Jiang Cheng had made. Why would

they try to convince Wei Wuxian to stay? They were better off without him! Why were they looking at her like she was *wrong* about that?

And yet, over the course of the simulation, that belief had been tested time and time again. Were her children really worse-off because of his presence?

(Should she say something about that?)

But she *couldn't*. Yu Ziyuan was the Madam of the Jiang Sect; she didn't apologize to *anyone*. Such weakness and regret was against everything she had ever known.

So why was she still feeling this way? Some small, insignificant, easily-locked-away part of her *wanted* to apologize. She wasn't entirely sure to who or about what, but the feeling was there and she *hated* it.

"We don't need him" she declared.

"But-"

In the hallways of Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian danced in and out of distance, play-fighting with Jiang Cheng as they walked down the hallway.

"W-wait, but we weren't done!" Jiang Cheng protested. Unfortunately, the watchers were helpless when it came to interfering with the simulation. They had no choice but to return to their seats and save the conversation for the next break.

Despite the energy he put into it, it was clear that Wei Wuxian was moving much slower than usual. Even without the bandages wrapped around his chest, his heavy injuries would be obvious.

As his children slid next to their new friends, Jiang Fengmian reluctantly moved back to his seat. When he got there, Lan Qiren gave him a single, respectful nod.

Jiang Fengmian was certainly a much, much better father than Qingheng-jun.

When Jiang Cheng landed a hit to Wei Wuxian's chest, the head disciple laughed and shouted, "Jiang Cheng! Come to your death!"

"He's much slower than usual," Nie Mingjue observed.

"Even that much movement is idiotic to do!" Wen Qing fiercely reprimanded. "He just woke up after a two-day coma! I don't care how strong his core is, he should stay in bed!"

Rolling his eyes, Jiang Cheng ducked a strike a shouted, "If that hurts you so much, why did you play the hero back then? Serves you right. This'll teach you better!"

At the reminder of Jiang Fengmian's earlier comment, the jealousy on Madam Jin's face flickered into rage.

Yes, Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Fengmian had personalities that clashed with each other. However, there was a big difference between that and her *own* married life. Jin Guangshan cared for Jin Zixuan somewhat (for his own legacy, if nothing else), but he most certainly didn't care enough to remain loyal.

And, on top of all that, Madam Jin hadn't forgotten the way her friend and Jiang Cheng continued to imply that saving her son's life was a *bad* thing.

Humming once at Jiang Cheng's complaint, Wei Wuxian asked, "Was I playing the hero? It's not like it was a conscious choice — I was moving faster than I could think! Stop running, I'll let you off this once. I need to ask you something! I had a perfume sachet somewhere around my waist. It was empty, did you see it?"

"The one MianMian gave you? I didn't."

Here, Huaisang hummed in consideration. Considering the previously-established trends, it seemed highly likely that the missing perfume sachet would become relevant later.

But how could an empty sack be important?

Wei Wuxian sighed regretfully, "I'll find another one later."

"You're at it again," Jiang Cheng observed, frowning. "You don't really like her, do you?"

'*Please say no. Please say no. Please say no.*' Lan Wangji thought.

"That girl does look fine, but it's obvious she doesn't have much background," Jiang Cheng continued. "She might not even be a disciple. She seems like the daughter of a servant."

Jin Zixuan frowned slightly and glanced at Jiang Yanli. If she also thought he was wrong to step in due to Luo Qingyang's low status, things might become a little awkward between them.

Luckily, when she noticed his gaze, Yanli instead smiled encouragingly at him, showing her full support.

"I guess, but what's wrong with servants?" Wei Wuxian asked. "I'm also the son of a servant, aren't I?"

And now Wen Ruohan had to cross "tempt him by offering to raise his status to an official member of the Wen Clan like Wen Zhuliu" off his list of ideas.

"How can you compare to her? What kind of servant is like you, having your master peel lotus seeds for you and boil your soup? I didn't even get to have some!"

"If you want some, just ask Shijie to cook you more! Right, we were talking about Lan Zhan! Did Lan Zhan leave a message for me? Has his brother been found?"

“Lan Xichen went into hiding with the ancient books and music sheets they’d rescued.”

“What about his father?”

“...He’s passed away.”

Like they’d been slapped, every member of the four (surviving) great sects flinched back.

“Passed away?” Wei Wuxian asked, his eyes going wide. To his right, a memory of Lan Wangji faded into existence — his expression as they discussed his father’s fate.

Wei Wuxian glanced down solemnly.

This was even more drastic than what had happened to the former Sect Leader Nie. *That* had been a quiet murder with plausible deniability; *this* was an open attack that no one could deny.

The Sunshot Campaign was imminent.

Looking at it from the outside made Jiang Fengmian briefly wonder why there was no word of him doing anything to prepare. Then, he understood.

It was easy to ask that from the outside when a glimpse at the future had already proven his coming death and the Sunshot Campaign’s beginning. To the him inside the simulation, trying to avoid Wen Ruohan’s attention probably seemed like the smartest thing to do.

That was what every clan had been doing for years, after all.

He sighed, an icy-cold dread washing over him.

“How’s Lan Zhan doing?!” Wei Wuxian demanded. “You said he went back?”

Lan Xichen smiled, finding the consistent concern sweet.

Jiang Cheng nodded once, “A-Die originally wanted to ask people to take him back to Gusu, but he refused. Judging by how he acted, he knows he should’ve known since long ago that this day would come. After all, with the situation at hand, no sect is any better than any other.”

Indeed; it was quite likely that another sect would be attacked soon. The Nie and Lans had already been targeted, so the Jiangs were probably next.

(Especially given Jin Guangshan’s continued friendship with Wen Ruohan.)

“How disgusting,” Wei Wuxian cursed.

“Yes, the Wen Sect is really too disgusting.”

Wen Qing clenched her fists, forcing herself to stay as still as possible.

“For how long are we going to jump around like this?! We’ve got so many sects, can’t we join together and-”

“Da-shixiong!” a voice yelled, and a series of footsteps approached. A group of boys wearing training clothes leapt across the hallways like monkeys, shouting at him.

‘*Do not think about raising children with Wei Ying,*” Lan Wangji reminded himself. ‘*Do not think about raising children with Wei Ying. Do not think about raising children with Wei Ying. Do not think about raising children with Wei Ying.*’

“Shixiong! You’re alive now!”

“What do you mean, ‘I’m alive now?’ I never died to begin with!”

“Not yet,” Jin Guangshan reminded with a chuckle, finding the dark irony of the statement amusing.

“Shixiong, I heard that you killed a beast over four hundred years old! Is that true? You really killed it?”

“Compared to that, what I really want to know is, Shixiong, did you really go without food for seven days?!”

“Have you secretly practiced inedia behind our backs?”

“Just how big was the Xuanwu of Slaughter? Would it really fit inside Lotus Lake?”

“The Xuanwu of slaughter was just a tortoise, right?”

“Shixiong, you spent an entire seven days with Lan Wangji from Gusu, right? How did you avoid getting beaten to death by him?!”

Hearing the unending stream of question, Nie Mingjue started laughing out loud.

“They love him!” he saw, feeling a flash of nostalgia. Thanks to Huaisang, nearly every younger member of his clan had called him “Da-ge” at some point or another; it seemed Wei Wuxian had a similar relationship with his shidis.

“Do they always do this?” Xichen asked.

Jiang Yanli nodded, “Some days, he has *dozens* of hero-worshiping ducklings trailing behind him. A pair of siblings named A-Lu and A-Yue are usually at the front of the pack, but they *all* adore him.”

Lan Xichen laughed at the description, and even Wen Qing gained a small smile.

The scene then faded away, and the Nightless City took its place.

Wen Chao fell to his knees, bowing lowly.

“Chao-er, do you realize what mistake you made back on Muxi Mountain?”

“Was the mistake letting us survive?” Jin Zixuan grumbled. The heirs were not yet angry enough to shout at the Chief Cultivator directly.

Clearly, that wouldn’t last long.

“I… don’t know,” Wen Chao responded, keeping his gaze lowered. “Please enlighten me.”

“You should’ve killed them all.”

Simultaneous growels escaped Madam Yu and Madam Jin at those words.

“No need to worry,” Wen Ruohan laughed. “It was foolish of my other-self to not consider the value some of those disciples had. I won’t make the same mistake.”

‘*In other words,*’ Wen Qing thought, ‘*he’ll make sure Wei Wuxian is on our side before making any moves against them.*’

“All clans have to obey us, and not dare to challenge our authority. If we go easy on them, people with ulterior motives will initiate attacks against us.”

“F-father, what should I do now?”

“To ensure a long-term reign, your subjects must respect your power. They must worship you, and be monitored by you. It’s not easy to scare people into obedience, but they’ll feel pressure when they’re put under watch.”

“Are you saying… we should spy on them?”

“Exactly.”

The mere suggestion made Lan Wangji frown in disapproval.

“Those who comply can be used by us.”

“And those who don’t?”

“Kill them all.”

Nie Mingjue gave a short, huffed laugh at the order, and no one else moved. They all could only mock their own foolishness. Given the orders, they could assume that — even *after* the Xuanwu cave — the other sects weren’t planning on fight back. Their enemy was preparing to kill them, while they sat like limp pheasants waiting to be hunted down. The only one who might be preparing was Nie Mingjue, and he had hated the Wen Sect even before all of this.

Jin Guangshan tilted his head thoughtfully. Given Wen Ruohan’s order, it seemed almost inevitable that the Jiang Clan would be the next one attacked.

Jiang Fengmian clenched his fists, realizing the same.

The world brightened again, returning to Lotus Pier.

Lan Sizhui's voice narrated, "Once medicine was applied to the brand mark and his other injuries, Wei Wuxian's fever began to die down. Thanks to his powerful golden core, he was lively again after just a few days of rest. Due to the excitement and chaos caused by the Xuanwu of Slaughter, all the disciples — including Nie Huaisang — returned to their sects."

Nie Mingjue breathed out a sigh of relief.

(Though part of him knew the only reason Huaisang had been returned was because the Wens knew the other sects wouldn't fight back quite yet.)

"...Say, what 'brand mark' do you think that's referring to?" Jin Ling whispered as quietly as he could.

Still far from quietly enough.

"Ooh, ooh, maybe Senior Wei got injured while saving Hanguang-jun!" Ouyang Zizhen excitedly suggested, raising his voice above a whisper.

The watchers' view changed to show a group of Yunmeng disciples practicing shooting kites. The sky was getting darker, and it was clear that the sun would be setting soon.

"Don't be silly, how could anything possibly hurt Hanguang-jun! I bet Senior Wei was just being careless and got himself hurt during one of his experiments," Jingyi declared.

Once he recalled who 'Hanguang-jun' was, Lan Wangji wasn't sure whether to be more concerned over the hero worship or the fact that they were sure Wei Ying would get hurt protecting *him*.

"Well, this is right before the Sunshot Campaign, right? Maybe something happened," Sizhui suggested.

"The Sunshot Campaign hasn't started *yet*, right?" Jin Ling objected. "How bad could it be?"

Sighing, Lan Qiren grumbled, "How old are they to still be so ignorant about war?"

"Perhaps that's a good thing," Lan XIchen responded. "It means our older-selves aren't worried about a coming conflict, and can allow the children to stay ignorant."

"I just don't get it," Zizhen decided. "If the spirits want us to put the proper amount of *emotion* into what we read, shouldn't they tell us what the lines refer to?"

"We learned about the Xuanwu in class a few years ago."

“I bet their class was nowhere near as fun as the 'lesson' we got,” Nie Huaisang giggled, remembering Lan Qiren’s classes. The light-hearted comment momentarily helped distract the watchers from the imminent conflict.

“I mean, we vaguely learned about it, but I still feel like I’m listening to a story while only hearing every other word! I didn’t realize narration was such a boring job!”

“...Would you like to read the next line?”

“Yes please!” Zizhen shouted, and there was the sound of rustling papers as Sizhui passed off a scroll with lines given to them by the spirits through inquiry. “Okay, so ‘All the disciples returned to their sects-’”

“Sizhui already said that, idiot!” Jin Ling hissed.

Jiang Yanli couldn’t resist laughing at the interjection, and Jin Zixuan rolled his eyes.

“*All the disciples returned to their sects,*” Zizhen repeated pettily. “And Wen Chao didn’t immediately follow up on what happened in the cave either.”

Jiang Fengmian frowned, worried that the pause in aggression would cause his other-self to become careless.

“Taking the opportunity, Madam Yu gave Wei Wuxian a harsh talking-to and ordered him to not take one step out of the gates of Lotus Pier, not even to play in the lake.”

The strange feeling buried deep inside Madam Yu was *not* guilt. She wouldn’t allow it to be.

“Thus, he could only shoot kites with the Jiang disciples, day after day after day.”

‘*A true waste of his talents,*’ Wen Ruohan frowned. ‘*If he was part of the Wen Sect, he would be utilized properly.*’

“No matter how much fun a game was, playing it every day would eventually become tedious. And so, about half a month later, the boys’ interest dwindled. Wei Wuxian wasn’t motivated either; he shot carelessly, and even let Jiang Cheng win a couple of times.”

The implications of “let” sent its usual sting through Jiang Cheng’s body, but, to his surprise, it was far less potent than he expected. He glanced at his father, and saw the man looking back at him without judgement. Instead, there was just concern.

He was checking to be sure Jiang Cheng knew he was still his son, regardless of whether Wei Wuxian was a better archer.

A warm, comforting feeling coated the stinging jealousy like a soothing balm.

“One day, after the last round had been shot down, Wei Wuxian wanted to be done.”

As Zizhen had explained, the simulation showed Wei Wuxian using his right hand to shade his eyes. He looked into the sunset silently. After a moment of thought, he sighed.

"Let's wrap things up and stop playing this. Food's waiting at home."

"So early today?"

Wei Wuxian tossed his bow to the side, disappointed.

"It's boring, let's stop. Who was the second-last in the round we just did? Go get the flags with sixth shidi."

At the bored defeat in Wei Wuxian's eyes, even the casual reminder of sixth shidi's archery skills couldn't bring a smile to their faces. Things were clearly reaching the very edge of what could be tolerated.

And, given Wen Ruohan's orders, a lack of conflict was *far* from peace.

"Shixiong, you're so tricky. You make others get them every time! That's shameless!"

"It's not like I have a choice. Madam Yu doesn't let me go outside."

'*I would take you wherever you wanted to go,*' Lan Wangji thought before he could stop himself.

"She's at home right now, but Jinzhu and Yinzhu might be watching from some corner, ready to turn me around wherever necessary," Wei Wuxian continued. "If I go out, Madam Yu's going to whip a whole layer of skin off me."

The judgmental looks sent Yu Ziyuan's way only made the feeling in her chest that much harder to ignore.

As his shidi began to tease each other, Wei Wuxian leaned back and asked, "Uncle Jiang went out so early in the morning — why hasn't he come back yet? Will he make it in time for dinner?"

"Why am I not there?" the tense Jiang Fengmian couldn't resist asking.

Wei Wuxian mentally explained, '*This morning, Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu had an argument again.*'

The pair flinched, remembering the one they had just had.

Footsteps quickly transversed the pier as Jiang Fengmian left.

"Jiang Fengmian? Where are you going?" Madam Yu demanded. "Stop right there!"

When her children looked down at the ground, ashamed, Madam Yu felt the hole in her chest suck all her other thoughts into it until it couldn't be ignored.

(But she didn't regret anything. She *didn't* feel guilty.)

'*No, it wasn't even an argument,*' Wei Wuxian's thoughts amended. '*Madam Yu lost her temper, while some of Uncle Jiang's remained throughout the exchange.*'

A flush began to creep its way onto Madam Yu's face, but she pushed it down through sheer force of will.

"You can't run from me forever," Madam Yu continued. "Fine, then. Don't come back once you leave."

Jiang Fengmian breathed out through his nose and forcefully calmed himself down before answering, "San-niang, I'm going to the Wen Sect again. I'd like to ask them to return the boys' swords."

"And you really think that will lead to anything?!" Madam Yu demanded.

Jiang Fengmian didn't answer, walking off.

With the apology they had just seen take place, it was clear to the watchers that the source of Madam Yu's insecurities — her belief that Jiang Fengmian didn't care about Jiang Cheng — was unfounded. A *Sect Leader* had apologized to his *teenage heir*, so they knew that to be true.

With that knowledge, the fact that the pair continued to argue couldn't be seen as anything but tragic.

The viewers were moved back, until they were able to see Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng and a few other disciples watching the argument from behind a large pillar.

Seeing the expressions on the pair's faces, the adults looked away. Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian had abstractly known that their constant disagreements impacted their children, but it was another thing to have the evidence of that thrown in their faces.

Sighing slightly, Wei Wuxian asked, "Why are they fighting again?"

"Not sure," another disciple answered. "But I heard someone say that one of Jiang-furen's hairpins was broken. She's really angry this time. Do you think she'll take it out on us?"

One of the other disciples flinched at the question.

'*Based on what we've seen, it seems more likely that she'll take it out on Wei Wuxian,*' Lan Xichen thought, struggling to keep a neutral face. Over the course of the simulation (and seeing the many reactions Wangji had), Lan Xichen had grown fond of Yunmeng Jiang's head disciple.

Perhaps, when they got out, he and Wangji could try to get to know him.

The sun's position changed, and the watchers were moved to several hours later.

On a boat, accompanied by many of his older disciples, Jiang Fengmian frowned and looked down at the hairpin in his hand. It was the broken one mentioned earlier, which he had given to Madam Yu shortly after dissolving Jiang Yanli's engagement.

Once again, Madam Jin couldn't stop the bright flare of jealousy that occurred within her. It was true that Jiang Fengmian probably didn't love Yu Ziyuan as much as she wished he did, but it was also undeniable that he *respected* her. She wasn't forced to manage Lotus Pier as most Madams would be — instead spending her time night hunting — and he never slept with other women, regardless of what happened between them.

How was that fair?

After several long seconds of gazing solemnly at it, Jiang Fengmian put the pin away and ordered, "Let's go."

"Yes, Sect Leader," the disciple behind him agreed with a low bow.

The boat began to move.

Back on the archery hill, Jiang Cheng shook those memories out of his head and explained "He's at the Wen Sect for our swords again, isn't he? Whenever I think of my Sandu being held in the hands of a Wen-dog, I…."

He sighed, unable to ignore the depressing reality of the situation. Around them, the sky turned a bloody red — lit on fire by the setting sun.

These past few segments, Wen Qing had often been given support by Jiang Yanli, one overprotective older sister to another. Now, glanced over, wondering if she should return the favor.

But Jiang Yanli refused to make eye contact with her, always making her gaze skirt around Wen Qing whenever her eyes drifted over.

('*Of course she won't look,*' Wen Qing thought, laughing at her own foolishness. '*That's why A-Ning gets killed; it doesn't matter what I've personally done so long as I'm a Wen.*')

After a moment, Wei Wuxian added, "It's a shame that our swords don't have much spiritual energy yet. If they could sheath themselves, then nobody would be able to use them."

"If you cultivate for another eighty years, then maybe it'd be possible," Jiang Cheng teased.

"Even then it'd be unlikely," Lan Qiren reminded. There was no point in focusing any attention on something that was that improbable; the kind of loyalty that would require was astronomical.

Just as Wei Wuxian was about to respond, he noticed a boy rushing towards them frantically.

“Something’s happened!” he shouted, making Wei Wuxian frown and jump up. “Da-shixiong, Da-shixiong! Something’s happened!”

Wei Wuxian stood up and hurried over to them. He was the shidi Wei Wuxian had sent off to find the kites.

Jiang Yanli swallowed nervously.

“What’s wrong?”

“Where’s the youngest one?” Jiang Cheng asked. “Why is there one missing?”

“He was taken away!”

“Taken away?!”

“Who *dares?*” Madam Yu hissed, protective instincts rising up. Although she was still somewhat angry at her friend, Madam Jin decided to stand by her for this.

Wei Wuxian picked up his bow and kneeled next to them to ask, “Who took him? Why was he taken away?!”

“We don’t know! We don’t know why they took him!”

Jiang Cheng stood up instantly.

Nie Huaisang began biting his lip nervously, but, this time, refused to hide inside his Da-ge. The Wens may be terrifying, but he knew this was something that he needed to see.

Jiang Cheng frantically demanded, “What do you mean you *don’t know?!*”

“Calm down,” Wei Wuxian ordered. “Tell us clearly.”

Despite his best efforts, Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but notice how his reaction paralleled his mom’s, while Wei Wuxian’s paralleled his dad’s. However, even louder than that observation, something else rang in his mind.

’Who says a leader must follow traditions? Among all the past leaders of the Jiang Clan, how many actually followed the motto?’

His father didn’t mind that he was different. His mother wasn’t bothering to raise a complaint about it either.

With that in mind, it seemed a little silly to get jealous over something neither he nor Wei Wuxian could control.

Once Wei Wuxian managed to calm the boy down enough for him to be understandable, the kid explained, “When-when we were getting the kites, the kite went all the way over there, really far away! When we went over, we saw a few dozen people, all from the Wen Sect — wearing their uniform.”

Jiang Fengmian's blood turned to ice.

"What are you planning?" Lan Qiren demanded, causing Wen Ruohan to raise an eyebrow in amusement.

"It isn't *my* plan; I have no way of knowing."

But Jiang Fengmian hadn't even heard the exchange. All he could hear was his own thoughts.

His simulation-self wasn't there. Shortly after he went to visit the Wens, they had sent a group to Yunmeng and even captured his youngest disciple. The chances of this being a mere coincidence seemed obsolete.

He sat down, dreading the coming events.

Finally, the disciple recovered enough to wipe away his tears and continue, "There were disciples and servants. The one leading them was a young woman. She was holding a kite in her hand and there was an arrow on the kite. She asked whose kite it was when she saw us."

Another boy continued, "The kite was our youngest shidi's, so we said it was. The woman suddenly got angry and shouted 'how dare you!' and then told her people to take him away!"

"Just like that?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Madam Yu growled at the unknown woman's audacity, still tense from the argument she'd just had with her husband.

The boy nodded, "We asked her why they were taking him away, and the woman kept saying that he committed treason and had hidden motives, and she ordered her people to detain him!"

How many times had the great sects looked the other way when the Wen Sect wiped out a minor one after flinging empty accusations of treason. Even Nie MIngjue, the one who objected to them most often, was usually talked down from truly fighting against the Wen Sect.

Karma was coming their way.

"We-we couldn't do anything to stop them, so we ran back," the boys finished.

Jiang Cheng cursed, "They don't even have a reason for taking him away! Just what does the Wen Sect want to do?!"

"Yeah, there's just no reason!" another person shouted, Jiang Cheng's anger spreading through them.

"Be quiet," Wei Wuxian ordered, silencing his shidi instantly. "The Wen Sect's people could be knocking at our doors any second from now. Don't let them hear us say

anything that could be used against us."

"Hm. So he knows when he really needs to keep quiet," Lan Qiren muttered to himself. The tone, however, was accepting rather than surprised. He had long since figured out that the perceived level of disobedience Wei Wuxian had was far more carefully calculated than it appeared.

(Breaks rules in the Cloud Recesses and speaks casually to Jiang Fengmian, but accepts almost all of Madam Yu's insults without complaint. There was far more to him than just a troublemaker.)

After a moment of intense thought, Wei Wuxian ordered, "Let me ask you, the woman, was she not wearing a sword? Does she look kind of pretty, with a mole above her lips?"

"Yes, that's her!"

"Oh, no-"

"JiaoJiao!" Wen Chao exclaimed with unhidden delight, ecstatic at the mention of his mistress.

"Wang Lingjiao!" Jiang Cheng spoke. "That-"

"What's this noise?" Madam Yu's voice called out. "Can't I have just one day of peace and quiet?"

She marched forward, her flowing violet robes streaming around her.

Seeing her, Jiang Cheng relaxed and explained, "A-Niang, people from the Wen Sect are here. Our youngest shidi was taken by them!"

Wen Chao smirked at the exclamation.

(Every time Madam Yu appeared, the Wen Sect getting Wei Wuxian seemed more and more likely.)

"You were all shouting so loudly that I heard everything even when I was indoors," Madam Yu responded. "And so what? He was taken away, not killed. There's no reason for you to be so worked up. Will you behave this way when you're a sect leader? Calm down!"

Blushing slightly, Jiang Cheng acknowledged his mother's point. Regardless of Wen Ruohan's order, it would be best for him to keep his cool.

Nevertheless, sweat began to gather in his clenched fists.

Then, Madam Yu glanced toward the hall, and her glare deepened.

'*Be careful, San-niang,*' Jiang Fengmian mentally requested, knowing that actually saying it would just spark another argument. Although Jiang Yanli understood why he couldn't say

anything, she was a little sad that even after pouring his heart out to his children, Jiang Fengmian couldn't talk to his wife.

(Unfortunately, it takes more than a day to change something like that.)

When the world began to change, the first thing they heard were the rhythmic, impatient taps of a fingernail against a table. Its source was soon revealed: Wang Lingjiao had been invited inside.

Hissing, Madam Yu glared down at the woman. If Wang Lingjiao truly thought she could simply waltz inside like *she* was the Master of Lotus Pier, she would be disappointed.

An annoyed expression plastered itself onto the mistress' face as she glanced left and right, expectant. FInally, she slapped her hand against the table.

"The tea?" she demanded.

Wen Chao took great delight in the expressions painting the Jiangs' faces at his mistress' audacity.

"No tea. Get it yourself," Jinzhu responded indifferently.

Madam Yu nodded once in approval, while Jiang Yanli glanced nervously from side to side. There was a rapidly building tension in the simulated room that could be felt even by the watchers.

"What use are the YunmengJiang servants then?" Wang Lingjiao asked.

"The servants here have more important things to do. Things as simple as serving tea are not our job."

Nie Huaisang snorted at the comment, making Wen Chao snarl at him.

Scowling at the disrespect, Wang Lingjiao humphed, "This is outrageous!"

Eager to widen the gap between Wei Wuxian and the Jiangs, Wen Chao looked around and laughed, "Well, i suppose the servants don't need to do something like that if the Mistress of the house does it for them!"

"How dare you-"

"I'd rather be a loving sister than a cowardly son," Jin Zixuan shouted back.

"I'm here under the order of Wen-er-gongzi! Do you know who you're dealing with right now?"

But no one paid any attention to Wang Lingjiao's threats. Instead, everyone's relieved eyes turned toward the door. They bowed as Madam Yu entered.

Even then, Wang Lingjiao offered only the slightest acknowledgement.

Standing next to her friend again, Madam Jin also glared down. She might be mad at Yu Ziyuan, but if that *mistress* thought she could hold herself higher than them, she would have another thing coming.

“Madam Yu, I’m back.”

Madam Yu remained expressionless, as though she felt showing any emotion to Wang Lingjiao would dirty her. Shortly after she entered the room, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian followed behind her.

The boys entered simultaneously, their purple and black robes flowing elegantly around them. They were a unit; a team.

A single thought — completely unrelated to the current situation — struck Jiang Cheng. He had stepped through first, and Wei Wuxian had followed behind him. Now, they stared down at Wang Lingjiao in unison, presenting a united front.

Was *this* what they could have looked like? Was this who they would have been, if Wei Wuxian hadn’t fallen to demonic cultivation and betrayed the Jiang Sect? Was this what they’d look like if it all went well?

Clenching his fists tighter, he swore to himself that he *wouldn’t* let this future be taken from them.

Seeing that her disrespectful greeting had been ignored, Wang Lingjiao began.

“Madam Yu, your Jiang Sect is outrageous! Even maids dare speak back to guests. Servants like this would get slapped in the Wen Sect.”

Hearing that, Wei Wuxian lifted an eyebrow, ‘*You say that, but you’re a servant as well, aren’t you?*’

Most of the teenagers snorted, and even Lan Wangji couldn’t resist rolling his eyes slightly. Wei Wuxian’s speech towards Jiang Cheng proved he wasn’t ashamed of his Father’s former position, but the comment was still ridiculously appropriate.

“Jinzhu and Yinzhu aren’t common servants. They’ve been staying with me since I was young,” Madam Yu responded without hesitation. “They have never served anyone but me, and no one has the authority to slap them. They wouldn’t dare to.”

‘*And yet you constantly whip a favored ‘son of a servant’ without hesitation?*’ Jin Guangshan couldn’t help but think. ‘*Really, Wei Wuxian doesn’t belong with the Jiangs.*’

“Madam Yu, what are you talking about?” Wang Lingjiao asked. “In a prominent sect, there has to be a clear distinction between superior and inferior or there will be chaos. Servants should be what servants ought to be.”

Instead of becoming angry, Madam Yu seemed to *agree* with the last comment.

Glancing at Wei Wuxian, she nodded, “That’s right.”

“San-niang!”

“Be silent, there's nothing I can do!” she hissed back. Although her son and daughter had frowned at her words, Madam Yu didn’t think she was wrong. She *couldn’t* be wrong. She wouldn't accept that. And yet there was a thickening fog of guilt in her brain that was starting to block off her other thoughts.

Now, the whispers were nearly impossible to ignore.

From there, Madam Yu asked, “Why have you captured one of my disciples?”

“Madam Yu, it would be best for you to draw a clear line between yourself and that brat. He had hidden intentions, was impudent, and disrespected the Wen Clan,” she revealed. “No need to worry, though. I caught him red-handed. I’ll handle the punishment.”

“What are you talking about?” Jiang Cheng demanded.

“I have evidence,” she declared. “See for yourself.”

One of the Wen disciples behind her set down a kite.

“...What?”

“That’s just an ordinary one-eyed monster kite,” Wei Wuxian responded, stating the obvious.

Everyone used those kinds of kites for kite shooting. Even Jin Zixuan, who had never done kite shooting before, had no idea what Wang Lingjiao meant.

“Do you think I’m blind? Look carefully!”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Hm,” she scoffed. “There are so many kinds of kites. Why did he choose a round, one-eyed monster? Why choose one with a gold eye? He was trying to imply something, right?”

Even Wen Ruohan could only tilt his head, having no idea where she was going with this.

“Implying what?” Madam Yu finally asked.

Laughing as though she had caught them in a trap, Wang Lingjiao responded, “Yu-furen, you still don’t understand? The drawing on this kite stands for the sun — the symbol of our Qishan Wen sect. Shooting down this kite was actually implying that he wanted to ‘shoot down the sun!’”

She stood tall, lifting her nose high as if she had unravelled a legendary mystery, and everyone else could only stare in disbelief.

“That… doesn’t even count as a *conspiracy theory*,” Nie Mingjue muttered, running a hand through his hair. It was as if she was *trying* to find the weakest excuse possible.

“Did she… decide on a reason for coming *after* she arrived?” Lan Xichen asked. No matter how you looked at it, it seemed clear that her and her group had arrived at Yunmeng first, and tried to find a reason for their presence second.

“This is unbelievable,” Jin Zixuan muttered, shaking his head.

Finally gathering his bearings, Jiang Cheng responded, “The eye might be golden and round, but it’s as different from the sun as can be! How on earth are they similar?!”

Wei Wuxian glared, “Then, according to you, we can’t eat tangerines either, because they’re also golden and round? But I’ve seen you eating them many times before, haven’t I?”

Wang Lingjiao glared at him.

An argument put together with Jiang Cheng’s anger (sharpened by his rank) and Wei Wuxian’s quick mind (supporting his heir) would prove to be a *devastating* combination if allowed to mature.

Jin Guangshan felt it would be smartest to teat them apart sooner, rather than later.

Impatiently, Madam Yu continued past the illogical argument to get to the point, “So, you came here for a kite?”

“Not at all,” she responded. “Today, I’m representing Wen-er-gongzi, and am here to punish someone.”

Her eyes turned gleeful and landed on Wei Wuxian.

“That disgusting *bitch!*” Nie Mingjue cursed, realizing what she was planning. Although Wei Wuxian had controlled his expression to the best of his abilities, it was clear that his heart had skipped a beat.

“Just riding on someone else’s power,” Madam Jin glared.

Jiang Cheng did a double take, “Wait, what is she-”

“On Dusk Creek Mountain, this brat make rude remarks while Wen-er-gongzi was fighting the Xuanwu! Those many disturbances tired Wen-er-gongzi, nearly making him lose the fight with the beast! He even lost his sword.”

Jiang Cheng laughed at the ridiculous story.

“She’s here to punish Wei Wuxian several months later for something he did *after* Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan had already rebelled against them,” Nie Huaisang explained. “Though, considering how *she’s* the one who was sent and the kite statement earlier….”

As Huaisang paused, lost in thought, everyone turned to look at him. Whether consciously or not, the crowd of watchers had come to realize that when Huaisang said something seriously, he was often correct.

'*I see,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*They intentionally chose to come now, or, rather, they purposefully led Uncle Jiang out of here.'*

"Good point, Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang mumbled.

"Huaisang?" Nie Mingjue asked.

Instead of responding to his brother, Huaisang's eyes widened and he turned to look at Wen Ruohan, "You're trying to provoke them into attacking first, aren't you?"

If Wen Ruohan actually wanted the Jiang's cooperation, then Wang Lingjiao was the *last* person he would send. But Jiang Fengmian was gone, and Madam Yu was the one left in charge; almost nothing would infuriate her more than being required to pander to Wang Lingjiao.

"How lucky!" the harpy shrieked. "The heavens blessed Wen-er-gongzi! Even though he lost his sword, he was able to take down the Xuanwu of slaughter! But this brat — we really can't tolerate him any longer! Today, I'm here under orders from Wen-er-gongzi. Madam Yu, please punish him harshly as an example to the rest of the YunmengJiang Sect!"

"A-Niang-"

"Shut your mouth!"

"Who does she think she is, to give me orders," Madam Yu hissed.

Silently, Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen frowned. When Wangji had gotten hurt disrespecting the Wens and trying to save the library, the part his Clan had been concerned about was his injuries. Even beyond their personal feelings, keeping the Sect's leading forces alive was their highest priority. No clan could exist without members, after all.

They were getting very, very close to crossing the point where retaliation from the Wens would be better than further compliance.

(But, unlike Wangji, Wei Wuxian had no family willing to defend him.)

Seeing Madam Yu's reaction, Wang Lingjiao was quite pleased, "Wei Ying, if I'm remembering correctly, is a servant of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect, isn't he?"

"He isn't," Jiang Fengmian quietly refuted. Technically, as Jiang Fengmian had released Wei Changze from service, Wei Wuxian wasn't even the *son* of a servant; he was the son of two rogue cultivators.

"Right now, Sect Leader Jiang isn't present. I'm sure Madam Yu knows what to do. If someone in the Jiang Clan defends him, I'm worried some people will believe that…

certain rumors… are really true."

Still giggling to herself, Wang Lingjiao turned around and sat down in Jiang Fengmian's seat.

Lan Qiren breathed out through his nose in disgust, and nearly everyone else growled at her audacity. .

"What rumors?!" Jiang Cheng shouted.

"What rumors? Why, the old romantic ties of Sect Leader Jiang, of course!"

"You-" just as Wei Wuxian moved to retaliate, pain shot through his back and his knees buckled.

He crashed to the floor.

"*A-Niang!*" the Jiang siblings shouted in synch with the simulated Jiang Cheng. Nearly everyone else flinched back at the scene.

(The pit of guilt growing in Yu Ziyuan's chest fluctuated at the scene.)

But the simulated Madam Yu gave no indication that she had heard her children. Instead, she proudly walked forward one step at a time. Her head was held high as she approached, Zidian trailing after and sparking with purple electricity.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji whispered, moving to kneel beside the boy. Out of all whips in existence, the only one with a chance of hurting more than Zidian would be the discipline whip.

"A… A-Niang, don't-"

"Jiang Cheng, leave it!" Wei Wuxian shouted.

(Wen Ruohan smirked. Whether it was intentional or not, injuring one of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect's strongest fighters before the conflict would make whatever the Wen Sect was planning that much easier.)

Ignoring her son entirely, Madam Yu stepped before Wei Wuxian, gazing down with frigid eyes.

"I've always said you… you unruly thing!" she lifted the whip, "I knew your impudence and recklessness would get us in trouble sooner or later!"

"*Don't!*"

The whip cracked down, and Wei Wuxian's blood sprayed in the air.

"*San-niang, stop!*"

Over and over and over again, before her children's horrified eyes, the simulated Madam Yu whipped Zidian against Wei Wuxian's back. Just as Wei Wuxian had predicted, she tore off a layer of flesh.

Every time the electric whip made a smacking sound against Wei Wuxian's back, Jiang Yanli flinched in her seat. She couldn't even bring herself to look.

"A-Niang!"

"Jiang Cheng, move out of the way, or you'll be kneeling too!"

'*Will he?*' Jin Guangshan wondered. '*We already know Yunmeng will fight back. If not for your heir's safety, than what would you consider worth fighting back for?*'

It went without saying that, while Madam Yu whipped Wei Wuxian at the slightest opportunity, she did love for her actual children. It was an empty threat.

(For her *blood* children.)

Pushing against the ground with trembling hands, Wei Wuxian waved Jiang Cheng off, "Jiang Cheng, move over! Don't worry about me!"

Madam Yu's next strike forced him back onto the ground.

"Wei-xiong!" Nie Huaisang cried out, wishing desperately he could hide inside his brother. The sheer level of pain Wei Wuxian must be going through was difficult to imagine.

(Perhaps this was one of the causes of the Yiling Patriarch.)

Enraged, the watchers turned *deadly* glares on Wang Lingjiao, the woman making this all happen.

Once Yinzhu and Jinzhu grabbed hold of Jiang Cheng, Madam Yu returned to whipping Wei Wuxian. The stinging purple light danced through the air, landing on Wei Wuxian's back every time without fail. He clenched his teeth as he suffered, unspeaking and unmoving despite the obvious pain.

An irrelevant memory floated into Lan Wangji's subconscious: the time he and Wei Wuxian both received punishment. Wei Wuxian had cried so loudly then; now, he didn't make a sound.

He only willingly mentioned his pain when it was inconsequential.

(Which made the slight gasps of agony that escaped all the more significant.)

Usually, the most Wei Wuxian would get from Madam Yu would be two or three strikes. That was bad enough on its own, but it was *nothing* compared to this.

Wang Lingjiao forced him to endure *dozens* of heavy blows. His back burned, and his entire body was numb with pain. The experience was *unbearable*.

But he had to bear it.

All the while, the real Madam Yu watched on. Judgemental and scornful gazes were sent her way by the people who, over the course of the simulation, had come to love Wei Wuxian, but she easily ignored them.

Her thoughts, on the other hand, were much harder to forget.

'*I always do this*,' she assured herself. '*He'll be fine.*'

Unfortunately, those words only served to make the pit of guilt growing in her chest turn *ravenous*.

Wei Wuxian collapsed onto the ground, and the beatings continued. The only sounds in the room were the rhythmic smacking of electricity cutting through his back, and the few cries of anguish Wei Wuxian wasn't able to completely suppress.

For minutes on end, Wei Wuxian endured hit, after hit, after hit, after hit.

'*It's fine*,' Madam Yu repeated. '*He's fine. He always makes out his injuries to be more severe than they actually are. I'm saving Lotus Pier, it's well within my rights to do this.*'

Except she knew that wasn't entirely true. When Wei Wuxian *saved her son* from the Xuanwu, he had utilized a flawless mask of health to convince the others to leave. When he wanted to hide his pain, he was more than capable of that.

But Wei Wuxian was her husband's favorite — she wasn't stupid enough to believe the "equality" nonsense he had just told her kids — and no one embodied "to attempt the impossible" better than him! He would be fine, just like always.

Just like he was fine while listening to her and Jiang Fengmian argue about how his actions had hurt A-Li? Just like he was fine when he collapsed with a fever after saving Jiang Cheng? Just like he was fine when he forced himself to stand to help her son after what *she* had said?

'*He'll be fine,*' she repeated, her hands trembling from how tightly she clutched them. '*He's Jiang Fengmian's favorite; he'll do the impossible.*'

She wouldn't *accept* another outcome.

Finally — *finally* — her virtual self finished.

Wei Wuxian lay trembling on the floor, spasms occasionally wrecking his body.

The punishment was over.

With the sudden relief that poured through them, every heir collapsed to the floor. Jiang Cheng stared in disbelief; Jiang Yanli couldn't bring herself to look; Jin Zixuan was speechless from shock; Nie Huaisang was nauseous from the scene; Lan Wangji remained frozen, kneeling next to Wei Wuxian as he tried to process what had just happened.

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng called out, but Jinzhu and Yinzhu still held him back.

“Hm?” Wang Lingjiao tilted her head. “Oh, is that all?”

“How *dare you?!*” Nie Mingjue shouted, standing up completely. “That bitch doesn’t deserve to *look at him*, much less-!”

“If she so much as touches a hair on his head I’ll tear her to pieces!” Madam Jin added.

Growling, Lan Qiren agreed, “No matter how much demonic cultivation he does, Wei Wuxian will *never* be worth less than *her*.”

Taking a deep, shaky breath, Jiang Fengmian turned to Wen Ruohan and explained, “I don’t care that this hasn’t happened yet; she will *never* be allowed at Lotus Pier.”

Wen Qing glanced down, shame for her clan rushing through her blood.

Finally getting over her shock at Wang Lingjiao’s implied demand, Madam Yu responded, “What else do you want? Do you have even the slightest idea what level of spiritual weapon Zidian is? After this, he’ll still be hurt even a month later!”

“Right, right, but he’ll heal eventually, won’t he?”

"Oh my god," Lan Xichen rubbed his temples, despair starting to sink in. What more could she possibly ask for?

Their powerlessness was *incomparably* frustrating. Regardless of how illogical it would have been to stay, Lan Wangji couldn’t help but curse his other-self for leaving Wei Wuxian alone.

“What more do you want?!” Jiang Cheng demanded.

Wang Lingjiao smirked.

“I’ll spray her *guts* along the steps of Nightless City!” Jiang Cheng growled.

“Madam Yu,” Wang Lingjiao trilled out. “Since it’s a punishment, you must make sure he remembers it for the rest of his life. We wouldn’t want him to make such a terrible mistake again, would we? If all he gets is a few whips, he’ll be jumping around again after a few months of rest. What sort of punishment would that be? Boys his age always forget the pain once their wounds heal. Then it would all be pointless, right?”

Jin Zixuan looked over, and saw the boy who had defended A-Li from him slumped on the ground.

Nie Huaisang looked over, and saw his friend who had never once judged him for his interests laying on the ground.

Jiang Cheng looked over, and saw his brother who just turned his whole world-view upside down half-dead on the ground.

Lan Wangji looked over, and saw his soulmate collapsed on the ground.

Simultaneously, one thought flew through their heads: *nothing* is worth letting him get hurt any further.

Their siblings, uncles, and parents felt the same.

“What do you want me to do then?” Madam Yu asked. “Chop off his legs so he can’t jump around anymore?”

Jiang Yanli’s pitiful whimper of dismay made the hole in Yu Ziyuan’s chest triple in size.

“Young Master Wen is kind. He wouldn’t ask for something like that.”

Nie Mingjue snorted at the statement, but his eyes held no humor.

“All he wants is for Wei Wuxian’s right hand to be chopped off. We’ll drop the matter then.”

Half the people present reeled back in shock, while the other half gaped openly.

“...I hope she and her clan *rot* for a thousand years,” Lan Wangji quietly cursed, clenching his fists tightly enough to draw blood. Despite hearing it, Lan Qiren didn’t bother to reprimand his nephew.

How could he, when he felt exactly the same?

“Cut off his right hand?” Madam Yu repeated.

“You vicious woman!” Jiang Cheng shouted, escaping Jinzhu and Yinzhu’s hold. “You just want revenge-”

“Stand back,” Madam Yu ordered.

“A-Niang,” Jiang Cheng whispered from where he sat on the floor. “No-no, please don’t-”

“I can’t change anything!” Madam Yu shouted back, glaring her son down. “Stop asking me to act differently when there’s nothing that can be done!”

Now, the hole in her chest was threatening to swallow her whole.

Slowly, the simulated Madam Yu began stepping towards Wei Wuxian. As she did, her son followed her orders and remained still, frozen in his conflicting loyalties.

“Mom,” he begged. “Please don’t. Things aren’t like she said at all.”

“Young Master Jiang, are you accusing me of lying?”

He flinched back, looking down.

Filial piety and respect for his mother were integrated into Jiang Cheng's soul. However, all he could think right now was an endless stream of curses and threats for what he would do if his other self just *let* Madam Yu cut off Wei Wuxian's hand.

(Similarly, Wen Qing felt her heart rate double in speed.)

"Madam Yu, think this through," Wang Lingjiao requested, her voice calm and sympathetic. "The Wen Clan will definitely get to the bottom of this incident. If his hand is chopped off for me to bring back, we'll have a good enough result. If we don't, Wen Clan might not be so kind to Yunmeng Jiang next time."

"*Kind?!*" Jiang Cheng spit out through a crazed laugh, then turned to Wen Chao. "You Wen-dogs don't deserve to breathe the same air as us!"

Wen Chao huffed once and responded, "Why are you looking at me? *I'm* not the one about to chop off Wei Wuxian's hand."

A cold light flashed through Madam Yu's eyes, and her voice was eerie.

"Jinzhu, Yinzhu, go close the door. Don't let others see the blood."

Those words struck Wei Wuxian. As JinZhu and YinZhu moved towards the door, he thought, '*Is she really going to chop off one of my hands?*'

Lan Wangji felt his heart stop.

Slowly, the door creaked closed, and the light in the room dimmed accordingly.

The color of Jiang Yanli's skin turned as pale as a ghost, and a single word rang on repeat in her head.

'*No,*' she thought. '*No, no, no, no, no, no, no-*'

When Madam Yu stepped directly in front of Wei Wuxian, he forced himself to look up. Contrasting against her resentful expression, his large, silver eyes projected a terror and innocence they had never seen from him before.

Somehow, it was that single expression was the tipping point.

Jiang Yanli felt warm tears fall down her cheeks.

A moment later, the fear was replaced by determination.

'*...So what? If it's in exchange for the safety of the sect… a hand is just a hand! Big deal. If worst comes to worst, I'll just practice my sword left-handed from now on!*"

"Don't just *accept it!*" Wen Qing cried out, finally reaching her breaking point. Her words had been hissed as quietly as possible, but Wen Ruohan still glanced over.

“Madam Yu, I knew you’d be the most obedient supporter of the Qishan Wen Sect,” Wang Lingjiao praised.

Yu Ziyuan felt disgust rising in her at the comment.

“Somebody, hold this brat down!” Lingjiao ordered.

“No need,” Madam Yu responded as Jinzhu and Yinzhu approached.

“Oh? You’re having your maids hold him down. That’ll work too.”

The very first thing they had seen was the Yiling Patriarch, Nie Huaisang reminded himself. The Yiling Patriarch had both hands — he needed them to play the flute.

But Madam Yu was actually going to-

“Wei-gongzi, don’t!” Lan Xichen whispered.

“A-Niang, no!” Jiang Cheng begged, getting to his knees. “Please!”

“Just take him and *run!*” Jiang Cheng hissed at his other self. Jiang Fengmian was forced to sit down, his body shaking in horror at what was about to come.

He continued, “If A-Die hears about this-”

“*Shut up!*” she shouted. “What could he do even if he knows? Kill me?”

Laughing, Wang Lingjiao began a slow, almost-patronizing applause and sang, “Yu-furen, I admire you so much! We’ll definitely get along well after they set up the Supervisory Office.”

A pause.

“...Supervisory Office?” Madam Yu repeated.

Seeing their mother’s expression, a bit of hope began to return to Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli’s minds.

“That’s right, the Supervisory Office. This is the second matter I came to Yunmeng Jiang for.”

‘*No, it‘s the main matter,*’ Wen Ruohan realized. Why would his other-self care about a maid’s pride? The only reason she was there at all (months after the Xuanwu cave, at that), was under orders to set the office up.

That explained it.

(That would be much easier to do now that the head disciple was heavily injured.)

Wang Lingjiao explained, “According to the Supervisory Order issued by us, we’ll be setting up Supervisory offices in each and every city starting today. All of them will be

under our command."

These words made Jiang, Lan, and Nie Sect Leaders look down. Even Nie MIngjue, who had been the most willing to fight against the Wen Clan, had done nothing while they conquered smaller sects under the thinnest of excuses. And now, it had come to this.

This is what their hesitation led to. It was their fault.

(On the other hand, Jin Guangshan couldn't help cracking a smile in amusement.)

Finally gathering his bearings, Jiang Cheng snapped, "What Supervision Office? This is *my* sect!"

"Madam Yu, you must discipline your son properly. Since hundreds of years ago, all Sects have been under the Wen Sect."

Wen Chao scowled as a countless number of snorts and eye rolls spread throughout the room.

"In front of the *Wen Sect's* envoy, how can he say things like 'your sect' and 'my sect?'" Wang Lingjiao continued, twirling with a dramatic flourish. "No need to worry though, Madam Yu. What you just did proves that you'll be the Wen Clan's most loyal subordinate. I hereby announce that from now on, Lotus Cove will be our Supervisory Office in Yunmeng-"

A slap brought her to the floor.

"*A-Niang?*" Jiang Cheng asked.

The slap had been shocking in both volume and force, and the scream Wang Lingjiao let out rang through the halls. Blood gushed from her nose, and she widened her eyes.

"She's fighting back," Jin Zixuan realized, then grinned. "She's fighting back!"

The Wen Disciples still present unsheathed their swords, but in the next second Madam Yu had already taken them down, Zidian crackling from the power used.

"Yes. Yes. Yesyesyes*yes!*"

Now, Madam Yu's distaste was directed entirely at Wang Lingjiao.

"How dare you!" she hissed out, grabbing the other woman's hair and tugging her up to give another slap of wrath. "Mind the master behind the dog you're trying to mess with! You barge into *my* sect, and you want to punish my disciple before my eyes? What a thing you are. How dare you be so undisciplined."

"How dare *you*-"

"""""""*Be quiet!!!*""""""" five people shouted at once, silencing Wen Chao.

Madam Yu threw Wang Lingjiao's head to the side, and, as if she considered it dirt, wiped her hand with a handkerchief. The sight made the Wen maid growl under tear-stained cheeks.

"You… how dare you do something like this?" she asked. "Neither the Qishan Wen Sect nor the YingChuan Wang Sect will let you go!"

"Shut up! You scum of a maid — my Meishan Yu sect has roamed the cultivation world for hundreds of years! I've never even heard of a YinChuan Wang Sect! Out of which gutter did that menial sect crawl out? Is it full of things like you?"

Wang Lingjiao was forced to face her.

"Let me teach you who the lady of this house is," she growled, making Wang Lingjiao tremble in fear. "It's me. Not you. I am superior. *You* are inferior."

The world faded to white.

What just happened began to sink in.

First, there was a slight laugh. Then-

"*Yes!*" Jiang Cheng screamed. "A-Niang, you-"

"Slapped that maid to hell and back again! Thank god!"

"That was the most satisfying thing I've ever seen," Lan Qiren quietly agreed, too emotionally exhausted to mind the breach of decorum.

Madam Jin nodded once, pleasure radiating off her as she hissed, "Teach that maid her place."

Laughing, Nie Huaisang began cheering, and was followed by Jin Zixuan shortly after. Soon, Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue began clapping as well. Applause resounded around the room, and the watchers' grins shone brightly. Even a dark (embarrassed) glare from Madam Yu did nothing to curb their enthusiasm.

She sighed and looked away.

(And, all the while, the pit of guilt which had encompassed her body screamed at her like a murder of crows.)

"That was so cool, A-Niang," Jiang Yanli whispered, so grateful that Wei Wuxian would keep his hand that she couldn't process anything else.

Wen Qing sunk deeper into her mind, trying to block out the rest of the watchers. She understood, now, why Wei Wuxian would want to kill Wen Ning.

"Very impressive," Wen Ruohan admitted, causing everyone else to do a double-take.

“What?” Nie Mingjue asked, turning to Wen Ruohan. “That’s all you have to say?”

“For now,” Wen Ruohan answered. “I don’t see any point in commenting until we see how this turns out. We all know the real reason that maid was sent over was to build the office. I highly doubt my other-self would send her to do that without sufficient backup.”

Glares were sent his way, but Jiang Fengmian nodded once at Yu Ziyuan.

“No matter what happens, it was long past the time of cooperation,” he declared. “She made the right decision.”

“I don’t need you approval,” Madam Yu hissed back, but her anger was surprisingly subdued compared to previous times. Similarly, Jiang Fengmian didn’t respond or even try to walk off.

(Both were distracted by their lingering guilt.)

The Wen Sect had arrived, and he wasn’t even there.

The Wen Sect had arrived, and she cooperated so long as it was Wei Wuxian being inconvenienced by the demands.

Neither of them knew how to feel about that.

Wen Ruohan’s words made nervousness rise up in Jiang Cheng. Just a short while ago, the Lan Sect was attacked, leading to the death of Qingheng-jun. Now, Jiang Cheng wasn’t sure whether to be grateful or even more worried that Jiang Fengmian wasn’t there.

But everyone said Wei Wuxian had caused the near destruction of the Jiang Sect. Surely, that meant the sect would escape this event unharmed so that Wei Wuxian could betray them some later day?

Surely.

He was so lost in thought that when two words were spoken quietly, Jiang Cheng thought he had misheard.

“What?”

As blank-faced as ever, Lan Wangji calmly repeated, “I’m sorry.”

“...For what?”

“You wouldn’t have let this be shown if you had a choice. That was more personal than anything else we’ve seen so far. I’m sorry your family’s private life is being displayed. You seemed bothered by it.”

Flushing slightly, Jiang Cheng glared Lan Wangji down, praying desperately that he wasn’t that obvious. Yes, his feelings on his Dad were private, and yes, Wei Wuxian’s promise had

been emotional, and yes, he was conflicted over the things his mom did, but he wasn't Wei Wuxian — he didn't *want* people to know how he was feeling.

Though he did find it somewhat amusing that both he and Lan Wangji had an emotional breakdown in front of Wei Wuxian. The parallels between their relationships with him were becoming more and more obvious.

"Uh, I know it doesn't really mean anything, but...." Jin Zixuan hesitated. "Um, I'm sorry too."

"...It's fine," Jian Yanli shook her head, smiling hesitantly at Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji. "We all agreed to stay, so we don't really have any right to be angry over this. I'm sure we won't be the only ones this happens to."

"Still, sorry," Jin Zixuan mumbled. "If you need someone to talk to, I'd… be okay with that."

Jiang Cheng hesitantly nodded, but Nie Huaisang didn't even react.

Now that he'd gotten some time to calm down from the high of Wang Lingjiao getting slapped, some of Nie Huaisang's earlier concerns were nudging at his mind again.

Wei Wuxian had been willing to let Madam Yu chop off his hand. He had been cheerful, in fact. Positively declaring that he would just practice left handed swordsmanship instead. It was one thing for a disciple to be loyal to a sect, but the head disciple — Jiang Fengmian's *ward* — had acted like his life meant *nothing*. Everyone approved of Madam Yu's decision to fight back, but, if Wang Lingjiao had mentioned the Supervisory office even a second later, wouldn't Wei Wuxian's hand be gone by now?

During war, soldiers could be expected to face injury or death; it was a little different when the side they were *on* was the one willing to chop off their limbs.

Wen Ruohan's earlier comments on the Jiang Sect's ward were becoming more and more relevant as time went on.

The same thing occurred to Madam Jin.

Over the course of the simulation, Madam Jin had grown fond of Wei Wuxian. He had been the cause of his son's affection for A-Li, had helped save her son ~~even when her best friend's child told him to stop~~, and had continued to show his righteousness at every turn.

In a situation like this, she felt like she had a *duty* to say something.

But before she could-

"A-Niang?" Jiang Yanli spoke. "Can we continue our conversation from earlier?"

"What else is there to say?"

The biting tone made Jiang Yanli want to back down immediately, but Jiang Fengmian continued to look at her. In the simulation, his passiveness when it came to dealing with the

Wen Sect had allowed this to happen. Stepping forward and speaking to his children had helped immensely.

Maybe it was time to do that again.

“San-niang,” he spoke. “Please come talk with us.”

After a moment of contemplation, Madam Yu complied. The quick acceptance shocked Jiang Yanli slightly, and she had to force her brain to focus on what she wanted to talk about. What things should be discussed now, and what things could be mentioned later? Where did Wei Wuxian fit on that range?

(For years, she had told herself that Wei Wuxian’s position in her family was fine. It could be better — the comfort she was able to offer was appreciated — but it was fine.

The more she saw, the harder it was to believe that.)

“Well?” Madam Yu challenged. “What do you want me to say?”

“A-Niang, about A-Xian, is-” Jiang Yanli cut off, noticing the defensive wall Madam Yu built up at her words. “I-I mean, we should talk about A-Xian later. We were cut off earlier. You seemed like you wanted to say something?”

Before, Madam Yu had been valiantly fighting off the pit of guilt in her chest whispering at her to apologize to Wei Wuxian. Now, those whispers had become deafening shrieks.

“Nothing,” she stubbornly bit out.

’Mind the master behind the dog you’re trying to mess with,’ she had said.

She *knew* what Wei Wuxian felt about dogs, and yet she hadn’t hesitated to say that.

(And that was the least of her sins.)

After they left the simulation, how was she supposed to look Wei Wuxian in his eyes — the boy who had prioritized and defended her children over and over again — and know she had nearly taken off his hand? How was she supposed to treat him the way she had before, knowing what she knew now?

“San-niang… do you actually think I had an affair with Cangse Sanren?” Jiang Fengmian asked, hesitantly. For years, he had thought she was just using it as a tool to hurt him with. He had never considered that she might genuinely *believe* it.

“...No,” she finally answered.

Madam Yu didn’t believe what Jiang Fengmian said about not loving Wei Wuxian more than their kids, but now she could at least admit that he wasn’t a bastard child.

Still….

“Jiang Fengmian!” she called out, making her family do a slight double take.

“San-niang?”

“Do you swear to me right now that what you said is true? I want your word that you’ll never stop loving A-Cheng and A-Li, no matter what Wei Wuxian accomplishes.”

“I promise,” he answered without hesitation.

Huffing slightly (still completely against apologizing, regardless of what that hole in her chest was blaring out), Madam Yu said the only thing she could.

“I’ll withhold my comments related to that, then.”

The Jiangs nearly collapsed in relief, astounded by the change occurring within Madam Yu at a shockingly fast pace.

‘*Not good enough,*’ their many eavesdroppers thought. ‘*Wei Wuxian deserves more than a concession like that. Not yelling at him for something that wasn’t true to begin with isn’t even close acceptable — it’s just better.*’

If there was one thing this simulation had confirmed for Wen Ruohan, it was that he *needed* to acquire Wei Wuxian. As far as he was concerned, everyone would be happier then.

(Besides, if he left the boy with the Jiangs, they might break him beyond repair.)

But a significant portion of their time had already been taken up by these conversations. It wouldn’t be wise to bring up such a controversial topic now; maybe next time.

“Though, come to think of it, Wei-xiong is really smart, isn’t he?” Nie Huaisang asked, thinking absentmindedly.

“I’m pretty sure that was clear in the *first* segment,” Nie Mingjue responded. “Remember? Spirit attraction flags and the compass and all that?”

“Right, right, but there’s a difference between being a good inventor and being politically observant. As far as I can tell, Wei-xiong’s so-so at hiding his involvement, but he’s really, *really* good at figuring out the political situation. Which I guess makes sense given the deduction skills we saw him use in the second segment.”

“Wait, what?” Jiang Cheng asked. “What are you talking about.”

“Hm?”

Seemingly snapping out of a thoughtful zen, Nie Huaisang blinked rapidly and began to panic.

“Ah, sorry! Just thinking out loud, Jiang-xiong! Please ignore me, I’m not really sure what I’m-”

“Nonsense, Huaisang,” Lan Xichen smiled warmly. “Your contributions have been greatly appreciated thus far. Please, do go on.”

‘*Take a hint, Xichen-ge! I forgot who we were with and was about to say something that I shouldn’t!*’

Unfortunately, it seemed Nie Huaisang’s little hint was enough for Wen Ruohan to realize what he was talking about. Smirking coldly, he answered Xichen’s question.

“I believe Nie-gongzi is referring to what Wei Wuxian said when he learned my sect sent over the abyss. If I’m remembering correctly, it was ‘but if we keep letting them get away with things, there’ll be a disaster sooner or later,’ right?”

“...Right, Your Excellency,” Nie Huaisang agreed with a shy ~~and disgustingly fake~~ smile.

In hindsight, those words certainly did seem ironic.

“I guess Wei Wuxian was right.”

Gaining a slightly bitter smile, Lan Wangji murmured, “He always is.”

“It seems you’re right, Wei Ying.”

“I always am!” the future’s Yiling Patriarch trilled, then glanced over. “What am I right about this time?”

Gesturing for him to come closer, Lan Wangji pointed towards the results of the experiment he was helping Wei Wuxian run. Within the orb was a memory of Wei Wuxian working with Wen Ning. The image had been stored.

“What is that, Lan-er-gongzi?” Wen Ning asked.

“It’s one of my inventions!” Wei Wuxian answered instead. “It’s a little inconvenient for the people on either side to have to watch the messages immediately. I figured it would have been much easier if I hadn’t had to get information on my other-self’s first message from Jiang Cheng! If it works, this will allow the messages-slash-memories to be stored.”

“It will,” Wangji confirmed. Once he had run out of stories to tell — never one to unnecessarily elaborate on the details — Wei Wuxian had asked him to help modify the orb. As with all of Wei Ying’s inventions, the record-keeping abilities this offered had the potential to change the world.

“This is great! Now we just have to run a few more tests!” Wei Wuxian declared, his lips curling into a tempting grin. “So Lan Zhan, what do you say we start by recording ourselves tonight? I’ve always wanted to see how I look, and the more angles I can see you from the better!”

Wen Ning squeaked at the suggestion, and quickly turned away from the couple.

Sighing slightly in amusement, Lan Wangji responded with a firm “No.”

“Eh? Why not?”

“No one else gets to see you.”

“No one else will! It’s just going to be us-”

“Someone else might find it and see you. I’m the only one who gets to see you like that.”

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian squeaked, flushing red as Lan Wangji pulled his fiance onto his lap. Once Wei Wuxian was properly straddling him, Wangji moved his hands to Wei Wuxian’s cheeks and cupped them delicately.

“Mine,” he declared.

Laughing, Wei Wuxian rested his forehead against Lan Wangji’s and responded, “Mmhm. All yours.”

“...”

Even Wen Ning’s undead skin was starting to feel a little flushed. That really, honestly shouldn’t be possible, but….

Not even the dead could remain unembarrassed before this!

Still smiling, Wei Wuxian mumbled, “Though we do still need some way to test it.”

“Now?”

“Yeah, Wen Ning and I are about ready to send over the last bit of information little-me needs to set up the privacy thing. Remember? I based the structure of the intelligence on Wen Ning’s combat form to reduce the necessary memory space and simplify the commands, so it’ll be easier if he has one of Wen Ning's relatives to help him activate it. That’s really important, so I’d like to make sure little-me can replay those instructions.”

“Do you think that will be possible?”

“I hope so. Though who knows what that-universe’s Wen Ruohan will allow. With the other four great sect leaders unconscious, he’s probably expanding his influence as far as he can.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Lan Wangji assured.

Despite remaining facing away, Wen Ning nodded at that and added, “You’ll definitely make right choice, Wei-gongzi.”

“Of course I will, I’m always right!”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, it’s getting really annoying to have to write “privacy-thing” and “red-orb” and “time-travel talisman” every time, but all the possible names I've come up with have been absolutely abysmal. Any suggestions?
:)

Slapping, Choking, and Infinite Regrets

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arrogance dripping from his robes, Wen Xu flew into Lotus Pier. He was uninvited and unexpected, but, as the only high ranking Wen awake, no one would dare oppose him.

Terrified, the civilians surrounding lotus cove all bowed their heads, too scared to make eye contact with him. Seeing the thriving pier Wei Wuxian had maintained, Wen Xu smirked in amusement.

Then-

BOOM!

An earth shattering explosion shook the pier. Shockwaves spread out, bringing half the civilians to their knees and making the other half fly off the ground.

Mad laughter rang out across the pier.

“An enemy attack?” a Wen soldier shouted, frantically drawing his weapon.

“No!” one of the civilians shouted back, trying to keep their hat from being swept away by the brewing tornado of spiritual and resentful energy. “It’s just Wei-gongzi!”

That explanation just made the Wen soldiers even *more* confused. The only exception was Wen Xu, who hummed in amused understanding.

Finally, the storm of both energy disappeared, and the maniacal laughter increased in volume.

Shaking in her boots, Wen Xu’s second in command asked, “G-gongzi, should we… should we attack?”

“No need,” he answered, then glanced at the civilian who had spoken. “This happens a lot?”

The ones who had fallen stood up, dusting themselves off and not looking at all surprised by the event. One of the women carrying a crate of buns answered him.

“Every once in a while. He always tells us before-hand so that we can leave if we have to, and the laughter means something has gone well. Wei-gongzi is working on what Sect Leader Jiang asked him to do, so he’s asked for our patience. Apologies for the disturbance, Wen-gongzi.”

That had been an enormous explosion of energy, but 100% of the fear she had was directed at the Wens. It seemed the citizens of Yunmeng had the upmost faith in Wei Wuxian.

As expected of the to-be Yiling Patriarch, he supposed.

Turning to his second in command, Wen Xu ordered “Go inside and find Wen Ning. We’ll speak with him until Wei Wuxian is ready.”

Nodding once, she saluted formally and left to follow his orders.

“G-gongzi,” a Wen disciple bowed lowly. “There was… resentful energy there, wasn’t there? Doesn’t that mean there’s a yao? Shouldn’t we send back up?”

It took Wen Xu a moment to remember that none of the people with him had even considered the *possibility* of demonic cultivation. Which made sense. No one had ever figured it out.

The simulation had completely warped Wen Xu’s sense of normalcy.

“No need,” Wen Xu decided. “We’ll wait in the main hall.”

Even among his own men, Wen Xu preferred to keep pivotal information secret. For now, he was the only one in the whole world who knew what Wei Wuxian was capable of.

He’d rather keep it that way.

Several minutes passed as he sat within the Lotus Pier’s main hall, patiently sipping tea while his men got progressively tenser and tenser. Every time a fluctuation of resentful or spiritual energy shook the pier, they jumped and reached for their swords. It was rather amusing.

Wen Xu calmly took another sip.

Finally, just as Wen Xu was starting to wonder if he could send his men into panic attacks by whispering “boo,” the weak, powerless, cowardly Wen Ning walked in.

(Really, Wen Xu had no idea what Wei Wuxian was thinking in making Wen Ning his second in command, fierce corpse or not.)

“W-welcome, Wen-gongzi,” Wen Ning greeted with a deep bow. “I apologize for the wait.”

“What were you and Wei Wuxian working on?”

The accurate question made Wen Ning flinch heavily, but he quickly responded, “Mo Xuanyu — uh, the person who knows the most about the simulation — send us instructions on how to make a… or, what he called a ‘concealment zone.’ So long as the person being affected is already in the simulation, it’ll slow down their perception of time until whatever they don’t want to see is over. Um, like — for example, Wei-gongzi said that if we were inside the simulation right now and you didn’t want to listen to me, you would see me come in and then see me leave. It would-it would feel like an instant for you, but I could have done all sorts of thing and explained all this to you without you having heard it.”

Humming in understanding at the explanation, Wen Xu continued “And what about the power you were broadcasting from the pier?”

"It-it’ll take a lot of energy to attach it to everyone since-since we can’t see everyone’s bodies. The Lan and Jin won’t let Wei-gongzi meet the clan heirs, so we-we need to remotely

attach it. That'll… take a lot of power?"

His voice had grown progressively higher-pitched as time went on, unused to speaking for so long to the Wen heir. It made Wen Xu pleased to know the person he sent over was someone who could be bullied into betraying Wei Wuxian, should that become necessary.

"And where is Wei Wuxian?"

"O-on his way! The experiment made a bit of a mess, so he needs to clean up first."

Given the way Wen Xu's second in command looked traumatized from whatever she had seen, Wen Xu assumed "a bit of a mess" was "a bit of" an understatement.

(Her mutters of "not possible — can't be — how did they make resentful energy *do* that?" only added to that feeling.)

Half a minute later, Wen Xu heard a rush of footsteps approaching. Unnerved by the recent events, his entourage prepared for combat as the sound approached.

Finally, the door opened, and Wen Xu laid his eyes on Wei Wuxian.

"Hello, Wen-gongzi," Wei Wuxian greeted, acceptably polite but unable to keep a breathless smile off his face. "Is there something I can help you with?"

The childishly happy grin he had caused Wen Xu's guards to make eye contact with each other, all wondering how the fifteen year old before them could be the cause of the energy they had felt.

Smirking back at the boy, Wen Xu answered, "I was hoping I could get a more thorough update of what, exactly you're going to be doing to my family."

"Of course," the boy happily responded.

In the following two hours, the visiting Wen Clan members would learn more about talisman theory than even the Clan's best experts knew.

A shriek resounded, and Wang Lingjiao was thrown down.

"Back where she belongs," Nie Mingjue muttered angrily.

Now that he had gotten some time to calm down, however, the elation he had previously felt turned sour. Yes, Madam Yu was retaliating, but…

Blood was soaking through the robes on Wei Wuxian's back, and Nie Mingjue wished she had resisted sooner.

Terrified, Wang Lingjiao began crawling away, trying to silence her whimpers so as to not attract Madam Yu's attention again. As she did, the Wen disciples lying on the ground began to force themselves up.

Madam Yu nodded once at Jinzhu and Yinzhu, and they swiftly slit the disciples' throats. Within seconds, Wang Lingjiao's position had switched from a commander to a prisoner.

Although many would consider it uncharacteristic of him, Jiang Fengmian couldn't help the deep, layered satisfaction that poured through him at the scene.

He could only hope it stayed that way.

Trembling, Wang Lingjiao reminded, "I… I am Wen-er-gongzi's woman. If-if you dare to hurt me, he'll make you all-"

"He'll do what?!" Madam Yu shouted, whipping Zidian forward to wrap around the screeching Wang Lingjiao's neck. As she gasped and fought it, Zidian retracted, dragging the maid to Madam Yu's feet.

Jin Zixuan stepped out of the way as she passed, too disgusted to be willing to let her phase through him.

Laughing once, Yu Ziyuan lifted her foot, then crushed the woman's wrist.

"What will he do? Will he cut our hands and legs off? Or burn down Lotus Pier? Build a Supervisory Office?"

The mocking words caused smiles to form on many watchers' faces, but Jiang Yanli couldn't bring herself to agree. Just a little while ago, it had been *Wei Wuxian* Zidian was being used against, his wide silver eyes staring up at Madam Yu in terror.

And then she considered chopping off his hand, and he had just *accepted* it.

"A-Niang," Jiang Cheng said, supporting Wei Wuxian so that they could both begin to approach.

Before they had taken more than two steps, the door behind them was smashed down.

Wen Zhuliu stepped through.

"Ha!" Wen Chao shrieked, grateful that his mistress would be saved. He agreed with his Father — *of course* he did — that Wei Wuxian belonged in the Wen Sect. He wouldn't dare to question that.

That said, nothing stopped him from enjoying the suffering that would befall the prideful woman who had beaten down his lovely Jiaojiao!

Madam Yu glared, "Core Melting Hand?"

"Violet Spider?" the man responded coldly.

This was very, *very* different than a fight against Wang Lingjiao. Jiang Cheng felt his heart skip a beat at the scene. In the future, he had been sect leader. It had been gratifying to see —

proof that he *could* do it; that he *was* strong. Only now did Jiang Cheng consider the fact that, for him to be Sect Leader, his parents couldn't be alive.

'*You call that being allies? The Jiangs raised him like their own, but almost all of them were killed because of him.*'

Right, the four sects won the war against the Wens. For Wei Wuxian — one of the campaign's biggest contributors — to be known for the destruction must mean it was undeniable that it was his fault.

It was fine; his clan would make it out of this alive.

Finally catching her breath, Wang Lingjiao turned in the momentary silence to shout, "Wen Zhuliu! Wen Zhuliu! Help me! Help me now!"

"Hurry up!" Wen Chao ordered.

"Silence, Chao-er," Wen Ruohan responded, not even glancing at his son. This was getting important; he had no interest in Wen Chao's petty remarks.

Madam Yu snorted, "Wen Zhuliu? Core Melting Hand, wasn't your original name Zhao Zhuliu? Your surname clearly wasn't Wen, but you insisted on changing it. Is the surname of those Wen-dogs really so precious? Turning your back on your ancestors — how laughable!"

Nie Huaisang couldn't help but wonder if their magnanimous Chief Cultivator planned for *Wen* Wuxian to be known across the cultivation world instead of "Wei." He hoped not; his Wei-xiong didn't deserve such a fate.

Seeing that she had been ignored, Wang Lingjiao screeched, "Wen Zhuliu! Don't you see what's happening? Why are you talking instead of killing her? Is this how Young Master Wen ordered you to protect me? Watch out or I'll denounce you!"

Madam Yu grinded her foot into the other girl's wrist.

Restraining a sigh, Wen Qing looked away, unwilling to watch her clan embarrass her any longer.

From the way he hesitated, it was clear that Wen Zhuliu despised Wang Lingjiao. He was protecting her under Wen Chao's orders, but he didn't like Wen Chao either.

He didn't *want* to protect them.

With a scoff, Madam Yu hissed, "Why on earth does he offer such loyalty to those Wen-dogs?"

Wen Ruohan wanted to ask the same about Yunmeng Jiang and Wei Wuxian.

Finally, knowing that the matter would get back to Wen Ruohan if he let her die, Wen Zhuliu sighed, then attacked.

The Core Melting Hand batted Zidian away like it was nothing!

Everyone's eyes widened.

The battle began in earnest. Wang Lingjiao ran away as soon as Madam Yu's attention was off her, but everyone else remained mesmerized by the fight.

The Violet Spider was well-known for her fierceness and prowess with Zidian. Her skills were made even more apparent every time she slipped out of Wen Zhuliu's core-melting range. Zidian was a constant and powerful force, shattering the nearby furniture into splinters whenever it made contact.

But she wasn't able to get *him* either. Despite the spiritual energy running through being at full power, it barely slowed him down. In all its years of use, Zidian had never met such an opponent. Whether by dodging it or simply knocking it aside, Zidian was continuously rendered useless before Wen Ruohan's strongest weapon.

Lan Qiren frowned deeply. It was one thing for them all to rally together against the Wen Clan like they had during the previous segments, it was another to actually hope to *beat* them.

Wen Ruohan tilted his head, wondering how on earth the Core Melting Hand had been defeated. In the Wen Sect, the only person stronger than Wen Zhuliu was Wen Ruohan himself. How did the Sunshot Campaign take *both* of them out?

Unfortunately, while everyone had been distracted by the fight, Wang Lingjiao had moved. Running through the door, she took out a cylinder and opened it mid-step.

It was a signal flare.

"Stop her!" Wei Wuxian shouted, pushing Jiang Cheng forward through his pain. "She's sending a signal!"

'*That's what you get for playing with her, Madam Yu,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*You should have just set your pride aside and killed her as soon as you could.*'

Realizing the same, Yu Ziyuang cursed.

Jiang Cheng let go of Wei Wuxian and lunged in the direction of Wang Lingjiao. However, at the same time, Wen Zhuliu was closing in on Madam Yu. Scared he would knock her down, Jiang Cheng turned and shouted.

"A-Niang!"

He immediately gave up on Wang Lingjiao and threw himself over, but Wen Zhuliu didn't even turn his head as he defended himself. He struck Jiang Cheng's shoulder, and blood burst from his mouth. Seeing that, Madam Yu roared.

Wen Zhuliu was blasted through the wall by a sudden eruption from Zidian, and Jiang Cheng fell to the ground.

“A-Cheng!” Jiang Fengmian shouted.

“Stupid, stupid boy! You should have stopped the signal, I was fine!” Madam Yu added. The hole in the wall left many watchers gaping in shock.

Their view then switched to an outside hallway of Lotus Pier as Wang Lingjiao finished opening up the signal flare, launching it into the night sky.

Dread washed over Jiang Fengmian.

(Jin Guangshan withheld a laugh, knowing that this wouldn’t have been possible if Wei Wuxian wasn’t already injured. Wen Ruohan had planned this very well, hadn’t he?)

The watchers were brought to a distant section of Lotus Cove. The pier could easily be seen, but darkness covered their own forms. When the signal flare burst into the sky, *dozens* of ships faded into existence.

The army was already here.

“No,” Jiang Yanli whispered in horror. All four Jiangs looked faint.

‘*You’re trying to provoke them into attacking first,’ Huaisang had realized.*

Sighing, Huaisang tried to ignore the fear which crept through him. If he was in Wen Ruohan’s position, he would have set an army nearby Yunmeng Jiang, waiting for the chance to attack.

It seemed His Excellency had done the same.

Although his sigh had been soft and quiet, Wen Ruohan glanced over thoughtfully. It had not escaped his notice that Nie Huaisang was quite crafty when it came to altering the crowd’s perception of events without making it obvious that he had done anything. Although he was known as a terrible student, that was only in terms of cultivation; Nie Huaisang’s art and poetry were both praise-worthy.

And, apparently, his mind for politics.

For a brief moment, Wen Ruohan considered winning him over. Much like Wei Wuxian, there was a chance Nie Huaisang could be turned into a useful weapon for the Wens.

Unfortunately, there was a glaring problem with that.

There were minor issues like Nie Huaisang’s lacking cultivation and the hate Nie Mingjue felt for Wens, but Wen Ruohan was sure he would be able to find ways around that. No, the problem was in how Nie Huaisang operated.

Both Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang could read other people well; both could understand political situations; both frequently made comments that proved to be undeniably correct. But Wei Wuxian never *hid* that he was the one saying these things. He was always attracting

attention in some form or another, whether it be annoyance as attraction. It worked wonders for most things he wanted to do, but he very much did *not* know how to be subtle.

Nie Huaisang did. And would be able to operate behind Wen Ruohan's back.

That tipped him on the scale from "useful" to "dangerous." Rather than recruitment, it would be much smarter to simply remove the threat as soon as possible.

Just as Wen Ruohan came to that conclusion, his view of Nie Huaisang was cut off.

Nie Mingjue stood between them, glaring at Wen Ruohan with the force of the million suns. He had seen the look in Wen Ruohan's eyes once before.

(It had been there when the Wen Sect Leader returned his father's saber. When Wen Ruohan had decided to murder the former Sect Leader Nie and *committed* to that stance.)

He would not let that happen to Huaisang.

"...Sect Leader Jiang," Nie Mingjue began, momentarily pulling the man's attention away from the navel fleet that had come to invade his home.

"Sect Leader Nie?"

"...Know that, when we get out, Yunmeng Jiang will have Qinghe Nie's full support in this. If this happens in our world, there will be more than one sect for Qishan to fight."

Lan Qiren nodded in agreement.

Once the boats were just outside of the pier, Wen Chao stepped forward on the leading ship.

Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Mingjue all growled at the sight of him.

Smirking once, Wen Chao then thrust his hand forward and shouted, "Kill everyone in Lotus Cove! All of them!"

Jiang Fengmian turned his head, scanning the lake full of ships, and suddenly was faced with the realization that the Wens might *succeed.*

(But Wei Wuxian hadn't betrayed them yet. Surely that meant they were going to be fine?)

Back at Lotus Pier, Jiang disciples rushed around, grabbing their swords. Madam Yu stood on a center bridge of the Pier, overlooking the lakes where the army was.

In the distance, Wen Zhuliu covered for Wang Lingjiao's retreat.

"She better not survive this," Jiang Cheng grumbled. Not a single one of the Lans frowned at him despite his vengeful comment; they all felt the same.

Seeing Wen cultivators approaching in the sky, Madam Yu turned to Jinzhu and shouted, "Turn on the barrier!"

Sucking in a deep breath, Lan Xichen forced himself to concentrate. They hadn't seen the entirety of the burning of the Cloud Recesses, so this would be his best chance at getting an idea of what had happened there.

In the skies of Lotus Pier, the watchers saw nine areas light up with energy, before converging in the center and creating a gorgeous barrier in the shape of a purple Lotus.

Jiang Cheng had never seen the barrier in action before. For some reason, *that* was the thing that made him mind realize how genuinely serious this was.

This future Lotus Pier was under attack.

The Wens were trying to wipe them out.

Just as the energy shield made contact with the ground, the first brigade of Wen Disciples arrived. They paused, unable to pass through the barrier, and hovered just outside.

Then, under the orders of their leader, began to attack.

Golden arrays appeared in the air, slamming down against the purple barrier.

Already, the Jiang, Nie, and Lan leaders were analyzing the battle, trying to figure out how to respond ~~when~~ if the real Wens attacked them.

Back on the bridge, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had joined Madam Yu in looking over at the barrier, the latter helping support the former's weight.

Seeing how injured Wei Wuxian was, another quick rush of emotion swept through Madam Yu. She knew Wei Wuxian was powerful — so powerful that even *she* couldn't question his position as head disciple — but Zidian was far from child's play to deal with.

If he now had to fight-

('*At least you didn't cut off his hand yet*,' some small part of her said.)

The golden arrays continued to smash into the Jiang Sect's barrier.

"A-Niang, what…" Jiang Cheng began, eyes wide and fearful.

"Don't panic," Madam Yu responded. "The barrier of our Jiang Clan can't be easily broken by the Wen Clan."

And, indeed, she was right: the golden arrays weren't making a dent in the Jiang Clan's shield.

But Jiang Fengmian couldn't shake the feeling that this wouldn't be so easy.

“Hm,” Wen Chao huffed from his boat, seeing the repeated failures. “Like a mantis trying to stop a chariot.”

The glare Lan Qiren sent the real Wen Chao crushed any elation he might have felt. Yes, the Wens might be succeeding now, but they all know that, eventually, the Wens would lose.

“Pass my order,” Wen Chao commanded. “Continue the onslaught! We must conquer Lotus Cove today!”

“Yes.”

“Don’t worry,” Jin Zixuan whispered to the slightly-panicking Yanli. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. We already know both your brothers survive, right?”

She nodded hesitantly.

Far away, in the calm of the star-lit lake, Jiang Fengmian looked down at the hairpin in his hands again. Upon closer inspection, it became obvious that the part which had broken earlier was repaired.

Seeing Jiang Fengmian made Lan Xichen’s breath pick up, and his Father’s fate rang in his ears. Honestly speaking, he barely knew the man. He and Wangji had seen their *mother* more often.

And yet the idea that he was *dead* in this other-future sent a wave of confliction and grief though him. Based on his brother’s expression, Xichen knew Wangji felt the same way.

“Master,” a senior nodded once. “The hairpin looks much better after being repaired. Yu-furen will definitely like it.”

Jiang Fengmian smiled slightly.

Another vicious sting of jealousy swept through Madam Jin.

“Sect leader! Something happened!” someone shouted behind him.

“What is it?”

‘*Please let me make it back in time,*’ Jiang Fengmian prayed. Even Qingheng-jun, who barely counted as a sect leader, had been there when the Cloud Recess was attacked.

How much of a failure would he be if he only returned *after* all was said and done?

“The purple flame surrounds the sky around Lotus Cove! I think the barrier’s been opened!”

Jiang Fengmian instantly stood up. Without wasting a second, he grabbed his sword and motioned for his disciples to come with him.

“All disciples of Yunmeng Jiang, follow me!” he commanded.

They sped through the air as fast as they could.

Scoffing lightly, Madam Yu insistently told herself that she didn't *need* her husband to be there; she would do just fine.

(The guilt she felt over how the other-her had just treated Wei Wuxian was irrelevant.)

Still leaning on Jiang Cheng's shoulder for support, Wei Wuxian frowned, "The barrier won't last much longer."

He was right to say so, as the Wens' continuous assault was wearing on the barrier. It would hold for a little while longer, but was far from a permanent solution.

Silently, Jiang Fengmian, Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren pondered how they could improve their defense and evacuation strategies once they got out. Especially since the Wens, who were, unfortunately, also watching, might change their plan of attack.

After thinking that over for a moment, Wei Wuxian glanced back at Jiang Cheng and asked, "When will Uncle Jiang be back?"

"Late tonight," Jiang Cheng answered. "They really picked the perfect time to attack."

Guilt once again flooded Jiang Fengmian and he thought, '*I should never have left. Why did I think the Wens would actually give back the swords just because I asked?*'

His naivety would have disastrous consequences.

In the center of the pier, nine Jiang seniors circled around each other focused their energy in the center, powering the barrier. It was relatively stable.

Then, the watchers saw a flash of red behind them.

"No-"

"Wen Zhuliu!"

Dancing through them, Wen Zhuliu shattered their cores in less than an instant.

Jiang Yanli looked away.

"The barrier!" Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian realized. However, they were too late; they could only watch in horror as the now unpowered barrier dissipated before their eyes.

Madam Yu tsked, "Should never have let him inside."

"It might not have been as much of a problem if you hadn't injured Wei Wuxian beforehand," Wen Ruohan responded easily. The ferocious glares sent his way did nothing to deter him.

After all, everyone knew he wasn't wrong. Wei Wuxian's core was healing his injuries as fast as it could, but he clearly had no where near the reaction speed or power he normally would.

Truly, the perfect time to attack.

Back on the boats, Wen Chao watched the collapsing barrier with unhidden glee. When the Wen elder next to him announced that the barrier had been broken, he lifted his hand and gestured toward the pier.

"Shoot," he ordered.

A million flaming arrows rained down from the sky.

"Sect Leader Jiang?" Lan Qiren asked, glancing at the man after hearing a shaky breath. Although the Wens had also burned the Cloud Recesses down (killing his brother in the process), Lan Qiren hadn't been forced to *watch* his sect's destruction in its entirety.

That wasn't true for Jiang Fengmian.

However, breathing deeply, Jiang Fengmian simply shook his head to show that he was fine. They needed to keep watching.

A hurricane of fire fell towards Lotus Pier, the thousands of arrow painting the sky red. Screams resounded as they landed, instantly killing any Jiang Disciples unlucky enough to have been in the line of fire.

Jiang Yanli turned away. This wasn't just a massacre of strangers — she *knew* these people. She had talked to them just a few days ago, before being brought into the simulation.

People she had spent years living with were now dying on the ground.

"A-Li," Jin Zixuan began, but Jiang Yanli shook her head. The screams of her friends rang all too loudly in her ears.

Although he couldn't touch her, Jin Zixuan did the best he could. Copying what he had seen from Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang, he moved close enough that his fiance could curl up in his chest, divided from the scene before them.

But regardless of who was watching, the carnage continued. Lotus Pier's wooden halls were lit on fire by the attack, and soon the formerly tranquil land was blazing a brighter red than even The Nightless City. Buildings collapsed as the fire spread, and the proud flags of Yunmeng Jiang burned to ashes.

Trembling in his seat, Jiang Cheng couldn't make himself look away. Before his horrified gaze, his home — the legacy he was meant to inherent — burned to ash.

Even when Lan Wangji and Nie Huaisang moved closer to him in a show of support, Jiang Cheng couldn't do anything. All he could see was the massacre taking place.

"Damn Wen dogs!" he cursed, ignoring the amused smirk Wen Ruohan sent him.

The Wen army landed, easily cutting through the unprepared Jiang disciples. Despite the valiant effort they put forward, it seemed like the Jiangs were outnumbered nearly one hundred to one. Disciple after disciple was cut down.

Blood sprayed on the burning ground.

Revulsion moved up Wen Qing's throat until she could *taste* it, but she forced herself to keep watching. If nothing else, she had a duty to learn what her clan would do.

The strings of companionship which had been forming between her and Jiang Yanli snapped with every disciple that was killed.

Watching the massacre from the main hall of Lotus Pier, Yu Ziyuan's gaze turned venomous.

"Wen Chao, how dare you!"

Purple lightning shrouded her as she marched down the steps of the Pier towards the battle. Stepping through the fire, she walked with her head held high, glowing with power. Two silhouettes appeared behind her.

Madam Yu, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian were ready to fight.

Hope began rising in the chests of the watchers.

The trio marched towards the Wen disciples, who attacked at once. Zidian threw them into the air and they slammed against the hard ground. When the next wave came, the boys moved.

Unsheathing their swords, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng cut through the attacking disciples like butter. No one could lay a hand on them, and no one had any chance of standing against them. The two stolen Wen swords slit the throats of *dozens* of Wen disciples in a second.

Although Madam Yu had often been away from the Pier on night hunts, the trio fought as though they'd been working together for years. One by one, the Wens fell. Yu Ziyuan was a fierce tiger; Jiang Cheng was a brutal storm; Wei Wuxian was a shooting star, only visible as the quick gleam of a blade due to how his and hair clothes blended into the night.

But, compared to what he should be, he was-

'*Slow,*' Jin Guangshan thought. Jiang Cheng's backup helped Wei Wuxian immensely, but it was extremely obvious how much the whipping impeded his movement. It was only due to his ridiculously superior skill that Wei Wuxian was managing to beat back the attacks.

And yet, every time he stepped a little too fast, or dodged a little to quickly, pain flashed across Wei Wuxian's face and he winced in agony. His breaths were speeding up unhealthily quickly, and stress clouded his eyes.

As Wei Wuxian slashed the chest of a Wen, he convulsed as if acid was spreading across his back. Clenching his teeth, Wei Wuxian sank to his knees and tried to power through the agony he felt. The fresh wounds from Zidian screamed at him in anguish. He had moved too fast, too soon, and now his injuries were biting through his flesh and cutting into his bone. He let out a shaky breath, trying to force his trembling body to continue fighting. Despite his attempts, he couldn't move.

Behind him, a Wen raised his blade.

Lan Wangji's heart stopped.

Wei Wuxian jumped left, dodging by a hair's breadth. The Wen's blade cut a thin sliver into his robes as he moved, missing his skin by less than an inch.

But it had missed nonetheless.

A second later, Wei Wuxian decapitated the Wen and rejoined the fight.

Relief poured through Lan Wangji, and he sank to his knees. Wide eyed, he felt his heartbeat slowly returning, pouding so loudly in his ears that it *echoed*.

"Why is he still fighting?" Wangji whispered. "He can't. He's too injured, he — he won't *last* like this."

Perhaps the worst thing was that no one even *tried* to disagree with him.

Even as his body screamed in protest, Wei Wuxian continued to fight. More and more Wen Disciples fell to his blade, painting the ground as crimson as the fire they had spread. Jiang Cheng did the same.

Then, Wen Zhuliu appeared.

"*No!*" Madam Yu stood.

"Watch out, Jiang Cheng!" Wei Wuxian shouted, shoving his brother out of the way. Thanks to that, Wen Zhuliu's hand landed on a shoulder instead of a chest, rendering it incapable of destroying the core.

***Not* incapable of slamming into a whip mark, however.**

As Wei Wuxian gasped in pain, Lan Wangji felt his heart skip a beat in fear.

(Wen Qing no longer cared if the Jiangs didn't trust her; she *would* give Wei Wuxian an examination whether he liked it or not.)

"Wei Ying!" Madam Yu shouted, which was his only warning to dodge before Zidian slammed down where he had been a moment ago.

Zidian and Wen Zhuliu made contact, sending a shockwave of dust into the air. The watchers were temporarily blinded by the covering, and when their vision returned

Madam Yu was locked into deadly combat with Wen Zhuliu.

"Go A-Niang," Jiang Cheng whispered. "You can do it."

As had been made evident in the meeting hall, Yu Ziyuan was not well-equipped to handle someone of Wen Zhuliu's caliber. Her best efforts were thrown off or ducked under, causing her to be driven back.

However, that was far from saying her resistance was pointless. As Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng worked to take down the Wen army, she managed to keep Wen Zhuliu occupied and unable to stop them.

For a moment, it looked like they might have a chance.

If Jiang Fengmian got back now, they might be able to survive. Hope began to consume them again.

A piece of a building fell down and momentarily separated the fighters, giving Wen Zhuliu time to grab a Wen corpse off the ground. He threw it towards Madam Yu.

When Zidian attacked, a stray bit of blood fell into her eyes.

"A-Niang!"

In the current situation, no one cared about the corpse desecration Wen Zhuliu had done. Their culture frowned upon it, but, compared to everything else the Wens had done, it seemed so *meaningless* now. They were starting to see why the adult Wei Wuxian didn't mind.

Temporarily blinded, Madam Yu was caught off guard by Wen Zhuliu's next attack. Instead of defending, she rushed to the side and grabbed both Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng by the backs of their collars.

"Let's go!" she shouted, jumping over the wall.

"Running away?" Wen Chao cackled.

"You're not even *fighting* you miserable little-"

"Chao-er, stay silent," Wen Ruohan ordered, interrupting Madam Yu. Despite speaking to his son, his eyes were fully centered on the simulated Wei Wuxian. Throughout the entire fight, Wei Wuxian had proved his capabilities again and again. Even with heavy injuries impeeding him, Wei Wuxian had managed to take down an astonishing number of Wens.

He might be getting dragged away now, but the fact that he was able to last so long spoke wonders of his core's strength and his mental discipline.

Of course, that also meant his injuries were even worse now.

Wei Wuxian winced as Madam Yu pulled him along, but simply gritted his teeth and allowed it to happen. Finally, the trio landed next to the river on the opposite side of the

Wens' approach.

Wei Wuxian was thrown into the boat, gasping when his back made contact with the wood.

"Wei-xiong!"

"Wei Ying, you wretched boy!"

"What?"

"I…" Madam Yu breathed out, unable to contain her anger. "You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look at what our sect has turned into because of *you!*"

Absolute silence followed that statement.

Chest heaving, Wei Wuxian glanced away, unable to say anything in response.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji whispered. "It's not your-"

"A-Niang, what can we do now?" Jiang Cheng asked hesitantly.

"What do you mean 'what do we do?' Can't you see it? They came here prepared! Today's fight couldn't have been avoided! Soon afterwards there'll be herds of Wen-dogs arriving!"

Lan Qiren turned, "Yes, they came for a fight, but it was for the office. Wen Ruohan wouldn't care about Wei-"

"Oh, be silent!" Madam Yu hissed, causing the Lans' Acting Sect Leader to raise a brow in disapproval.

"Today's battle was inevitable," Madam Yu decided, twisting Zidian a few times. Then, in an act that surprised everyone involved, she pulled Zidian off.

"No," Jiang Cheng whispered, remembering who had used Zidian in the 13-years later segments. "No, no, you can't-"

"...A-Niang, why are you giving me Zidian?"

Uncharacteristically, Madam Yu hesitated. Then, carefully, she straightened her son's collar and responded "I've given it to you, so it'll be yours from now on. Zidian has already recognized you as its master!"

"No," Jiang Cheng repeated. "Please, please-"

Patting her son's head, Madam Yu ordered, "Go find your sister in Meishan. Go, and never return."

The weight of the situation settled over the crowd.

To Jiang Cheng, the rest of the world seemed to be drowned out. All he could see was his mother leaving him Zidian and *not going with him* and yes, he had seen what happened to the other Jiang disciples during this but this was his *mom* and she was so strong and brave and now-

"A-Niang?" he asked again, eyes as wide as an innocent child's. "Aren't you coming with us?"

Jiang Cheng was pulled into her embrace.

Madam Yu hugged him so tightly that it seemed like she wanted to turn Jiang Cheng into a baby again and stuff him in her stomach, where nobody could hurt him, and nobody could tear them apart. Jiang Cheng had never been hugged by his mother like this, much less kissed. And yet, here he was, being held tightly as she kissed his hair a few times.

Tears began to fall down Jiang Cheng's face.

"Good boy," she whispered as a silver tear fell down her own face.

No one knew what to say.

Then, Madam Yu shoved Jiang Cheng towards the boat as well. Wei Wuxian caught him, but Jiang Cheng's mind was entirely focused on his mother.

"A-Niang?! What are you doing?"

Purple lightning flared, wrapping around both Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian in an instant, binding them in place so they couldn't chase after her.

"When you get to safety, Zidian will untie," she explained. "Wei Ying!"

He looked up.

"Wei Ying, listen to me. Protect A-Cheng. You have to protect him even if you die, understand?"

"Madam Yu-"

"Got it? Don't tell me any nonsense! I'm asking if you understand!"

Wei Wuxian lowered his head in submission.

For some reason, Madam Yu's stomach turned at the scene. For years, she had insisted that Wei Wuxian was not a member of their family, no matter how much he wanted to be. For years, she had used his father's status to drive a wedge between him and Jiang Cheng. For years, she had accused his mother and her husband of disloyalty, driving a different kind of wedge between him and her children.

And, in less than a week, the simulation had changed all that.

Now she stared at her other-self, a woman who truly and genuinely believed Wei Wuxian was nothing more than a servant, and felt something within her break.

“A-Niang!” Jiang Cheng shouted. “A-Die’s still on the way! Can’t we face this together?”

“And so what if he’s not back yet?!” Madam Yu shouted. “Can I not live on without him?”

With that, she turned on her heel — robes fluttering in the wind — and walked back towards the burning pier.

“San-niang,” Jiang Fengmian whispered. There was no judgement in his voice, and no mocking either; just a deep, unquestionable sorrow.

The boat began to drift away, and Jiang Cheng cried out in desperation.

“A-Niang!” he shouted, unable to get any closer. “A-Niang!”

Jiang Yanli felt tears fall.

“A-Niang!”

As Jiang Cheng’s voice echoed through the night, the world faded to black.

‘*I wasn’t there,*’ Jiang Fengmian thought. ‘*I didn’t make it back in time.*’

“...How?”

The Jiangs looked over.

“How could you blame Wei Ying for this?” Lan Wangji asked, staring brokenly at where the simulated Wei Wuxian had been. “The Cloud Recesses had already been attacked and it was a *month* after the Xuanwu cave! They were only there for the Supervisory Office.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Madam Yu hissed, glaring at the Second Jade. “But if he hadn’t-”

“If he hadn’t *saved* my son’s *life?*” Madam Jin demanded.

None of the Jiangs had a response.

The boat Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were on drifted across the water. Shaking, Jiang Cheng knelt down and tried to understand how this could have happened.

Lotus Pier burned in the distance.

Wiping his tears, Jiang Cheng defended his mother with a shaky, “W-well, Lotus Cove is *gone* now. It’s just… if he had just kept his head down maybe we’d have had more-”

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian whispered. Jiang Cheng flinched and looked down, knowing that what he had said was the *opposite* of his sect’s motto.

“The Cloud Recesses were attacked before the cave.”

Madam Yu scoffed in faked confidence, “Well, that only happened because of the archery competition. If Wei Wuxian just knew how to avoid attracting attention-”

“Excuse me?” Lan Qiren demanded, cutting Madam Yu off. “Are you saying my nephews should have held themselves back and not shown their true abilities to avoid *offending* the Wens?”

“I’m saying-”

“If you really hate him so much,” Wen Ruohan growled. “Then hand him over to someone who will *value* him.”

For once, there was no smile on his face. Wen Ruohan genuinely and honestly couldn’t *understand* why the Jiang Sect would look at Wei Wuxian’s bravery, loyalty, and talent, and decide to do everything in their power to squash his potential. They gained *nothing* from blaming him.

“Do you really think we’ll just hand him over to you?” Jiang Fengmian asked.

“Give him to *anyone*,” Wen Ruohan responded, glaring at Jiang Fengmian. “Your wife blamed *him* for your sect’s destruction even though we all know it wasn’t his fault. Between how she talks to Jiang Cheng and how she speaks to Wei Wuxian, it’s obvious that she sees him as nothing more than a servant-”

“I know!” Madam Yu shouted. “I know it wasn’t his fault.”

No one could believe what they were hearing.

“Then why do you-”

“Well, Jiang Fengmian loves him!” Madam Yu declared. “Shouldn’t that be enough?”

Just then, Wei Wuxian saw a gleam to his right.

“A-Die!” Yanli shouted, her teary eyes gleaming with hope.

“It’s Uncle Jiang!”

Brightening, Jiang Cheng began to shout, “A-Die! A-Die!”

Jiang Fengmian wanted to be happy — wanted to feel relieved — but felt doubts creeping in.

”You call that being allies? The Jiangs raised him like their own, but almost all of them were killed because of him!”

“I…” Madam Yu breathed out, unable to contain her anger. “You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look at what our sect has turned into because of you!”

Was this what they had been talking about? Then, didn’t that mean he failed? Didn’t it mean that Jiang Fengmian’s presence couldn’t save his sect? Didn’t that mean it was going to be destroyed now?

Didn’t that mean it was never Wei Wuxian’s fault to begin with?

Seeing the pair, Jiang Fengmian gestured for his men to move forward without him, and went down to his son.

“A-Cheng, A-Xian? What happened?”

He had only seen the barrier rise. This Jiang Fengmian didn’t know the Wens were attacking.

“A-Die! A-Die, let us go!”

Hesitantly, Jiang Fengmian reached a hand out, responding, “This is your mother’s Zidian. Zidian knows its masters, I don’t think it would let me-”

The second he touched Zidian, it acknowledged the area as safe and retracted, turning back into a ring and wrapping around one of Jiang Fengmian’s fingers.

He froze.

“...San-Niang?” he asked, shocked. She refused to make eye contact.

Madam Yu had let Zidian recognize Jiang Fengmian as a master.

Looking at it like this, Madam Jin couldn’t help feeling like the arguments Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian always had were completely unnecessary.

And now, her friend was going to die without ever having realized that.

Having been released from the electric net, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian both collapsed to the sides, panting heavily.

“What’s going on?” Jiang Fengmian asked. “Why were you two trapped with Zidian?”

Jiang Cheng instantly clutched Jiang Fengmian’s legs and explained, “The Wen Sect’s people came here! A-Niang had an argument with them and started fighting with the core-melting hand! A-Die, let’s go back and help her! Let’s go!”

“The Core Melting Hand?”

“Yes, A-Die, we-”

Before he could finish speaking, Zidian had wrapped around him and Wei Wuxian again, tying them up.

“Good,” Madam Yu said. Now, her son would be safe.

And Jiang Fengmian had ensured Wei Wuxian would be safe too.

She had expected that thought to fill her with dread or annoyance, but there was nothing there. She had defended Wei Wuxian’s flute playing in the second segment, and since then he had defended her daughter’s honor, her son’s life, her best friend’s son, and her son’s happiness.

And Jiang Fengmian *did* love her kids.

If he happened to love Wei Wuxian a little more, then she wasn’t *happy*, but she supposed, for now, she could accept that.

“...A-Die?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“I’m going back, you two leave. Don’t return to Lotus Pier. After you reach the shore, try to get to the Meishan Yu sect to find your sister and grandmother.”

“Uncle Jiang!”

“A-Die! Let me go! Let me go!”

“I will go back to find San-niang,” he explained.

Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian made eye contact, a strange rush of emotion twisting through them. In all honestly, they had failed; they were going to die.

But they were going to die together.

(Yes, regardless of who Jiang Fengmian loved more, Madam Yu supposed she could accept Wei Wuxian.)

“We-we can go back and find her together, can’t we?” Jiang Cheng asked desperately.

Yanli moved closer to him, hoping to provide comfort.

Jiang Fengmian stared into his eyes, then reached out. Only after pausing in the air for a moment did he finally touch Jiang Cheng’s head.

“A-Cheng, be well.”

Jiang Cheng felt his eyes watering again.

“Uncle Jiang, if anything happens to you, he won’t be well,” Wei Wuxian pointed out.

Jiang Fengmian turned his eyes on him.

Despite what she had thought, Madam Yu would be somewhat annoyed if Jiang Fengmian told Wei Wuxian something like “I love you” without having told their son that.

“A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him.”

“...What?”

Nearly everyone thought they had misheard.

But Wei Wuxian seemed wholly unsurprised by the order. All along, he had known that Jiang Fengmian loved Jiang Cheng more than he loved him.

“*What?!*” Madam Yu repeated, disbelievingly.

From there, Jiang Fengmian mounted his sword and sped towards the burning pier, ignoring his son’s frantic cries of “A-Die!” and Wei Wuxian’s sorrowful gaze.

The pair’s boat drifted down the current.

Madam Yu sat down, still frozen, and tried to process what she had just seen.

After a flash-forward that brought them a great distance from the pier, Zidian finally loosened its hold and allowed them to escape, becoming a single silver ring around Jiang Cheng’s finger.

During the glimpse at the 13 years later future, Jiang Cheng had felt so triumphant seeing himself control Zidian. Now, all he felt was grief for everything they had lost.

Curling up into a ball, Jiang Cheng trembled.

(In the back of his mind, this thoughts raced. Wei Wuxian hadn’t been surprised at Jiang Fengmian’s instructions. When he said he was sure Jiang Fengmian loved Jiang Cheng more, he had *meant* it. Whenever he or his mother had complained about Wei Wuxian being favored, Wei Wuxian had *known* that wasn’t true.)

(Jiang Cheng wasn’t sure he was ready to dig too deeply into that yet.)

Now that they were free, the boys silently began paddling back to Lotus Pier.

“What did we tell you?!” Madam Yu demanded. “Do *not* come back. What part of that was hard to understand?”

Jiang Cheng shrank down under his parent’s disapproving gazes. Although Jiang Yanli had moved closer to in an attempt to provide comfort, it was clear to Jin Zixuan that she was too emotionally distressed to help her brother right now.

Silently, he moved between them, smiling reassuringly when they glanced over.

The watchers were then yanked forward in time and brought back to Lotus Pier. The fire covering the pier made the water reflect orange and red, a far cry from the purples it was meant to have.

The Yunmeng Jiang Sect was gone now.

A mournful silence passed over the Lans and Nies, and social niceties kept the Wens and Jins from making any comments quite yet. The Jiangs stared at the ruined mess of their home, grief quickly filling their hearts.

A torn up piece of cloth from a Jiang disciple's uniform drifted across the water lightly. Reaching a shaky hand forward, Jiang Cheng pulled it up.

Denial was painted across his face, but the harsh reality was clearly laid out before him. No matter how much he didn't want to, Jiang Cheng knew what he was seeing was true.

Lan Wangji glanced over, realizing that this was probably even worse than the state the Cloud Recesses had been left in. Silently, he and Nie Huaisang joined Jin Zixuan in sitting next to the Jiang siblings.

The creams and light browns of Lotus Pier were now an ugly, black charcoal, falling to pieces as the still-raging fire broke down the manor's pillars. A charred flag in front of the pier tilted, then fell over.

Proudly, a Wen disciple sauntered past the corpses of Jiang disciples and stepped on top of the fallen flag.

Any sense of victory Wen Chao might have felt was instantly crushed by the dark *hate* sent his way on all sides.

"Damn Wen-dogs," Jiang Cheng repeated. The gazes of everyone else conveyed the same.

The Pier was overflowing with Wens, dozens of disciples walking around every corner. The Wen Sect was about as big as the four other great sects *combined*; they had brought a force nearly double the size of Lotus Pier's for the extermination. The countless bodies on the ground proved the state of things.

It had been a massacre.

"You monsters," Jiang Cheng hissed, glaring at Wen Chao. "How could you?"

"Wha-I wasn't the only one!"

"You really think that makes this *better?!*" Nie Mingjue bellowed. "Rest assured, we'll repay this act two-fold! Not a single Wen will be left alive!"

"I look forward to seeing you try," Wen Ruohan responded.

Shuddering slightly, Wen Qing closed her eyes.

(Of course Wei Wuxian would kill Wen Ning. After this, why would he hesitate? It wouldn't matter to him that A-Ning hasn't done anything.)

Simultaneously, Wen Qing and Jiang Yanli froze; they were both now uncomfortably aware of the fact that the real Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning were together outside the simulation.

‘*Please, please, don’t let him kill my brother,*’ they both thought.

The dozens of Wen ships approached the Pier, their sun flags standing proudly before the carnage. Zooming out, the watchers were able to see Jiang Cheng, staring in horror at the conquered pier.

Wei Wuxian immediately pushed him underwater, keeping him out of sight as a ship passed by.

‘*Good*,’ Madam Yu thought. ‘*Keep him safe.*’

She wasn’t ready to think about her husband’s last words to the boys quite yet.

Once the ship was out of range, Wei Wuxian hesitantly allowed Jiang Cheng to come up. As the Jiang heir — Sect Leader, now? — stared in despair at the discarded sliver of fabric, Wei Wuxian’s attention remained entirely focused on him. He had been told to protect Jiang Cheng.

Now, that seemed to be the only thing he could think about.

Lan Wangji frowned, praying desperately that Wei Wuxian wouldn’t sacrifice too much of himself in an effort to follow his leaders’ last orders.

Forcing a smile, Wei Wuxian reminded “Yu-furen is so skilful, and Uncle Jiang… Uncle Jiang is also back. It’s going to be okay. There’s a waterway leading to the Drill Ground. Let’s go in first.”

Madam Yu was still annoyed at Wei Wuxian for returning, but the level of care he was putting into keeping Jiang Cheng safe reassured her somewhat.

(“*A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him,” Jiang Fengmian had said.*

No matter how many times it repeated in her head, Madam Yu still couldn’t figure out — couldn’t understand — couldn’t *accept* — those words. What did they mean?)

Shocked and scared, Jiang Cheng seemed to have no sense of direction. As they moved, Wei Wuxian kept one hand on Jiang Cheng’s sleeve, tugging him this way and that through the pier.

At the Drill Ground, corpse after corpse was dragged along. The Wens were moving the Jiang disciples’ bodies in lines for easier disposal.

Once the Wens had left to get another corpse, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng rose out of the water. Sneaking close to the wall, the pair remained behind cover as they approached the foreground. Silently, Jiang Cheng sneaked towards an opening to peak inside.

He instantly faltered.

Piles and piles and piles of dead Yunmeng Jiang disciples covered every square inch of the ground like grass. There were hills of corpses that towered as tall as a person, and rivers of blood flowed down them.

Fourth shidi was added to the closest pile.

Nausea stuck Huaisang, and he was forced to look away. Similarly, Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji felt bile creeping up in their throats from the actions of the Wen Clan. Even Wen Qing felt her heart skip a beat when she saw just how *many* corpses there were.

On the other hand, neither of the Jiang siblings would be able to look away even if they wanted to. How could they, when a scene straight out of their darkest nightmares was on display before them?

"You…" Nie Mingjue took a deep breath, then turned to stare at Wen Ruohan. "You will *not* get away with this."

Simultaneously, Lan Qiren, Lan Xichen, Madam Yu, Jiang Fengmian, and Madam Jin all nodded in agreement; an alliance had been created. The tension was overflowing.

Wide-eyed and horrified, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng could do nothing but stare in shock at the bodies of their martial siblings piled on the ground.

"A-Niang," Jiang Cheng whispered, glancing around. "A-Die."

When he saw them, he almost wished he hadn't. After all, what attracted his attention in that direction was Wen Chao's voice, comforting the simpering Wang Lingjiao with empty words.

"Stop crying. You'll look ugly if you cry."

"Will you not like me anymore if I look ugly?" she whined.

"Of course not, I'll like my Jiaojiao no matter what she looks like."

Behind the wall, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were gritting their teeth tightly enough to crush diamond.

As Madam Yu looked at Wen Chao, she mentally contemplated whether she could sever his spine and force him to swallow it whole.

Eyes glistening with emotion, Wang Lingjiao continued, "I was so, so scared, Wen-er-gongzi! That bitch hit me so hard-"

Jiang Cheng leapt forward, only to be pulled back by Wei Wuxian.

"Good, keep him safe," Madam Yu hissed, gratitude for Wei Wuxian sinking back into her.

On the side, however, Lan Qiren, Madam Jin, and many of the other adults felt disgusted. The last things Madam Yu had said to Wei Wuxian was how much she hated him, right

before ordering him to defend her son.

That meant she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Wei Wuxian would protect Jiang Cheng regardless of what she did to him. It meant she could abuse him all she wanted without receiving any retaliation.

It meant the chains binding Wei Wuxian to the Jiangs were just as strong as the ones binding Wen Zhuliu to the Wens.

Wang Lingjiao continued, "Today I really… I was so close to believing I'd be killed and wouldn't ever get to see you again!"

"I *wish*," Jin Zixuan hissed.

"Wen-er-gongzi, I-"

Wen Chao embraced her, comforting, "Stop talking, Jiaojiao. It's alright now. It's a good thing Wen Zhuliu protected you."

"You're still mentioning him? Wen Zhuliu, I hate him. If he hadn't arrived so late today, I wouldn't have had to suffer so much! Even now my face still hurts."

"Wasn't *she* the one who ordered him to stay farther away?"

"I'm sorry it hurts. Here, let me touch it…. I know you don't like how slow Wen Zhuliu was, but don't challenge his limit. His level of cultivation is really high. My father still wants to use him for a few more years."

"Use him to murder innocents?" Lan Xichen demanded. Some part of him wanted to pity Wen Zhuliu for having to put up with Wen Chao, but that was greatly outweighed by his disgust at the man. Anyone who completely abandoned their moral code for the sake of past debts and loyalty deserved to be kicked down.

"So what… so what if he's a talent?" she complained, obviously wanting him to be punished. However, no matter how much he liked Wang Lingjiao, Wen Chao wasn't going to punish his personal guard just because she said so.

Seeing her continued whining and pettiness, Madam Jin scoffed, "Does she have no pride?"

"I guess not," Madam Yu agreed.

"No need to worry, Jiaojiao. I punished the one who hurt your face."

Hearing that, Wang Lingjiao smirked and wiped away her fake tears.

"That old witch deserved it," she said, glancing back.

The simulation went into focus, and the surroundings which had been blurred out suddenly became visible.

"*A-Niang!*" Jiang Cheng shouted, his voice breaking into a million pieces.

Jiang Yanli froze, then went numb. The hand she had been using to wipe her eyes fell to her side, limb and motionless, and all the blood drained from her face.

Laughing once, she continued, "Madam Yu used her family's power to force Jiang Fengmian to marry her. But, despite all that effort, her husband never liked her. Everyone mocked her, yet she's still so prideful."

Madam Yu's body knelt before them, kept upright only by her grip on her sword. Grinning maliciously, Wang Lingjiao grabbed Madam Yu's hair and forced her head up.

"San-niang," Jiang Fengmian gasped in despair.

Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian tensed.

"It's retribution for her to end up like this," Wang Lingjiao decided.

The gathered crowd couldn't wait to see what retribution *she* would encounter.

The Wen Sect would lose, they reminded themselves. It wasn't over yet.

"Bitch, weren't you going to break my hand?" Wang Lingjiao asked, smirking mockingly. "Do it!"

After she commanded the corpse, she threw Madam Yu against the wall. The Jiang matriarch's body slumped dead against the cold ground.

Jiang Fengmian, who had unconsciously reached out to try and catch her, felt himself *break* as she phased through his body. Lotus Pier was lost; there was nothing they could do.

Wang Lingjiao raised her hand to slap Madam Yu, only for Wen Zhuliu to reach out and stop her.

"Yu Ziyuan comes from a well-known family," he reminded. "You can kill her, but don't insult."

Wang Lingjiao felt her earlier anger returning anew.

"If you feel any respect for them, then *why* follow Wen Ruohan's orders?!" Nie Mingjue growled.

"Because *I* know how to keep people loyal," Wen Ruohan answered, then glanced at the Jiangs. "Now that you've wrongly blamed him for your sect's destruction, is it really a surprise that he ends up leaving the Jiang Sect and falling to demonic cultivation?"

"You say that like you have nothing to do with this!" Jiang Cheng shouted. Any fear he might have felt towards the Chief Cultivator had long-since been overwhelmed by rage.

“I’m not denying my role in it, but I think it’s far more interesting to think about how *you* have contributed to his fall.”

No one could deny that.

After a pause, Wen Chao humphed and said, “Look at her now. She’s quite beautiful. Why didn’t Jiang Fengmian like her?”

“Yu Ziyuan was too fierce,” Wang Lingjiao answered. “She often went around slapping and whipping people. She has no manners whatsoever. Jiang Fengmian has been so burdened since he married her. He’s really the unluckiest man ever.”

Instantly, Wei Wuxian’s expression collapsed into horror.

“Uncle Jiang.”

Jiang Fengmian knelt nearby, a sword pierced through his chest.

Wen Chao laughed, “And in the end, he and Yu Ziyuan got their cores crushed!”

Madam Yu was going to flay Wen Zhuliu alive.

Wen Chao continued, “Women should be like my Jiaojiao! Obedient and gentle, caring for nobody but me.”

Madam Jin gagged.

“Of course I care for nobody but you. Who else would I care for?”

Even Jiang Yanli cringed in disgust at Wang Lingjiao’s words.

Suddenly, another voice barged in, “Young Master Wen! All the houses have been searched already! Over two thousand four hundred treasures have been counted! They’re being categorized at the moment.”

‘*Those belong to Lotus Pier!*’ Wei Wuxian screamed mentally. ‘*Those belong to the Jiang Sect!*’

The Jiangs, Nies, Lans, and Jin Zixuan nodded furiously.

Madam Yu, for once, felt completely in agreement with her husband’s favorite child.

(No, she supposed she couldn’t call him the “favorite” now.)

“Well done! Well done!” Wen Chao laughed. “We should have a grand celebration! Tonight, we’ll have a banquet here! Make use of everything!”

“Around the bodies of dead Jiang disciples?” Nie Huaisang realized, disturbed by how gleeful Wen Chao looked at the prospect.

“Young Master Wen, congratulations on moving into Lotus Pier,” Wang Lingjiao sang.

“What Lotus Pier? Change the name! Bring down any door covered with the nine-petal lotus crest and replace them with the Qishan Wen Sect’s sun crest!”

“*This* is what you want to do?” Jiang Fengmian demanded, turning to Wen Ruohan. When faced with such a scene, not even Jin Guangshan would be shameless enough to claim to be righteous.

But the man just shrugged in response, his attention entirely focused on the simulated Wei Wuxian.

Still laughing, Wen Chao concluded, “The Yunmeng Jiang Sect is finished.”

He walked toward Jiang Fengmian and pulled out the sword embedded in his chest, causing the hairpin which had been hidden in his robes to fall out, landing between them.

It was the one he had fixed for Madam Yu.

Wei Wuxian was fine — kind, *heroic* — and not at all interested in taking the position of heir from Jiang Cheng. Jiang Cheng was loved — fiercely, deeply — and was always going to be heir. Jiang Fengmian was impartial — loved Wei Wuxian *less*, in fact. Madam Yu was cared for — her hairpin had been fixed.

And now the other-her was dead, with her last words to Wei Wuxian blaming him for something that would have happened regardless.

Had the other-her really wasted the entirety of her life hating him?

(Yes. The answer was yes.)

Laughing, Wen Chao walked off. A lone Jiang flag broke off a pole, fluttering down to land on Jiang Fengmian’s shoulder. As he watched the destruction, Jiang Cheng’s eyes grew as large as the Xuanwu’s.

“The bodies have also been counted. Over 1,500 were Yunmeng disciples,” someone reported.

Wei Wuxian glanced over nervously, but Jiang Cheng wasn’t listening to them anymore. Instead, his attention was completely focused on his parents’ bodies. Not taking his eyes off them, Jiang Cheng slowly began sinking to his knees.

The despair was starting to consume him.

The real Jiang Cheng just felt *numb*.

Right as he got to the ground, Jiang Cheng’s hand accidentally snapped off a piece of burnt wood.

Wen Zhuliu glanced over.

“A-Cheng!”

A Wen disciple who was coincidentally in the way flinched under Wen Zhuliu’s gaze. After a moment of thought, the Core Melting Hand turned back around.

Everyone breathed out a sigh of relief.

Behind the wall, Wei Wuxian listened carefully for any sign that they were caught, keeping a hand tightly wrapped around Jiang Cheng’s mouth to keep him silent.

Jiang Cheng fought to escape.

“*A-Cheng*!” Jiang Fengmian hissed.

“No, no — do *not* try to escape,” Madam Yu ordered. “Are you *trying* to die?!”

Unfortunately, the answer to that might be ‘yes.’

As Wang Lingjiao continued congratulating Wen Chao, Jiang Cheng fought viciously against Wei Wuxian’s hold. He squirmed and pulled and hit, but Wei Wuxian kept a tight grip on his heir.

The charge he had been tasked with protecting.

Flushing, Jiang Cheng looked away. Seeing such a direct comparison between his and Wei Wuxian’s reactions, he couldn’t help but feel like an out of control child. Why did Wei Wuxian have to take care of him?

(Why hadn’t his father told them to take care of each other?)

An enormous Wen Flag was dropped from the center-hall’s roof. Hundreds of voices then spoke at once, the victors of the war they had started:

“Congratulations on becoming the owner of Yunmeng, Wen-er-gongzi!”

“It. Won’t. Happen.”

Even when Wen Chao squeaked under Madam Yu’s threat, Wen Ruohan and Wen Qing offered no assistance.

(Wen Chao was so annoyed! If Jiang Cheng had been scared, Wei Wuxian would do whatever it took to help him. Wen Chao now completely understood why his father wanted the boy.)

“Wen-er-gongzi,” someone said. “Jiang Cheng, the son of Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan, and Wei Wuxian have escaped.”

Those words only made Jiang Cheng fight back harder, causing Wei Wuxian to grit his teeth from the exertion of keeping his brother restrained.

“Idiot boy!’ Madam Yu shouted. “What do you hope to accomplish by getting found now?”

“I can’t just stand there and listen to them!”

“You can and you will,” Jiang Fengmian objected.

Jiang Cheng fought harder.

“Wei Wuxian should never have brought you back here-”

“I don’t need to be babysat by him!”

“*Obviously*, you do,” Jin Guangshan responded, causing both Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian to glare. The Jin Sect Leader didn’t mind however; he only cared about Wen Ruohan’s reaction.

The man nodded, understanding the implication.

(Even with what Jin Guangshan had seen, he was still willing to support the Wens.)

Madam Jin growled.

“Pass my order,” Wen Chao decided. “Hunt all disciples of the Jiang Clan down.”

At those words, Jiang Cheng’s tolerance snapped.

He bit through Wei Wuxian’s hand, drawing blood. When his head disciple winced back in pain, they shuffled. The movement made a sound.

“Who’s there?” Wen Chao shouted.

“*Run!*” Yanli begged.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji whispered.

Wen Chao made a motion with his head, and, a second later, Wen Zhuliu moved. He ran towards the wall the boys were hiding behind, crossing the distance in an instant.

Jiang Fengmian stood up, terror sinking in.

But, when Wen Zhuliu got to the other side of the wall, there was no one there.

“Thank god for Wei Wuxian,” Madam Yu sighed. A part of her couldn’t believe she would ever admit that.

The rest of her was too grateful to care.

(She swore she wouldn’t rest until every Wen was a corpse in the ground.)

At first, it was silent; they were shown an ominous grove of trees at twilight. Then, they heard the sounds of tumbling, grunting, and exertion — a struggle.

The fighting and resistance became louder and louder as time went on. Heavy breathing and pained grunts echoed through the otherwise-silent clearing as two people fought each other. One began snarling ferociously.

If anything, it sounded like a fight with an animal.

"Jiang Cheng, what are you doing?" Wei Wuxian shouted, his voice raw and *breaking*. "Don't go back there!"

Wei Wuxian had his arms wrapped around Jiang Cheng's chest, desperately trying to keep him from running forward. The pair went back and forth, struggling for dominance.

"You better keep a tight hold on him, Wei Wuxian," Madam Yu hissed, and Jiang Fengmian nodded once in agreement.

However, there was an unmistakable *wildness* to the fight. It wasn't martial arts or sword fighting or spoken manipulation, it was two grief-filled boys battling each other with raw physical strength.

As Jiang Cheng pushed forward, Wei Wuxian pulled back. As Jiang Cheng clawed, Wei Wuxian held strong. As the Jiang heir fought, the to-be Yiling Patriarch stayed calm. Jiang Cheng became angrier and angrier and fiercer and fiercer and wilder and wilder and soon he was trying to power through with his hate and grief and vengeance and resentment-

"Wen Chao is still there! If you go back, you'll be killed!"

Wei Wuxian's words only made Jiang Cheng angrier. He growled, grunted, fought and struggled and yanked and hissed and Wei Wuxian pulled — got in his way — was trying to *stop him*-

"I know you want revenge! But not now!"

Jiang Cheng fought more.

"Did you forget what your mother said?!"

Now, finally, his words seemed to get through to Jiang Cheng. The other boy's resistance paused.

Seeing that Jiang Cheng had transitioned from animalistic growling to a calmer heavy breathing, relief filled Wei Wuxian's eyes and he let go.

"Just run," Jiang Yanli begged.

"Jiang Cheng," he whispered. "It's never too late to take revenge. We can-"

Jiang Cheng turned and backhanded him.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji shouted, instantly running to his side.

The two moved apart; a bruise rapidly formed on Wei Wuxian’s face.

“Jiang-”

“Why? Why?! Just *why?*” Jiang Cheng shouted, staggering towards Wei Wuxian. “Are you happy now? Are you satisfied?!”

Jiang Cheng looked down.

Unlike his other-self, the real Jiang Cheng’s mind wasn’t clouded by grief. His parents were watching next to him, alive, and in fact closer than they had ever been before.

But he *understood* his other-self. He saw the trauma and grief “he” had gone through, and knew he would do the same. The simulation was still *painfully* accurate.

“Why did you have to save Lan Wangji?!” he shouted.

His lightning-fast punch knocked Wei Wuxian off his feet. The only reason he didn’t fall was the grip Jiang Cheng had on his collar, pulling the lapels apart and leaving Wei Wuxian with no defense.

“Why did you do that?!” he shouted, shaking Wei Wuxian back and forth, madness seemingly creeping in.

Lan Wangji frowned, “Stop-”

“I don’t care if Lan Wangji or Jin Zixuan dies! Just *let* them die! What’s their deaths got to do with us?! With our sect?! Why did this have to happen?!”

Lan Wangji's mouth snapped shut.

The next punch brought Wei Wuxian to the ground. The whip-wounds on his back screamed on impact, and the bruises on his face were becoming darker and darker.

Then, Jiang Cheng reached his hands forward, and wrapped them around Wei Wuxian’s neck.

“No,” Lan Wangji whispered, kneeling down and trying to push off the vision’s Jiang Cheng, but phasing through with every attempt. “Get off. Get off. *Get off!*”

“Why?!” Jiang Cheng repeated, slowly adding tension to his hand until Wei Wuxian was gagging.

“Wei Ying!”

“A-Xian!”

“Why?! Why?! Why?!” Jiang Cheng shouted, his eyes going feral as he squeezed Wei Wuxian’s neck with all his might. “Why did you save Lan Wangji? Why did you have to speak up?! How many times have I told you not to stir up trouble?! Not to strike? Did you really want to play the hero that badly? Well, have you seen the result of you playing hero? Are you happy now?!”

Stunned, Jiang Cheng stepped closer-

“Don’t *touch him!*” Lan Wangji shouted, turning to growl at the real Jiang Cheng. Logically, he knew the simulated-Jiang Cheng was grieving. Logically, he knew the real one couldn’t change the simulation even if he wanted to. Logically, he knew the real Jiang Cheng wasn’t trying to do that.

But behind him was a Jiang Cheng *choking* Wei Ying.

Trembling, Jiang Cheng stumbled backwards, unable to argue.

“Go to hell!” Jiang Cheng shouted squeezing even tighter. “They should all just go to hell!”

Wei Wuxian’s face had become red under the strain. Slowly, he brought his hand to touch Jiang Cheng’s arm, whispering “Jiang Cheng.”

But Jiang Cheng seemed like he couldn’t hear him, still squeezing and choking with all his might. Soon, his face split into a deranged smile, and he began to laugh.

He laughed and laughed and *laughed*, and all the while kept choking Wei Wuxian.

And all the while, Wei Wuxian simply laid there and took it.

‘*This is wrong*,’ Jiang Cheng thought. Beyond the morality of it — beyond the fact that the burning of the Cloud Recesses proved it would have happened regardless — there was something wrong.

He had never, ever been able to beat Wei Wuxian. Grief or not — whipping or not — Jiang Cheng wasn’t more powerful. And yet Wei Wuxian was being slammed to the ground and choked.

Not once had he put up even the slightest bit of resistance.

Now, finally, Jiang Cheng couldn’t take it anymore. He sank to his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“*Fight back, idiot!*” he screamed, voice shattering like glass.

The laughter was not a happy one, and it continued and continued and continued as Jiang Cheng’s hands squeezed around Wei Wuxian’s open and pliant neck.

The laughter shook the grotto they were in, and soon became a sob of agony. The hands around his neck suddenly loosened, and tears fell onto Wei Wuxian’s bruised face.

Trembling, Jiang Cheng shook with genuine sobs, and his cries made his voice crack in his misery.

"I want my parents back."

Slowly, one by one, drops of rain began to fall from the sky. In it, Jiang Cheng's anguished cries sounded even more painful, and the world's darkness seemed overwhelming.

The simulation focused on Wei Wuxian, as he lifted one hand to shield his eyes from the rain.

"I want my parents back!" Jiang Cheng repeated, screaming out in unparalleled grief.

'*The Wens would have come regardless of what Wei Wuxian did,*' Jiang Cheng knew. '*But-but maybe they'd have come a little later — maybe we would have had a little more time. Maybe we could have turned things around.*'

It was a foolish thought, but one he couldn't help thinking.

'*Why? Why? Why? Why?*'

Trembling, Wei Wuxian struggled to breathe. He had pink bruises on his face, deep purple on his neck, whip scars on his back, and orders from both his guardians to worry about Jiang Cheng's safety before his own.

A tear finally fell down his face.

The simulation faded to black, then returned them to the usual white void.

Even after the simulation had faded away, Jiang Cheng couldn't move. He kneeled next to his family, staring in horror at the place where his simulated-self had been just moments ago.

His eyes burned, and warm streams of liquid fell down his face.

He could feel his heart shattering.

"Hello everyone!!!" someone shouted at full volume.

The tone was so wrong — *indescribably* out of place — that the watchers thought the simulation had started again.

"Uncle Jiang? Shijie? Sect Leaders? Jiang Cheng? Madam Yu? Hellooo? Anyone there?"

Nothing.

"Everyone?"

Finally, Jiang Cheng blinked twice, realizing that the voice wasn't from the simulation.

"...Wei… Wei Ying?" he asked, voice breaking as he spoke.

"Eh? Jiang Cheng? What's wrong with your voice?"

"I… you… it's you?" he breathed out, gasping for air. Tears continued to pour down his face.

"...It's me," Wei Wuxian confirmed. "Uncle Jiang said I should check in every once in a while, so… here I am. Is everything alright? You sound sorta… off."

'*I just saw my other-self try to kill you,*' Jiang Cheng thought, approaching hysteria. '*How am I supposed to feel?!*'

"What are…" he tried and failed to speak. "What are you… why are you…"

"W-we're fine, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli reassured, shaking in her seat. She wanted to sound confident, convincing, and clear, but couldn't stop the tremble in her voice as she recalled how *her mother was going to cut off his hand and then blamed the sect's destruction on him and then her dad abandoned him and Jiang Cheng choked him and now-*

"Shijie? What's wrong? You sound…" he paused, unwilling to throw her weakness out in the open when it was clear she was trying to hide it. "Did someone say something? Who was it?!"

"No one… no one said anything, A-Xian."

Wei Wuxian made a dissatisfied noise like he wanted to protest, but couldn't given who was listening to their conversation. Lan Qiren really, really hoped the privacy-thing would be done soon.

"Do you have an update for us?" Madam Yu asked. Unlike her usual snark and hisses when speaking to him, Madam Yu's question was completely toneless. There wasn't blame nor apology; Yu Ziyuan had gotten so overwhelmed in the past few minutes that she had simply shut her emotions down.

She was completely blank.

That, more than even Jiang Yanli's tearful words, unsettled the Jiang Sect's head disciple.

"I…" his initial cheer had completely vanished. "Uh, it's going well. It's been about four days since you were all trapped inside. We got the rest of the instructions for the privacy thing — oh, uh, Mo Xuanyu called it a "Concealment Zone" — and now we just need to synch it up to Wen Ning. Apparently someone from his bloodline will have an easier time manipulating the structure. Um, I sent a thank-you video back to Mo Xuanyu. The-the other sects are doing well too. Should I… should I do anything for you?"

Although he had transitioned to a more serious tone, Jiang Cheng couldn't shake the feeling that there was now an uncrossable divide between him and Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian sounded more solemn now, but he didn't *understand*. He had no idea what Madam Yu and

Jiang Fengmian and even *Jiang Cheng* had done to him. He was worried *for* them and not *because* of them and he shouldn't be worried about that because they were brothers but his other-self had still *attacked* and what was he supposed to do now that he knew-

"Wei Wuxian."

"Hm?"

"If… if I got really angry and started genuinely choking you for something that wasn't your fault, you would fight back, right?"

"I… I mean yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I?"

He sounded like he genuinely believed that.

But they all *knew* that wasn't true. They knew he would simply lie there and take it and not fight back and not resist and he sounded so confused because he didn't *understand* that he wouldn't fight back and they knew and he didn't and Jiang Cheng *couldn't* talk to him anymore.

"...Leave," Jiang Cheng requested, shaking.

"I… Jiang Cheng-"

"Please, just *leave!*" he shouted, curling in on himself and covering his ears with his hands.

"I… what? I can't just-"

"A-Xian-"

"Is something wrong? Why do you want me to-"

"A-Xian," Jiang Fengmian sternly interrupted. "Please leave."

"But, I-"

"Please go, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered. "We… we can talk later, okay?"

"I… okay?" he deflated, giving up the fight. "Um, just remember, you can leave at any time if it becomes too much."

"Thank you, but we… we *can't* leave now," Jiang Fengmian answered.

"...Alright, tell me if you need anything," Wei Wuxian requested softly, sounding almost as vulnerable as when he had first realized Madam Yu was going to cut off his hand.

(But still falling so, so short of that level of nervousness. Because he didn't understand.)

Considering what had just happened, was it any wonder he became the Yiling Patriarch? The Jiangs might as well have led him down the path themselves.

With that realization, none of them were willing to talk to the boy in question.

Wei Wuxian disconnected from the simulation.

For a while, silence reigned again.

Aside from the muffled sobbing of Jiang Yanli, the rest of the crowd was too stunned to say anything. What *could* be said after something like that? Half the watchers felt their eyes glistening, and the other half were forced to tremble in shock. Everyone was frozen.

Well, almost everyone.

"What is wrong with you?" Wen Ruohan asked looking at Madam Yu.

His audacity left most of the watchers gaping in disbelief.

"Wha-wrong with *me?*"

"You attack my sect, and then question *us?*" Jiang Fengmian added on, standing up. "How dare you?"

Hearing Wei Wuxian's voice had clearly shaken him, but he was still the least affected of all the Jiangs. Growling, Nie Mingjue looked over from where he knelt, protectively wrapped around Huaisang.

"Sect Leader Wen, do you really think you have any right to ask *them* that?" he demanded. "I feel like I need to ask whether you've already planned on putting up Supervisory Offices!"

"Ha! If you all weren't so cowardly, maybe it wouldn't have gotten to this point!" Wen Chao shouted, parroting things he'd heard his father say earlier.

"Yes, we should have taken action to stop you," Lan Qiren admitted. "That doesn't make you any less *deplorable.*"

"For trying to set up an office that would ensure Yunmeng's citizens are well cared for? We only attacked after Madam Yu tried to kill our messenger."

"Yeah!" Wen Chao copied his father. "You deserve it for slapping Jiaojiao! What were you expecting after harming my woman unprovoked?!"

"Unprovoked? You'd brought an army!" Madam Yu reminded.

"It was long past time to respond," Jiang Fengmian agreed.

"And that was worth the annihilation of your sect?"

Hissing, Madam Yu responded, "You expected us to fight back because death was a better fate then surrendering to *you*! What, was it 'their own fault' when the Lans refused to burn down their library? We all know your attack was inevitable! Stop pretending like it happened because of us!"

“Oh? That’s not what the other-you said,” Wen Ruohan laughed, then settled into a malicious smirk.

“You disgusting Wen-dogs! *This* is what you were planning, and you dare to question people who just laid down their lives to stop you?”

“You raise no fuss as long as it’s smaller sects, but as soon as your own are in danger I can’t be tolerated?” he asked, making the crowd flinch back. Their hesitance before had been more than understandable; thousands would surely die in the war, and there was the risk of annihilation. Only an idiot would upset the Wen Sect for nothing.

“All these years, and the Lan Sect still hasn’t changed. Why bother being so polite? Hilarious!”

“But if we keep letting them get away with things, there’ll be a disaster sooner or later!”

“In this situation, it’s impossible to only worry about yourself and hope that no blood will be lost.”

But Wei Wuxian was truly the biggest idiot alive.

Laughing slightly, Wen Ruohan continued, “We all agreed to not punish for things that have yet to happen, right?”

“That… that’s different-”

“I see. Well, if you insist on being hypocritical, I suppose I can’t stop you.”

Silence reigned. Even with the knowledge that they would be attacked in a few years, people were hesitant to argue against sect leader Wen. He had a renowned position, grand lineage, and the world’s strongest army at his beck and call.

And what he was saying was just right enough to render them speechless.

“...S-still, what makes you think that *you* have any right to question us?”

“Because of Wei Wuxian,” Wen Ruohan responded, his smirk disappearing and being replaced by a cold disapproval. “Based on what we’ve seen, several things are undeniable. The boy is smart and courageous and innovative and talented and confident and loyal and you seem to be doing everything in your power to squash those traits in him! I must admit, no matter what I’ve done to other sects, even *I’ve* never blamed my most loyal disciple for a disaster that would have happened regardless.”

The Jiangs flinched.

Everyone wanted to object. The simulated-Jiang Fengmian had just lost everything, and that-Madam Yu had been brave and self-sacrificing and motherly and skillful and had *died*, but-

But.

No one could excuse the way she had treated Wei Wuxian.

Not even herself.

“A-Niang and everyone knows that it wasn’t really his fault, he was just an excuse,” Jiang Cheng admitted. “It-it’s fine though. Wei Wuxian is strong, he’ll be — he can take-”

“He can take Madam Yu whipping him half to death right before you choke him and nearly bring him to rest of the way?” Wen Qing asked. “I admit Madam Yu held back enough to not kill him, but that is *not* an acceptable limit.”

Wen Qing didn’t want to support Wen Ruohan too much in this — disagreed with everything their sect had just done, in fact — but she *couldn’t* let this go.

“I… I-”

“Yeah!” Wen Chao added. “I may not like Wen Zhuliu, but even *I* wouldn’t try to kill him for something that wasn’t his fault.”

“I wasn’t trying to *kill* him-”

Wen Ruohan openly laughed at that, but didn’t say another word.

“If we’re not going to punish you for things that haven’t happened, you can’t raise objections over this,” Jiang Fengmian argued, standing in front of Jiang Cheng protectively.

“I’ll admit we can’t punish him for something that hasn’t happened,” Wen Ruohan allowed, “But there are other concerns. I’m sure you noticed, but Wei Wuxian didn’t even *fight back.*”

Jaws snapped shut.

Wen Ruohan stared at the Jiangs, and thought.

He expected Wen Zhuliu to be willing to lay down his life to follow orders. Wen Ruohan was his benefactor. Had secured his loyalty and even adopted him into the clan. He had saved Wen Zhuliu when no one else would, as the rest of the world was far too scared of the Core Melting Hand to offer assistance.

Wei Wuxian was different.

From what Wen Ruohan remembered, Wei Wuxian had spent four years living on the streets. While Jiang Fengmian’s help was greatly appreciated, Wei Wuxian likely would have survived regardless. Taking him in was several degrees less than what Wen Ruohan had done for Wen Zhuliu, *and* meant Wei Wuxian had more options. The Jiangs had instead earned his loyalty by treating him as family. They didn’t respect his power or leadership or talent, but their interpersonal relationships maintained their bond. Although that was different from Wen Ruohan’s usual strategy, he found it acceptable nonetheless.

And yet, Wei Wuxian hadn’t been surprised when both Madam Yu *and* Jiang Fengmian prioritized Jiang Cheng’s safety over his. They had proven once and for all that he wasn’t

really part of the family. Anyone else would have felt their loyalty shatter at those words.

But Wei Wuxian had never thought of himself as part of the family. Madam Yu had shouted to the whole world that she hated and blamed him, but could still expect him to defend her son with his life and be *right* about that. Jiang Cheng had choked him, but Madam Yu had known that even with that the boy would never hurt Jiang Cheng. Wei Wuxian, one of the main reasons the Wen Sect lost the war, was held on the four great sects' side by a string that looked paper thin but was actually denser than titanium.

Wen Ruohan didn't understand.

If Wei Wuxian hadn't fought back even here, then *why* did he kill Jiang Yanli?

How had the Jiang boy regained Wei Wuxian's allegiance?

What would it take to change Wei Wuxian's loyalty?

Wen Ruohan didn't know.

And he *hated* that.

"He…" Jiang Cheng trailed off. "I shouldn't have done that. I was… I wasn't thinking clearly, but-but neither was he! He didn't fight back, but he normally would. He always wins when we fight with each other. It doesn't mean-"

"Doesn't it?"

"Your Excellency," Jiang Yanli stood. "Please, that's not true."

"A-Xian is like a member of our family," Jiang Fengmian agreed.

Jin Guangshan glanced over, and saw his son nervously glancing back and forth. It was clear that he *wanted* to support his fiancee, but hesitated. Considering what Jiang Cheng had said, the hesitation was no surprise.

Madam Jin, on the other hand, barreled forward.

"Yes," she hissed, turning to her (former?) friend. "Certainly, part of your family. So close to you all, that it took the crime of saving A-Xuan's life for you to abandon him."

Yanli flinched.

"That's not what we're doing!" Jiang Cheng shouted.

"Really? Because I'm pretty sure I just heard you say that what happens to the Jin isn't your problem. Then I suppose you shouldn't expect any help from us now that your precious Lotus Pier has been burned down!"

Madam Yu growled, "Enough-"

“And you too Ziyuan!” Madam Jin interrupted. “I thought you cared. But I guess *my son’s* life means nothing to you. I wonder, did my A-Xuan have Jin Ling without ever knowing what his brother in law thought? Did he ever learn that Jiang Cheng choked Wei Wuxian over this?”

”I don’t care if Lan Wangji or Jin Zixuan dies! Just let them die!” Jiang Cheng had shouted, digging his fingers into the soft flesh of Wei Wuxian’s neck.

Jiang Yanli’s eyes drifted to her fiancee and then immediately darted away. Jin Zixuan refused to make eye contact with her or her brother, trying to sift through his own feelings on the matter.

(Their friendship had nearly ended when the simulated Jin Zixuan made a few rude remarks. This was very, *very* different.)

“I… I was just angry,” Jiang Cheng protested. “I wouldn’t actually-”

“You tried to *kill* Wei Ying," Lan Wangji snapped. "Whether you meant it or not, there would have been no coming back from that." Neither Lan Qiren nor Lan Xichen blamed him for the interruption. After all, Jiang Cheng had made it quite clear that he wished Lan Wangji had died.

(They knew it was said in grief. They knew that. But-)

“I wouldn’t have.”

“Then what *were* you trying to do?”

Jiang Cheng looked away.

“So, what do you want for him?” Wen Ruohan asked, making the crowd’s angry eyes turn back to him.

“...Excuse me?”

“We’ve established that he shouldn’t stay with you. Not only do you put him at a physical risk, but you don’t even seem to *want* him. However, as you seem hesitant now, I’m willing to make a trade for Wei Wuxian. So, name your price.”

Horror rose in Jiang Cheng’s chest.

“You… you — he’s not an animal up for sale!”

“Just a target for you and your mother to project your anger onto?” Wen Chao laughed.

“So, what?” Madam Yu hissed. “Just because he lives at my house, I have a responsibility to be a *mother* to him?”

“You don’t have to treat him like a son, but he *deserves* to be treated like your head disciple.”

“He is!”

“When they were picking lotus seeds, you specifically targeted Wei Wuxian when whipping. No one thought it was unusual, and none of you were all that surprised when it was shown,” Lan Xichen pointed out, glancing at the Jiangs. Before, Lan Wangji, Jin Zixuan, or Nie Huaisang might have stepped in to defend them.

Now, they were silent.

(They knew it was only done in anger. They knew it was from grief. They knew Jiang Cheng would never do that normally… but that was hard to remember.)

Madam Yu huffed, “Is enacting punishment not within my power as the mistress of the house?”

“‘Within your power’ doesn’t mean you *should* do it.”

“The bare minimum would probably include not wrongfully blaming the *massacre* of his friends and family on him! The least you can do is admit that was wrong.”

“Fine! It's not true. Happy?”

“And the other stuff? Do you not regret that at all?”

Normally, Madam Yu would have shouted at them — sect leaders or not — for having the arrogance to try and command her. However, to everyone’s surprise, she instead fell silent.

(The disease known as guilt was spreading through every one of her cells.)

“...A-Niang?”

“...Fine,” she decided. “Fine. I was… wrong.”

For a moment, no one knew what to say.

“...Well, I’m not sure about forcing Wei Wuxian away from the pier,” Lan Qiren explained. “But if he’s willing, the Lan Sect would be happy to watch over him for a while.”

“As would the Nie,” Nie Mingjue added. He hated seemingly agreeing with Wen Ruohan, but his brother loved spending time with Wei Wuxian; if he could help the kid, he would.

Then, smiling politely, Jin Guangshan added, “The Jin would gladly accept him as well.”

Wen Ruohan smirked, “I’m sure we can make it worth your time."

“I would rather you don’t try and *buy my brother* as though he’s a slave,” Jiang Yanli disagreed.

“Only your family gets to treat him like one?”

“We don’t!”

“The bruises seemed to disagree.”

“Shut up!” Jiang Cheng shouted.

“If you have problems with how we’ve treated Wei Wuxian, then speak to us,” Madam Yu ordered. “Or has the Wen Sect really fallen so low as to care about how *children* behave.”

“Won’t be children forever,” Jin Guangshan sang. “Everyone in the future thought Wei Wuxian had caused this. We know that’s not true, and everyone else who heard Madam Yu say it is dead. It seems to me that there’s only one person who could have spread that rumor wide enough for it to be accepted as true.”

Jiang Cheng flinched.

“If you want to wait, that’s fine with me, but don’t forget that ‘he’s just a child’ won’t work for much longer.”

Jiang Cheng wanted to protest — to say the simulation was wrong and that he would never choke his brother or say something like that — but he had seen every step of the way. He knew his other-self couldn’t help but blame Wei Wuxian.

(But surely someone else had spread the rumor. His other-self knew it wasn’t true. It must have been someone else.)

(Just an hour ago, he would never have considered questioning that.)

“We… we’ve already seen how little those rumors can be trusted,” Jiang Yanli objected. “They even said A-Cheng could have been the one to kill A-Xian!”

“You don’t think he did?”

“I don’t.”

Jiang Cheng looked over disbelievingly.

“Even when the adult A-Cheng tried killing ‘Mo Xuanyu,’ A-Xian never thought he was trying to ‘kill him again.’ Yes, A-Cheng acted in grief, but that is no indication of what will happen in the future.”

“...Alright then,” Nie Huaisang decided. “Let’s just get everything out of the way.”

He stood up and began walking towards the Jiangs. Most everyone turned to him in confusion, but Wen Ruohan glanced over speculatively.

(Should he assassinate the boy and frame it on bandits? Poison him? Or was there no point in hiding and he should attack as soon as they got out?)

Nie Mingjue growled, realizing what Wen Ruohan was thinking about.

Ignoring them, Nie Huaisang moved to stand directly in front of Jiang Cheng, making him step back slightly in fear. They maintained eye contact, one apprehensive, and one determined.

"You… don't agree, right?" Nie Huaisang asked, voice wobbling in nervousness.

"...What?"

Clearing his throat, Huaisang spoke clearly, "Do you agree with your other-self about what Wei Wuxian should have done in the Xuanwu cave?"

Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji both immediately glanced over. Although they had seemed judgemental earlier, Huaisang knew they were too terrified of the answer to ask. So, as the person who hadn't even been in the cave, he figured it was his job to ask for them. He waited patiently for Jiang Cheng to answer.

"I… no. No, of course not. I… even my other-self knew the Wens would have come eventually, and there was a *month* between the cave and just now. I… I mean I was…" Jiang Cheng's voice trailed off, growing quieter and quieter. "I was just upset. And-and I know I said he shouldn't have saved you even before this happened, but I was just-I was…"

"Scared, then grieving?" Nie Huaisang suggested, referring first to what the simulation's Jiang Cheng said by Wei Wuxian's hospital bed, and second to what he said while choking Wei Wuxian. "...I guess that's fair."

Both Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji thought it over. Yes, they were seeing versions of themselves that were older, but they were still just seventeen. How much could they really blame him?

'*But he choked Wei Ying,*' Lan Wangji thought.

'*But he thought I was wrong to save Luo Qingyang,*' Jin Zixuan remembered.

But then….

Madam Yu stormed forward to stand directly before Wei Wuxian's bed, brows raised, and shouted, 'To uphold justice at all costs is exactly how he is, isn't it? Fooling around even though he knew it would bring trouble to our sect?'

And more.

'Would Wen Chao have dared to do anything to the two Young Masters of the Gusulan and Lanlingjin sects? And even if he did, that'd just mean they ran out of luck! Since when was it his turn to play hero?'

And more.

'Wei Ying, you wretched boy! I... You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!'

Looking at it like this, was it really *Jiang Cheng's* fault he felt that way? How much could they blame a teenager for lashing out in pain?

(But why did it have to be Wei Ying who suffered for that?)

Then again, *this* Jiang Cheng hadn't done anything to the real Wei Wuxian. Could they really hold a grudge over this?

As the silence stretched on, Jiang Cheng became more and more uncomfortable. After looking back at his sister for help, she faltered slightly, then motioned to her fiancee.

She wanted him to act.

"I…" Jiang Cheng turned to Jin Zixuan, shaking in embarrassment, and said "If-if you had died to the Wens… Jin Ling would never have been born. And-and aside from that, you… you did the right thing. I mean… I'm sorry."

The last word was a barely-audible squeak, but Jin Zixuan understood nonetheless. He shrugged elegantly, then nodded once in forgiveness. It hadn't technically been Jiang Cheng who said it, but they both felt the apology and forgiveness were needed. Then, the harder one.

Right as Jiang Cheng looked towards Lan Wangji, he saw an icy storm approaching and jumped back. Lan Wangji wanted to speak first, it seemed.

After looking down at Jiang Cheng for several long, agonizing seconds, Wangji spoke.

"*Never* do that to Wei Ying."

A bright flush crept onto Jiang Cheng's cheeks, but he forced himself to nod and answer, "I-I won't. I promise. I… I'll never hurt him like that. If… If I do then you can… beat me down, I guess."

"I will," Lan Wangji promised.

Unlike the boys, Madam Jin and Madam Yu stood divided. What was said would not be forgiven so easily.

"Nothing to add?" Madam Jin coldly asked.

"You say that as though I've done something unforgivable," Madam Yu turned to Wen Ruohan. "I'll admit I was wrong, but what I did was nothing compared to burning down his *home*."

"I think it's pretty clear that, if Wang Lingjiao hadn't mentioned the Supervisory Office, Wei Wuxian would be down one limb," Wen Ruohan reminded, delighted by the way everyone flinched back at the image.

"...I know," Madam Yu admitted. "I'm not excusing that. I know he didn't deserve it. I…"

She trailed off, not know what else to say.

The simulation started again.

“Wei-gongzi,” the ghost general greeted. “I think there’s something you should look at.”

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji looked at each other, then the former shrugged and stood up to follow Wen Ning. Lan Wangji set down several documents he was sorting through, then joined the two.

(Hanguang-jun really hated having the position of Chief Cultivator. When he and Wei Wuxian had returned from their honeymoon, the cultivation world had been in pandemonium. No one knew who to trust, and everyone was accusing each other of helping Jin Guangyao out behind closed doors. Evidence for that had mysteriously popped up everywhere, and it seemed like Jin Guangyao and Jin Guangshan had sunk their teeth into *every* sect at some point or another.

So the Sect Leaders had begged Lan Wangji to take the position. He was the only one they all felt certain would not follow in the three previous Chief Cultivators’ footsteps.

That didn’t mean he *liked* it.)

Just now, he and Wei Wuxian had in fact been discussing possible candidates who could take over Lan Wangji’s position. He would be the first Chief Cultivator in the past century to not die with the role. Wei Wuxian had called him an inspiration. And more.

(“Chief cultivator for only a few months? You know, it’s supposed to be a position held until death. Should I be worried about our ‘till death do us part vows?’”

“*Never,*” Wangji growled, pulling the laughing Wei Wuxian close.)

Lan Wangji just wanted to get back to night hunting with his husband.

If that took helping Nie Huaisang move his reputation away from the “Headshaker,” then he would gladly do so.

He and Wei Wuxian come to a stop before a glowing red orb (the “Píngxíng Gateway” Wei Wuxian had decided, to the juniors’ resounding applause). Now, it was glowing in a strange blackish-red color Lan Wangji has never seen it have before.

“Is it alright?” he asked.

“I think so,” Wei Wuxian sang, slipping closer to inspect it. “It seems like the message-storage system works. Little-me must have sent something back while no one was around.”

Smiling fondly, he played the message. An illusionary projection of the younger Wei Wuxian — happy, innocent, unburdened — appeared above the Píngxíng Gateway.

“Hello!” the young Wei Wuxian called out, waving frantically. “I’m almost done with putting together the privacy-th — er, I mean, the Concealment Zone add-on. Thank you for your help!”

As he said that, there was an *explosion* of lotus petals from behind him.

Wen Ning jumped back in surprise.

“We decided to hold a party to celebrate almost being done, and we thought we’d include you in it! Can't send anything physical over, so A-Yue, one of my helpers, suggested this! Thanks for the help!” he said, as a young Wen Ning moved closer to pick some of the petals out of the young Wei Wuxian’s hair.

The adult Wei Wuxian squealed, “Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, look! It’s a baby Wen Ning!”

“Young Master Wei,” Wen Ning protested.

“Look how adorable he is!” Wei Wuxian continued.

“Mn. The little Wei Ying is cuter.”

“Lan Zhan, how dare you? That is factually incorrect!”

“Oh, and one last thing!” the younger Wei Wuxian declared. “You mentioned you thought it would be easier if someone from the Wen Qing's branch of the Wen Clan was there. Well, as you can see, I already have one!”

He gestured dramatically to the baby Wen Ning, who was continuing to pick flower petals out of his hair.

“H-hello,” the baby Wen Ning squeaked.

Adult Wei Wuxian began shaking the Ghost General, gleefully exclaiming, “Wen Ning! Wen Ning! Look, look! You’re so cute!”

“T-thank you, Wei-gongzi.”

Wei Wuxian was pleased; the Concealment Zone was based off The Ghost General's battle-mode, so no one could possibly manipulate it better than the baby Wen Ning could!

The younger Wei Wuxian continued, “Wen Xu gave us the go-ahead, so Wen Ning has full clearance to help me with this.”

“Hm?” Lan Wangji frowned. “Why would Wen Xu be the one to give clearance?”

“Though I guess that shouldn’t be a surprise,” Wei Wuxian laughed. “I mean, considering how his Excellency, *Sect Leader Wen* is inside the simulation, he’s probably just as eager as we are to finish this.”

The three adults *froze*.

“Anyways, bye!” young Wei Wuxian declared, and the message ended.

The three remained frozen.

Then, slowly, Wei Wuxian turned to look at Lan Wangji.

“...What did he just say?”

Chapter End Notes

Hi, everyone! Thank you for all your comments. I think I’ve made a decision! Concealment Zone = Privacy-thing. Píngxíng (parallel) Gateway = Time Travel Talisman (because it’s technically an orb and it makes a path to a parallel dimension and the pinyin of parallel sounds really cool). The “red orb” is technically the same thing, so that name will apply to both. Hope you like it!
:)

Spoiler: It Gets Worse

Chapter Notes

Beta read by the lovely tinitin!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Ghost General, Hanguang-jun, and the Yiling Patriarch all stood, frozen in shock.

“What did he just say?” Wei Wuxian repeated, desperately hoping that one of the other two would reveal he had merely misheard. In Lan Wangji’s unusually expressive eyes, Wei Wuxian could see his own fear reflected back at him.

“I…” Wen Ning’s unblinking gaze seemed to flutter in disbelief. “I think he said… ‘Sect Leader Wen.’”

After a moment, Lan Wangji nodded, “The younger version of you said that ‘Sect Leader Wen’ is inside the simulation… getting information on the Sunshot Campaign.”

Holding one hand up in a stopping motion, Wei Wuxian took a few deep breaths as he tried to process that. Then, he spun on his heel, and left the room without another word.

“Eh? Wei-gongzi?” Wen Ning asked as both he and Lan Wangji hurried to follow behind him. “Wei-gongzi, where are we going? Are you… are you going to see Zewu-jun?”

“I wish,” Wei Wuxian huffed, speeding towards the library where he knew four mischievous radishes were working on the punishment he had given them (*his* punishment — what was the world coming to?). Rounding a corner, he stepped inside the library and laid eyes on his prey.

The first to notice them was Lan Jingyi. In addition to the fanboy-ish adoration he felt every time he laid eyes on Hanguang-jun, he felt a strange sense of deja vu. Right now, Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and Wen Ning were approaching.

Hadn’t this happened just a few days ago, but with Sect Leader Jiang instead of The Ghost General?

“This doesn’t bode well,” he whispered to Sizhui, getting a reproachful flick in response.

Although their Senior Wei smiled slightly at the interaction, his lips were pursed together nervously.

“So,” he began abruptly, making Zizhen jump. “Maybe you could go over who, exactly, you sent our information to. You said you had the Píngxíng Gateway transmit everything back to

‘a young Hanguang-jun, a young Zewu-jun, a young Sect Leader Nie, a young Sect Leader Jiang, etcetera,’ right?”

Lan Sizhui nodded, “That’s exactly what we said.”

“What you said to me,” Wei Wuxian confirmed. “What intentions did you use to instruct the Píngxíng Gateway?”

Several long seconds of silence passed as the boys all looked at each other, waiting for one of the others to respond. Wei Wuxian impatiently tapped his fingernail against the table, making the boys even more nervous.

Sighing once, Lan Wangji ordered, “Sizhui, explain.”

“U-uh, well, I guess our original plan was to send it to you three, Jin Ling’s parents, Sect Leader Jiang’s parents, Sect Leader Jiang, Zewu-jun, Lan Qiren-xiansheng, Sect Leader Nie, and the former Sect Leader Nie. I suppose we just focused the Píngxíng Gateway on who people in that time considered the main branches of the Great Clans.”

“I see… and did it occur to you that, at the time you sent it to, there were *five* Great Sects?”

The quartet blinked in confusion for a moment.

Then went as pale as ghosts.

“I… that…”

“Um, but,” Jin Ling shook his head. “Wait, you mean the Wen Sect, right? I… we-of course we wouldn’t send it to them. We’re not *stupid!*”

Lan Wangji looked like he wanted to contest that.

“I… we didn’t,” Lan Jingyi declared.

“...Right?” Zizhen asked, uncertain.

Jingyi and Jin Ling both glared at him, but his eyes were focused on the pensive Wei Wuxian.

After a pause, Wei Wuxian decided, “I’m not entirely sure. We have some evidence that indicates you might have, but I’m still not sure how much to trust it.”

Wen Ning frowned, “But Wei-gongzi-”

“I’ve messed up plenty already,” Wei Wuxian interrupted, shaking his head at Wen Ning. “I shouldn’t have let this be used to begin with. The least I can do is complete a thorough investigation before doing anything else.”

“How are you going to do that?” Lan Wangji asked, frowning at the thought of his soulmate adding *more* work to his already packed schedule. Wei Wuxian just shrugged.

“The end goal with this device was to create simple communication between dimensions. Being able to check in on the people stuck inside the memory-packages was part of it. I’ve got most of that feature done already. It won’t be all that much extra work to speed up the completion time.”

Both Wen Ning and Lan Wangji looked absurdly sceptical.

“...I think,” Wei Wuxian added.

The scepticism turned into annoyed glares. In response, Wei Wuxian just gave a casual shrug, regaining his usual smile and standing up.

“So, I feel a sudden need to ask if you actually *know* what information you sent over. You said you explained the Sunshot Campaign to them? In how much detail? Who did you focus on?”

More silence.

“...Zizhen, answer,” Hanguang-jun instructed.

“Uh, well, I mean… we understand what we sent over… theoretically?”

“What does that mean?”

“W-well we used inquiry to talk to the spirits putting the memory-package together, and they wanted us to narrate some things. So we… know it covers the Xuanwu cave? And Jin Guangyao, and-”

“So you just narrated over lessons?”

“We narrated over their memories of the events!” Lan Jingyi declared. “Either there would be a spirit who had been there, or, like in the Cloud Recesses, there was a trace of spiritual energy we could get an impression off. The spirits wanted to include one or two scenes which took place in the Jingshi, for example. No spirits or other people were there, but there was a spiritual imprint we could use.”

“And who taught you how to do that?” Wei Wuxian asked. Even *he* had only realized the existence of spiritual imprints a few months ago. Who on earth could have taught the juniors about it?

The boys paused and looked at each other.

“...Senior Wei, *you* taught us,” Sizhui explained. “You were… pretty tired that time too. You and Hanguang-jun had just finished planning the seating arrangement for your wedding, and you were a little drained so you… might have rambled a bit about what you were working on.”

“I… did?” Wei Wuxian asked, staring blankly. Everyone else sighed, despairing at Wei Wuxian’s selective memory.

Standing up, Jin Ling nodded and declared, “W-well, your own carelessness was the cause, so I don’t think you can blame us all that much for what happened!”

A squeak resounded as Wei Wuxian pinched Jin Ling’s ear.

“Hey! Hey! Stop!”

The other three attempted a tactical retreat. However, a moment later, Wei Wuxian had gotten hold of Zizhen’s ear as well, and Lan Wangji and Wen Ning were keeping Jingyi and Sizhui still, respectively.

“Ow! What’s this for!”

“A reminder that you couldn’t have messed up more!”

With one final tug, Wei Wuxian finally let go.

Jin Ling scampered away, only to be caught by Wen Ning when he tried to escape.

Lan Jingyi whimpered, “Are we going to get a more serious punishment now?”

The three adults made eye contact. Due to their personal experiences — Lan Wangji with the discipline whip, Wen Ning at the Jin’s camp, and Wei Wuxian with Madam Yu — none of them enjoyed assigning corporal punishments. Besides, in a case like this, where the children couldn't see the consequences of their actions, it wouldn't change much.

Regardless of how many whips they were given, the juniors wouldn't *register* how dangerous their actions were.

“No,” Wei Wuxian decided. “Instead, you’re going to help me figure out whether the Wens are actually there. By doing that, maybe you’ll start to understand *why* I don’t want you to mess with my inventions.”

“Oh,” Zizhen blinked. “That actually sounds kinda fun-”

“And an additional twenty five copies to what you’ve already been assigned,” Lan Wangji added.

“...What?"

“Hey-”

“You-”

“Senior Wei, have *mercy!*” Lan Jingyi cried out, hoping an appeal to their punisher's husband would result in a lighter sentence. “Weren’t you constantly punished by Hanguang-jun back when you were a student here? How can you be so cruel? My hand is starting to fall off!”

Pitying his friends, Sizhui spoke up, “Technically, there’s no rule against sending information to the past and starting a parallel universe. I… that’s because your invention is new, but if it’s

not on the wall of rules, I don't think we've technically broken any."

"Do not act impulsively," Lan Wangji recited. "Be careful with your words. Be of one mind. Be strict with yourself. Do not cause damage. Steer away from bad men. Do not be over-the-top. Speak meagerly, for too many words only bring harm. Do not-"

"Lan Zhan, I think they get it," Wei Wuxian laughed.

"Senior Wei breaks some of those every day!" Jin Ling protested.

When Lan Wangji didn't even blink, Jin Ling quickly backed down.

Sizhui turned hopeful eyes on his uncle, but Wen Ning simply shook his head, and Sizhui resigned himself to his fate. He hadn't minded too much, but the others were *devastated*.

Ignoring the way the other three turned boneless and tried sinking into the floor, Sizhui picked up his brush, and returned to his lines.

In the dim light of a cloudy day, a gust of wind swept through a grassy clearing.

"When the daylight began to arrive, Sect Leader Jiang-"

"Call him 'Jiang Wanyin,'" Sizhui reminded, cutting Jingyi off. "He's not Sect Leader yet."

"But isn't this after the Lotus Pier Massacre?"

The Jiangs flinched at the casual description.

"I'm not," Jiang Cheng mumbled, exhausted after his earlier crying. "Not sect leader."

All his life, he had trained to be a great Sect Leader.

Now, his chance was here, and there was nothing he wanted less.

Sizhui and Jingyi hadn't seemed to come to an agreement, so Jin Ling shouted, "Whatever! When daylight began to arrive, my jiujiu had become numb!"

"Whatever that means," Jingyi mumbled, then cleared his throat. "Throughout the night, he had managed to sleep a couple of times. This was partly due to passing out after exhausting himself… crying?"

"...My Jiujiu doesn't cry."

"Don't look at me! That's what the spirits told us to say!"

When Wei Wuxian had called at the end of the last segment, there had been a divide in understanding. Wei Wuxian didn't have any idea what Madam Yu, Sect Leader Jiang, and

even Jiang Cheng were willing to do to him, so having a conversation was more than a little awkward.

With these *children* it went even further. At least Wei Wuxian understood war, violence, and sacrifice. These kids seemed *unbelievably* sheltered.

'*But that's what we're fighting for, isn't it?*' Xichen wondered.

Once again, Sizhui continued as his friends began to bicker, "The second reason was that he had a faint hope that everything had just been a nightmare. He hoped he would be able to wake up after resting for a while and find himself in his room in Lotus Pier. His father would be wiping his sword in the main hall. His mother would be angry again and complaining, scolding Wei Wuxian for winking in a funny way. His sister would be in the kitchen, thinking about what she could make today. His shidi would be refusing to do their morning lessons properly and jumping around."

"They'll never jump around again," Jin Zixuan whispered, then winced when his words made Jiang Yanli flinch. He wanted to apologize, but he had a feeling that would just make everything worse. After all, they both knew what he'd said was true.

How could everything the Jiangs had be lost in a single night?

"Instead, Jiang Wanyin woke up in a bush full of weeds with his head almost bursting apart. He was still curled up on the barren hill."

Madam Yu breathed out sharply through her nose in frustration.

"The first to move was Wei Wuxian."

"Of course it was," Jiang Cheng couldn't help but bitterly whisper. Although the words did make Jiang Yanli smile slightly, she was also worried; if their narrators felt they needed to specify this, then what was the simulation's Jiang Cheng doing?

Hands on his legs, the simulated Wei Wuxian managed to push himself up and suggested, "Let's go."

There was no response. In fact, Jiang Cheng hadn't moved at all, simply lying there and observing the heavy clouds floating above. Wei Wuxian frowned.

"Let's go," he repeated, pulling at his shidi.

While Jiang Cheng flushed at his other-self's behavior, no one could blame him. After what they had just seen, hopelessness wasn't a surprise. In fact, the strange reaction was probably *Wei Wuxian's*. Considering how much closer he seemed to all the JIang shidi, Wei Wuxian had arguably lost *more*. And yet here he was, working on finding a solution and keeping everyone alive — exactly what the Jiangs ordered him to do.

They had created a perfect guard dog, hadn't they?

"...Go where?" Jiang Cheng finally asked. His throat was dry and cracking.

“Just do as Wei Wuxian says,” Jiang Cheng begged his other-self, sighing slightly.

“We’ll go to the MeishanYu Sect. To find Shijie.”

“Should have just done that from the beginning!” Madam Yu hissed.

After a few moments of thought, Jiang Cheng got up on his own. The pair began walking to Meishan.

“Go Jiang-xiong. Go Wei-xiong,” Huaisang cheered. “Go Jiang-xiong. Go Wei-xiong. Go Jiang-xiong. Go-”

“Huaisang, stop,” Nie Mingjue sighed. His brother’s attempt to encourage and lift the dreary atmosphere was appreciated, but not especially desired right at that time.

In a town some distance from Yunmeng, the civilians talked.

“The Jiang Sect of Yunmeng? Isn’t it the largest sect in Jingchu?”

“Yes,” another person admitted, also looking at a set of posters. “But it can’t fight against the sun. Check the notice.”

Wei Wuxian passed behind them, wearing a straw hat which covered most of his face. He glanced over at the posters, then gasped.

“The late Jiang Clan of Yunmeng,” someone read.

Madam Yu growled. The head disciple and heir of the Jiang sect should not need to walk through their own territory like fugitives for crimes they didn’t commit.

And yet, the wall was lined with three accurately-drawn posters of Jiang Yanli, Jiang Cheng, and Wei Wuxian.

Madam Jin scoffed at the Wens, disgusted by their actions.

“In the past, they enjoyed playing around here. But now…”

“Things change. Life is unpredictable.”

Wei Wuxian tilted his hat down, then continued to walk.

Very true; even aside from all this (which they arguably should have seen coming), who could have predicted demonic cultivation? It seemed that in desperate situations, Wei Wuxian would truly attempt the impossible.

Still, Lan Qiren couldn’t excuse it. Wei Wuxian was heroic and righteous and talented and good, but, even given the dire circumstances, Lan Qiren couldn’t accept demonic cultivation. If Wei Wuxian was capable of fighting back with his spiritual cultivation, then him falling to demonic cultivation was inexcusable.

Though Lan Qiren could at least understand *why* the boy thought it was a good idea.

As he continued to travel through town, the people from earlier continued talking.

“I heard the trouble was caused by the senior disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Clan.”

Wei Wuxian paused again.

“Oh, don’t you *dare* blame him!” Jin Zixuan shouted.

“They should not speak while they don’t understand,” Lan Wangji frowned.

“What Clan do you think will be targeted next?”

“...Hard to tell.”

When Wei Wuxian looked up again, he flinched back. Two Wen soldiers were patrolling the town in search of them.

Jiang Yanli felt her heart jump at the sight.

“So we’ll just let the Qishan Wen Clan do whatever they want?”

“Even the Yunmeng Jiang sect was destroyed. Large clans have kept silent out of fear. What can insignificant people like us do about it? We just need to worry about taking care of ourselves,” the man concluded.

Nie Mingjue cursed.

“But isn’t *that* the mindset that caused all of this to begin with?” Nie Huaisang sighed.

“Yes,” Wen Ruohan agreed with a smirk. “You never seem to learn from your mistakes.”

People on all sides glared at him, but the Chief Cultivator remained unphased.

Once the Wen soldiers were out of sight again, Wei Wuxian lifted his head enough to see and continued on his way. He ventured to a lower-class part of town, far from the market.

Behind overgrown, cracked walls, Jiang Cheng was gazing blankly at Zidian, twisting it on his finger. It was a habit his mother and his adult-self had whenever they were enraged.

To the current Jiang Cheng, it was the only remnant he had of his parents.

Jiang Fengmian moved closer, wishing he could provide comfort to the simulated version of his son. It was pointless, but Jiang Cheng appreciated the attempt.

Wei Wuxian kneeled down before Jiang Cheng.

“How are you?” he asked. “Still dizzy?”

After walking for a while, they had both started becoming faint from the lack of food. Seeing how tired and unwilling to move Jiang Cheng had been, Wei Wuxian had hidden him and moved out on his own.

Jiang Cheng still didn't respond.

Flushing again, Jiang Cheng wished he could make his other-self stop being such a burden to Wei Wuxian. He understood why — of course he did, it was *him* — but he couldn't help feeling frustrated.

Of course they weren't told to protect each other. He couldn't even protect himself!

"I've done some research," Wei Wuxian explained. "It'll take a few days to get to Meishan. We just need to watch out for Wen scouts along the way. Soon, we'll meet up with Shijie!"

Jiang Cheng remained unresponsive.

"W-we will…" he tried, then set a hand on Jiang Cheng's shoulder and continued. "We'll go back to Lotus Cove one day, but not now, okay? Uncle Jiang and Yu-furen did everything they could to save your life. If you go back there, their efforts would be in vain."

Jiang Cheng still didn't respond.

Finally, Wei Wuxian stood up and ordered, "Sit here. I have some money in my pockets; I'll go get you some food."

He then paused, uncertain about leaving JIang Cheng alone.

"...Sorry," Jiang Cheng whispered, watching his brother leave. Wei Wuxian was only five days older — October 31st to November 5th — so they almost felt like twins. In fact, Jiang Cheng often felt like *he* was the older one when Wei Wuxian pulled off some of his more insane schemes.

Looking at them now, Wei Wuxian truly seemed to be his older brother.

Jiang Cheng quickly sucked in a deep breath, refusing to let any more tears fall.

"...Stay still," Wei Wuxian continued after a moment. "Don't do anything rash."

The level of care Wei Wuxian was giving Jiang Cheng left him flushed in both embarrassment and a splash of affection. Even in the worst circumstances possible, Wei Wuxian was prioritizing him. As long as he could remember, he had always been jealous of how everyone loved Wei Wuxian more than they loved him.

Now, he was wondering if it was actually the other way around.

After hesitating for a few more seconds, Wei Wuxian forced himself to leave. However, rather than following him, the simulation remained situated on the sitting form of Jiang

Cheng. He glanced up, watching Wei Wuxian's retreating figure with dead eyes.

Above, rain began to pour.

Both Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian moved closer to the simulated figure of their broken son, concern radiating off them. The only source of hope they had was the glimpse at the future — clearly, Jiang Cheng would recover from this. No matter how bad it seemed, Jiang Cheng would survive.

(And Wei Wuxian wouldn't.)

Under Jiang Cheng's solemn gaze, Wei Wuxian pulled his hat low and went to buy him several buns. He spoke softly to the vendor, trying to attract as little attention as possible. Accordingly, none of the civilians around him seemed to notice anything odd, despite all having seen Wei Wuxian before. It was going well.

Then, Jiang Cheng turned, and his gaze focused on a group of Wens.

Lan Wangji immediately stood up, heart pounding. Nearly everyone else sucked in gasps of horror, but Jiang Cheng didn't notice any of them. Instead, all he could see were the white figures slowly approaching the still-oblivious Wei Wuxian.

Why? Why wasn't Wei Wuxian moving? Had he not seen them? Why was he there at all?

(To buy *Jiang Cheng* food.)

And he wasn't noticing why wasn't he noticing why wasn't he moving — Wei Wuxian, *run!*.

But the simulated Wei Wuxian continued to buy Jiang Cheng's food, not noticing the threat approaching him. Another step, and the Wens were closer. Another step, and they continued to approach.

It would be fine, wouldn't it? Jiang Cheng knew Wei Wuxian's talent better than anyone. A handful of ordinary Wen disciples were no match for Yunmeng's head disciple.

(But *his mom* had whipped Wei Wuxian, and there was no telling what would happen now.)

Another step, and they got closer.

Even with the injuries from Madam Yu, Wei Wuxian had managed to use a borrowed sword to tear through the Wen disciples during the invasion just the day before.

(But then *he* had choked Wei Wuxian, punching him and slamming his injured back to the ground.)

Another step.

"Do something!" Jiang Cheng shouted at his other-self, stress boiling over. "Don't just sit there! You see them, do-"

“A-Cheng!” Madam Yu screamed back. “Why are you asking to put yourself at risk-”

But then, as if reading the real Jiang Cheng’s thoughts, the formerly immobile Jiang Cheng forced himself to stand up. His eyes were glued onto the approaching Wens.

Still far enough away that Wei Wuxian hadn’t noticed them, but close enough to possibly see him first.

“No, no,” Jiang Fengmian whispered. “A-Cheng, don’t-”

Jiang Fengmian didn’t know what he was trying to say. Don’t put yourself at risk? Don’t do anything stupid? Don’t run out to tell Wei Wuxian they’re coming, they’ll notice you if you do?

Whatever it was, Jiang Cheng’s actual decision was so, so much worse.

With shaky legs and hate-filled eyes, Jiang Cheng ran out and passed the Wen disciples. Wei Wuxian didn’t notice him leave the alley.

The Wens did.

“A-Cheng!” Madam Yu shouted.

“That’s a Yunmeng uniform!” one of them declared.

A second later, the entire squadron was chasing after.

Lan Wangji turned, staring at Jiang Cheng with a shocked expression.

The Jiang parents looked faint.

As the heir of Yunmeng, Jiang Cheng’s cultivation was higher than theirs was. Unfortunately, he was still fatigued and dizzy from lack of food and grief. Corners were especially hard for his food-deprived mind, so every time he slipped around one, the Wens began to close in. The distance between them got shorter, and shorter, and shorter, and shorter, and then he *stumbled* and-

Everything froze.

They were getting another break.

Heavy breaths shook the room as the Jiangs tried to calm down from the adrenaline rush they had just experienced. It was fine, they reminded themselves; they had seen the future. They *knew* Jiang Cheng would come out of everything this showed strong and healthy and rich and powerful.

But he had just-

“Are you *trying* to die?!” Madam Yu asked again.

“A-Niang, I-I know that was-”

“Stupid? Yes, it was! I don’t know what Wei Wuxian was thinking in leaving you alone!”

“I-” Jiang Cheng flushed, “A-Niang, I-I don’t need a *caretaker*.”

“If this is what you do the minute you’re left alone, then clearly you do,” Madam Yu growled, terror at her son’s fate overcoming the gratitude she had begun to feel for Wei Wuxian. “This is all because you came back to look for our bodies instead of just going to Meishan like you were supposed to. How could Wei Wuxian let this — that irresponsible, arrogant, *brat*-”

“Yu-furen,” Lan Xichen spoke up. “I’m sure your son managed to escape them. He was clearly fine in the future, so surely the Wens weren’t able to capture him.”

“And that makes Wei Wuxian’s *uselessness* acceptable?”

“*San-niang,*” Jiang Fengmian spoke sternly. “Yes, I don’t think A-Xian made the right decision, but he and A-Cheng, *both* needed food.”

“A-Cheng just lost everything, he shouldn’t have been left alone!”

Wen Chao cackled, “Oh, so Wei Wuxian can sacrifice himself for Jiang Cheng as many times as possible, but Jiang Cheng-”

“A-Cheng could have *died!*” Madam Yu screamed. “Wei Wuxian was supposed to prevent this!”

“Wei Wuxian is *five days* older than me!” Jiang Cheng snapped, not backing off even when Madam Yu glared. “Why did you ask him to protect me?”

“He’s a servant; it’s his *job* to protect his master.”

“But he’s also our brother,” Jiang Yanli protested.

Scoffing, Nie Mingjue shook his head and said, “He has to be one or the other — he can’t be both.”

Those words made Wen Ruohan chuckle, “It’s the lie every favored servant is told, isn’t it? ‘You’re like a member of the family.’ At least I actually adopted Wen Zhuliu into the clan.”

“That isn’t what happened,” Jiang Fengmian objected.

“Isn’t it?”

“Can you really say that after watching Jiang Wanyin risk his life to protect Wei Wuxian?” Lan Qiren asked.

“The boy already wanted to die,” Jin Guangshan responded. “The second he saw an opportunity to risk his life without calling it suicide, he took it.”

The Jiangs tensed at the accusation.

“That… wasn’t what I was doing,” Jiang Cheng protested.

“I believe you, A-Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian said softly. “Just… remember: even if Lotus Pier is gone, your *life* is still far more important than that. *Nothing* is worth more than that.”

“I know,” Jiang Cheng responded. “And the other-me knows that too. He’s just — I’m just… not thinking clearly. I still have my core, we know I’ll recover. And Yunmeng will recover.”

“No thanks to Wei Wuxian.”

“*San-niang!*”

“Don’t shout at me, Fengmian! I wasn’t the only one; you *also* told Wei Wuxian to protect A-Cheng! How can you pretend that we’re different?”

Jiang Fengmian paused, silenced by those words. No matter how he allowed Wei Wuxian to eat with them at the table, or how he allowed him to go to the Cloud Recesses, both he and Wei Wuxian had always known Jiang Fengmian would value his *real* family first.

That had always been something he had tried to *convince* the rest of his family of. Now, it was an accusation against him.

Between her parents, Jiang Yanli clenched her fists. Over the course of the simulation, many things had changed. Her father had explained himself; her parents were starting to get along; her mother seemed like she was finally beginning to accept Wei Wuxian as a person, even if not a member of the family.

And yet, it seemed like this one scene had undone all of that.

“Do you disagree?” Madam Yu continued, glaring holes into Jiang Fengmian.

“...I do.”

Instead of the now conflicted Jiang Fengmian, it had been *Jiang Yanli* who responded.

“...A-Li?”

Jiang Yanli stepped back slightly in nervousness, but Jin Zixuan made eye contact her. He nodded once in agreement, then forced himself to smile reassuringly.

Revitalized, Jiang Yanli looked back at her mother and explained “We know A-Cheng doesn’t suffer any life-changing injuries from this. With or without that knowledge, I don’t think A-Xian necessarily made a terrible choice.”

Madam Yu didn’t even try to hold in her scoff. She had slowly been growing more and more fond of Wei Wuxian, but now the boy’s *carelessness* meant *her son* was being hunted down.

Meanwhile, Jin Zixuan, Nie Huaisang, and Lan Wangji glared at her, watching Jiang Cheng out of the corners of their eyes. If Jiang Cheng disagreed with his mother, they would let him speak; if he didn't, they would respond instead.

"I…" Jiang Yanli sucked in a deep breath, then continued. "If you're going to blame anyone for this, blame the Wens! It's not A-Xian's fault!"

Wen Ruohan just titled his head in acceptance, an amused smile on his face.

The sight infuriated Madam Yu, but she refused to back down and continued, "He still shouldn't have left. He's always like this; running around chasing after girls and buying alcohol-"

But he was getting *me* food!" Jiang Cheng shouted, clenching his fists and looking directly into his mother's eyes. "He wasn't doing any of those things. He was looking after me when I collapsed and couldn't do anything. You and A-Die were… you were… *gone* and he still came and prioritized me and protected me and there isn't even a Pier for him to be loyal to he was just… he was just doing that… it was because…."

'*Because he loves us.*'

Jiang Cheng couldn't bring himself to say it. Only the most loyal servants would continue serving dutifully after everything was destroyed ~~and wrongly blamed on them~~, but Wei Wuxian was far more than a servant.

He was a brother.

(Could Jiang Cheng really say that after the last segment?)

However, this time, the other heirs didn't hesitate to help.

"It seems like you two really care for each other," Nie Huaisang pointed out with a cheery grin.

(Wen Ruohan glanced over, watching Nie Huaisang with a cold smile.)

Reassured by Nie Huaisang's observation, Jiang Yanli looked at her mother and nodded once.

"I… I think of A-Xian as my brother, and A-Cheng does too."

Madam Yu flinched.

Subconsciously, everyone had braced themselves for the ensuing explosion. It was one thing for Madam Yu to admit that Wei Wuxian wasn't the scum of the earth, it was another for her to hear this.

However, instead of falling into an unstoppable rage, Madam Yu closed her eyes and breathed out a soft, reluctant "...I know."

She might not owe it to Wei Wuxian to be a mother, but that didn't mean she had to separate her kids from him either. After everything she had seen, how could she?

Behind her, Jiang Fengmian was struck silent. His whole life, *he* had been the one working to get the rest of his family to accept Wei Wuxian. After continuously proving unsuccessful with Madam Yu, he had changed his behavior to just lessening the struggle Wei Wuxian went through.

But now, faced with his children's declarations, he couldn't help but wonder if he had done something wrong. He wanted to protect his children — of course he did, but-

Could he have done more for Wei Wuxian?

(Watching them, Madam Jin looked down. She had spent years driving off all the mistresses and bastard children her husband had. It was different — Wei Wuxian *wasn't* Jiang Fengmian's — but some whispering voice in the back of Madam Jin's brain wondered if she should have been different too.)

(Her husband was inexcusable.)

(But could she blame the kids for that?)

Unaware of the conflicting thoughts running through the adults, Jiang Cheng took a deep breath and declared, "Wei Wuxian is my best friend. I shouldn't have tried to choke him — I-I know that. But if anyone tries to take him away I'll-I'll break their legs! Right now, we have proof that Wei Wuxian and I really… we care about each other."

Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, and Lan Qiren all fell silent at that, thinking it over.

On the other hand, Jin Guangshan smirked.

"How long will that last, though?"

'Break his legs?' Jiang Cheng asked. 'Haven't I told you? When dealing with those without honor, just kill them and feed them to your dog.'

"That…" Jiang Cheng cut off. "I-I'm sure that was just a misunderstanding. I-my other-self didn't really mean — he *couldn't have* and-"

"I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding," Jiang Yanli agreed, clenching her fists. "A-Cheng and A-Xian would never hurt each other. A-Xian, he… If something changed him enough to make him do that, then A-Cheng is probably just worried someone else will do demonic cultivation and be corrupted just as much."

"So he kills all demonic cultivators, even after they risk themselves to save Jin Ling?" Jin Guangshan asked.

"I… I... most of the things I say aren't *literal*," Jiang Cheng defended. "I… probably meant something else."

“Yeah… probably,” Jiang Yanli agreed, nodding unsurely.

Right now, it was undeniable that Jiang Cheng had loved Wei Wuxian. Whether that remained true or not would be the deciding factor.

Several minutes later, the simulation began again.

Thunder rumbled, and more rain began to fall. It splashed heavily into the rushing streams of the Gusu mountains, and flowed elegantly as shimmering waterfalls off the cliffs.

Within the Cloud Recesses’ Ancestral Shrine, a single candle was tended to by a graceful hand.

“Wangji,” a Lan elder spoke, causing the boy to look away from the candle and make eye contact.

“Great Uncle,” Wangji saluted, bowing respectfully.

Lan Qiren prayed that whatever news was being brought would be good.

(Most of the people present were nearly collapsing under the collective dread.)

The man spoke calmly, “I heard that you’ve sent disciples to Yunmeng and Meishan to look for Sect Leader Jiangs’ daughter, son, and head disciple.”

“Huh?”

“I have,” Wangji confirmed.

“You…” Jiang Cheng trailed off, looking at the seemingly impassive Lan Wangji in surprise.

“Aw, Wangji-xiong, you do care!” Nie Huaisang sang out in an attempt to dispel the awkwardness.

“Thank you,” Jiang Yanli whispered, bowing in gratitude.

“Wangji,” the elder’s tone switched to stern chastisement. “This time the Qishan Wen Clan used a heavy hand and destroyed the Yunmeng Jiang Clan in a single night. They even mobilized to hunt down and kill those three survivors. Do you know why?”

“I do,” Wangji nodded once.

“Then why do you have to risk getting yourself into trouble by helping the Jiang Clan?”

‘I don’t care if Lan Wangji or Jin Zixuan dies! Just let them die! What’s their deaths got to do with us? With our sect? Why did this have to happen?’ the simulated Jiang Cheng shouted, choking Wei Wuxian.

“The Qishan Wen Clan is doing everything they can to deter us from such an action, trying to prove that it’s the unchallenged leader of all clans. Those who obey will live; those who oppose will die.”

Once again, Lan Xichen couldn’t help but remember the way Wei Wuxian had seen the war as inevitable as far back as the abyss. If this was the way the Lan Clan continued to act, then how could they call themselves ‘righteous?’

“Now, all clans know better than to confront them,” the elder reminded. “Our Lan Clan has been severely damaged. It would be smarter to bide our time and focus on building up strength.”

“Great Uncle,” Lan Wangji responded. “The clans are closely related. The others will be in danger if one of them falls. At times like this, we should contend with the Wen Clan together.”

Jiang Cheng looked away from Lan Wangji, unable to make eye contact. Despite that, some part of him couldn’t help laughing snidely.

‘*Look at that*,’ his mind sang. ‘*He and Wei Wuxian are perfect for each other! No wonder everyone keeps talking about taking Wei Wuxian away.*’

“To contend with?” the elder repeated. “The Qishan Wen Clan is so powerful and strong-”

Wen Chao preened.

“-How can you speak as if getting rid of them will be easy?” he turned, facing away. “Whoever takes the lead, will become Wen Ruohan’s next target.”

Hadn’t Jiang Cheng said nearly the same thing to Wei Wuxian after the abyss?

Lan Wangji couldn’t help a slight flutter of happiness inside him at the parallel.

Sighing, the elder continued, “The Cloud Recesses is the legacy that our ancestors have built over centuries. We shall not ruin it.”

After thinking it over for a moment, Lan Wangji looked up to make eye contact with the elder and spoke confidently: “When a nest falls, all the eggs break. *Someone* must take the lead.”

“Xiongzhang?” Wangji asked quietly, noticing his brother’s approach. Lan Xichen stared at his little brother, clenching his fists. His other-self was still missing; Wangji must be worried out of his mind and scared and alone-

But. He hadn’t changed. He remained unquestionably righteous.

“Wangji,” Xichen whispered. “I am so, so proud of you.”

Jiang Cheng looked away.

The elder sighed again, "Just listen to yourself. Why are you so stubborn."

However, at the same time, someone was approaching the pair.

When the elder noticed him, he relaxed, "Ah, Qiren. Your timing is perfect. Come, talk some sense into Wangji."

Somewhat worried, Lan Wangji swallowed. He wouldn't change his mind regardless, but if his uncle disapproved he was sure there would be tension between them.

Jiang Fengmian stared intently, wondering what his ally would say.

"Shufu," Lan Qiren greeted, saluting as well. "I think what Wangji said was completely right."

The relief that instantly poured into Wangji left him breathless.

"When the nest falls, all the eggs will break," Lan Qiren recited, copying Lan Wangji. "Facing such an obstacle, all clans should join together to pull through this. Tomorrow, I'll travel to Qinghe."

Even after Jiang Cheng had held Wei Wuxian back in the Xuanwu cave to stop him from interfering, Lan Wangji was willing to do this.

What was he supposed to say now?

"...Unbelievable," the elder grumbled, walking off, ignoring the respectful bow Wangji sent after him.

Not looking back at his nephew, Lan Qiren explained, "Your great uncle is just worried about the safety of the clan."

"I understand."

Nie Huaisang cackled, "That's the Second Jade for you! Always so perfectly polite even to dirty, old-"

"Silence," Wangji ordered, but, shortly after, Lan Xichen began to laugh at the expression on his brother's face.

(He looked completely indifferent to everyone else, but they decided to take that as a good sign.)

"Do you have any news about Xichen?" Lan Qiren asked.

The real version tensed nervously.

(The future Wangji was "Hanguang-jun," not "Sect Leader Lan." It was fine; Xichen was fine. He had to be.)

But the other-Wangji could only solemnly shake his head. No one knew where Lan Xichen was.

"...No news is good news," Lan Qiren decided. "Xichen is smart. He'll survive this. How about Sect Leader Jiang's children?"

"Our people saved Jiang Yanli somewhere near Zizhou. To avoid causing trouble for the Yu clan, we've temporarily escorted her to the east."

Jiang Yanli's eyes widened and she gasped, shocked by the proclamation.

""Thank you,"" both Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan bowed in gratitude.

Lan Wangji nodded once in acknowledgement.

"But Wei Ying and Jiang-gongzi… are still missing."

Everything faded to black.

"It's fine," Jin Zixuan whispered, turning to Jiang Cheng. "I-I'm sure you escaped."

But even *he* didn't completely believe that.

The sound of pouring rain was momentarily broken by a loud thump.

A sack full of buns abruptly crashed to the ground.

"Wei Ying?"

Wei Wuxian stood, frozen in horror, as he stared down the empty alleyway. Jiang Cheng was still gone.

'*It's fine,*' Jiang Fengmian reminded himself. '*A-Cheng gets saved. It'll be fine.*'

Scanning around frantically, Wei Wuxian grew more and more unsettled with every second that passed. His breathing picked up; his pupils dilated; his pulse skyrocketed.

"Jiang Cheng?" he asked, turning back and forth as he searched.

No response.

Jiang Cheng looked down.

Wei Wuxian immediately ran out of the alley into the abandoned road he had come from. He had been gone for less than half an hour, and yet Jiang Cheng was nowhere to be found. Wei Wuxian looked and looked and looked and looked, but no matter where he ran there was no trace of his heir.

"*Jiang Cheng!*" he shouted, panic sinking in.

Seeing the terror slowly making its way onto Wei Wuxian's face, Jiang Fengmian suddenly felt a crawling sensation of guilt. The last thing he and his wife had told Wei Wuxian was to protect Jiang Cheng. Now-

He didn't regret trying to keep his son safe. Nothing would make him regret that.

(But he felt regret for the *way* he had done it, if nothing else.)

Finally, seeing that the neighboring streets were abandoned, Wei Wuxian returned to the original location. In his panic, he had lost his hat. Now, with rain-drenched hair and horrified eyes, he looked almost as pitiful as he had when he thought Madam Yu was going to cut his hand off.

No, perhaps even more pitiful.

Searching, Wei Wuxian turned to the left, then to the right, then back to the left, then back to the right, then turned all the way around and still didn't see anything and clearly didn't have even the slightest idea of what to do.

"Jiang Cheng," he whispered again, helplessly.

"Sorry," Jiang Cheng muttered, equally helpless. He couldn't say he regretted distracting the Wens, but he also couldn't help but wonder how his own emotions played into that decision.

He didn't want to die, but his other-self was in a different position.

"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli whispered. "It's okay. You were very brave."

At those words, Jiang Cheng felt some of the turmoil in his heart ease.

Finally Wei Wuxian ran over to a stall worker and asked, "Mister, there was a young master about the same age as me sitting here. Did you see where he went?"

"The one that was with you?"

"Yeah! Did you see him? Where did he go?"

"I was in the middle of doing something so I didn't really see. He kept spacing out and staring at people in the street. When I looked up again, he was gone. Maybe he left?"

"Gone?" Wei Wuxian breathed out.

The utter *hopelessness* in his gaze made Lan Wangji wish his other-self was there to help.

"...He left...He left…" Wei Wuxian repeated, dazedly, then straightened. "Lotus Cove!"

Jiang Cheng flinched. After what had happened in the last segment, he knew it was far from unreasonable for Wei Wuxian to assume that the other Jiang Cheng had returned to take the bodies.

Still, the accusation stung.

(And yet, after everything that happened, it seemed so comparably *insignificant* that Jiang Cheng had no idea how he would have ever gotten angry over it.)

The sun was already set when Wei Wuxian arrived at Lotus Pier, and yet he still hadn't found Jiang Cheng.

Worry grew within Madam Yu.

Rain continued to pour down, and the port was filled with dozens of Wen ships. Along the walls, flags of the Qishan Wen Sect covered every available space. Not a single Yunmeng flag was in sight, all having been either pulled down or burnt in the fires.

Pain flashed across the Jiangs' expressions when they saw what had become of their once-beautiful home.

(But it was fine. The future Jiang Cheng would rebuild Yunmeng. It didn't matter that the building were gone; so long as Jiang Cheng had his core, he could rebuild Yunmeng.)

As Wei Wuxian stood — hands on his knees — hiding behind a wall, he panted heavily.

He had exerted himself to the point where he could taste blood in his throat.

Moving closer, Lan Wangji wished there was some comfort he could offer. However, no matter how much he wanted to interfere, the simulation could not be altered.

Once he managed to quiet down his breathing, Wei Wuxian moved along the walls, sneaking back inside Lotus Pier.

"Be careful, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered. Sharing the sentiment, Nie Huaisang moved closer to Nie Mingjue again. Soon, he was peeking out at the scene around them from within his Da-ge's chest.

That was the most comfort Nie Mingjue could currently provide, but it was better than nothing.

In Wei Wuxian's head, a voice prayed with a desperation akin to despair:

'Please, please,'* he thought. '*Please don't let there be anyone talking about Jiang Cheng. Please don't have anyone laughing about his corpse resting in the training field. Or else, or else I'll…."

Or else?

Even if it was true, what could he do?

The Jiangs had known even before this started that Jiang Cheng would survive. All his limbs would be intact, his face would be unscarred, and his core would be stronger than ever.

But Wei Wuxian didn't know any of that.

As far as he knew, it was entirely possible for Jiang Cheng to be one of the hundreds of corpses on the ground. Pity for Wei Wuxian stretched out across the watchers.

He continued searching, but-

Hopelessness began to sink into him. The Jiangs were dead; he had no resources, no sword, and no support. He was the only one left. He didn't know anything; he couldn't *do* anything.

For the first time, Wei Wuxian was discovering how little power he held.

Lan Qiren still didn't approve — *nothing* would make him approve of demonic cultivation — but he was starting to see why Wei Wuxian thought it was necessary.

He should have stuck to using the power of his golden core, but the temptation demonic cultivation offered was now painfully clear to every watcher.

Looking at it like this, the future was really no surprise.

To sneak across an open area, Wei Wuxian soundlessly dove into the water. Only a few seconds after, two Wen soldiers passed through a walkway by the water, conversing casually.

"I heard that Jiang Cheng was caught," one said.

"What?!" Madam Yu hissed. All at once, the anger she had felt towards Wei Wuxian surged through her anew. If he hadn't left Jiang Cheng alone — if he had just *done* as he was *told* — then nothing-

"San-niang," Jiang Fengmian whispered. "Enough."

Sect Leader Jiang rarely tried to completely shut his wife down, but now, with drops of guilt beginning to poison his mind, he felt it was necessary. Similarly, Madam Yu simply looked back at him, then nodded once and sat down.

Neither of them knew how to feel about Wei Wuxian right now.

"Why didn't he hide away?" the other Wen finally asked. "Why did he expose himself and get caught?"

"Who knows."

To save Wei Wuxian, apparently. Neither of his parents knew how to feel about that.

(Why not ask them to protect each other? That's what happened anyways.)

"Well, Wen-er-gongzi asked us to lock him up in the storage room and keep a constant watch," the first reminded. The pair turned the corner, slipping out of sight.

A moment later, the watchers saw Wei Wuxian silently slink back underwater.

"Good," Madam Yu whispered. Yes, Wei Wuxian had let Jiang Cheng ~~sacrifice himself for Wei Wuxian and~~ get caught, but he would now stop at nothing to save his charge.

After all she had seen, there was no one she would trust more with that job.

Outside the central storage, two Wen disciples stood in front of the door. They were clearly guards assigned to make sure Jiang Cheng didn't escape.

And yet, rather than alert, they looked bored.

One sighed, "Does someone on the verge of death really need to be watched so closely?"

"Excuse me?" Madam Yu demanded, clenching her fists at the description.

Sighing again, the disciple turned away from his partner to stretch his hips and complain, "My waist hurts."

His partner vanished.

The watchers jumped in surprise.

In a half-second, Wei Wuxian had reached forward, covered the disciple's mouth, and pulled him out of sight. Given that there were no sounds of struggle, it was obvious the Wen disciple had been disposed of.

And yet even Wen Ruohan hadn't heard Wei Wuxian move.

"...Very impressive," he admitted.

Laughing once, the first disciple turned fully and suggested, "Let's sneak out to drink-"

Wei Wuxian leapt forward and snapped his neck.

Although all disciples were trained with the knowledge that they might have to kill to defend their clan, the fact that *Wei Wuxian* could become so brutal was a shock to all.

Even without his sword, he wasn't someone who could be dealt with lightly.

(Slowly, it was becoming clear how the malicious, powerful, *dangerous* version of Wei Wuxian they saw in the first segment came into being.)

Wei Wuxian threw the doors open, and instantly fell to the side of a figure on the ground.

"Jiang Cheng!" he hissed frantically. "Jiang Cheng!"

When Jiang Cheng got a glimpse of his other-self, he stepped back in shock.

He was covered in blood. As he laid motionless on the ground, his ashen face became even more obvious.

He looked like a corpse.

"*You!*" Madam Yu screeched, turning to the Wens. "How dare you? Even a pack of wolves would have more dignity you dirty *beasts!*"

"Oh? And how do *you* think criminals should be dealt with? Your treatment of Wei Wuxian seems to imply that we were comparatively merciful, if anything."

"Criminals?" Lan Qiren repeated disbelievingly.

"What else would you call a clan that tries to kill a non-cultivating messenger?"

"Oh, don't even *try*!" Nie Mingjue snarled. Despite receiving deadly glares from all sides, Wen Ruohan remained undaunted; he continued to smirk, eyes flashing in amusement.

(Behind him, Wen Qing kept her head high, trying desperately to hide her trembling hands. She would not risk her family for no reason, but-

But she *knew* Wei Wuxian. Had grown to care for him throughout the simulation. Could she continue to view him as an 'outsider' now?)

Jiang Cheng's thin neck lay exposed, and Wei Wuxian immediately checked for a pulse.

The watchers held their breaths.

When Wei Wuxian relaxed in relief, they did as well.

Somehow, even knowing that Jiang Cheng would survive, these events filled them with a sense of dread. Based on the condition Jiang Cheng's body was in, it was clear that the discipline whip had been used on him.

At least three of his ribs were broken.

"What happened here?!" someone shouted from outside.

"Run!" Nie Huaisang begged.

"Someone got hurt," another voice observed. Rather than fighting them, Wei Wuxian quickly picked Jiang Cheng up and broke into a run.

"Hurry!" Jiang Yanli prayed.

The only saving grace was that Madam Yu had clearly been exaggerating when she said that Wei Wuxian's injuries would keep him down for a month. They still hurt — they were still there — but perhaps Madam Yu had already had an idea of how this confrontation was going to end.

Maybe Wei Wuxian would be able to escape.

"Somebody! Hurry up!" the Wens shouted. As Wei Wuxian fled across the rooftops — showing an unbelievable level of agility considering the state his body was in — the Wens chased after.

"It's Wei Wuxian!" someone realized.

"It's Wei Wuxian! Come on! Don't let him get away."

Wei Wuxian sprinted across the rooftops, but, carrying Jiang Cheng, there was no chance of him being able to escape his pursuers. The Wens rode their swords, flying after the fleeing Jiangs and gaining on them bit by bit.

It disgusted Wen Qing to realize she *knew* some of those people.

(Of course Wei Wuxian was going to kill Wen Ning. After this, why would he care whether one Wen was innocent? How could she be stupid enough to expect anything else?)

The Wens were ten meters away. Five. Two. An archer pulled back and aimed at Wei Wuxian's feet.

Arrows flew.

"*No!*"

Dodging, Wei Wuxian stumbled. As he did, his grip on his charge loosened.

Jiang Cheng fell.

"*A-Cheng!*" Jiang Yanli screamed. Nie Huaisang looked away.

Wei Wuxian jumped off the roof and wrapped his arms around Jiang Cheng, spinning so that the Jiang heir was on top and he was on the bottom.

They *slammed* against the ground.

Everyone winced.

Wei Wuxian gasped, trying to reclaim the air that had been knocked out of him. It was no surprise; after all, his back had just crashed onto the ground.

His back, which Madam Yu had whipped not even 24 hours before.

If she thought she felt guilty before, it was *nothing* compared to what she felt now.

(A slapping sound of flesh against stone had resounded when Wei Wuxian landed. It would haunt her for years to come.)

"Over there!" someone shouted. Due to Wei Wuxian having jumped off the roof with enough force to catch Jiang Cheng, he had smacked against the ground a significant

distance away. The Wen disciples, flying high in the air, couldn't make out the boys' dark forms.

Trembling, Wei Wuxian forced himself to stand up, carrying Jiang Cheng on his back. His breathing was still broken and gasping, but he quickly looked for an escape route.

If nothing else, Nie Mingjue could relate to and admire the desperation Wei Wuxian felt while trying to protect his brother. His respect for the boy moved up another few notches.

Even Lan Qiren couldn't help but be impressed by the dedication and endurance Wei Wuxian showed.

"Let's move!" the Wens shouted.

"Get them!"

"Don't let them run away!"

Madam Yu was going to personally skewer each and every Wen in the world.

Wei Wuxian ran, but soon found that there was nowhere to go. He looked around despairingly, but could only move towards the wall as the Wens' voices got closer and closer. His back pressed up against the door behind him.

It opened.

He was dragged inside.

"*A-Xian!!!*"

A second later, Wei Wuxian had grabbed the Wen by the neck and slammed him against the wall. The watchers' eyes soon adjusted to the dimmer light.

"...A-Ning?" Wen Qing asked, squeaking it out brokenly.

"Don't say anything!" Wei Wuxian growled. "Or I'll break your neck."

Wen Qing believed him. After all, she had seen him break a stronger disciple's neck not two minutes ago.

So, was this it? Was this where it happened? Was she going to watch her innocent little brother die? Choked — neck snapped — killed, and resurrected as a *weapon* for this stupid, stupid war?

And, worst of all, she couldn't entirely blame Wei Wuxian.

She sank to her knees in defeat.

"Did you find him?" someone shouted from outside, making Wei Wuxian's expression turn from fierce to terrified in an instant. He looked around, recognizing the place.

This was his room.

Wei Wuxian knew the layout better than anyone. He had to run, but there was nowhere to go from here.

“I haven’t seen him,” someone outside responded.

“He must be somewhere nearby,” the first said. “Keep looking.”

The shadows walked off, and Wei Wuxian let out a stuttering breath of relief, wincing slightly from the strain. On his back, Jiang Cheng continued to sleep restlessly. The pressure from the other boy weighed down on Wei Wuxian like a mountain, and cut through his flesh like a knife.

Back, back, back. Why was it always the back?

Now that she had a second to calm down and watch him, Madam Yu couldn’t help but wonder. Jiang Cheng had smashed Wei Wuxian’s back against the ground. When they fell, Wei Wuxian had turned to make sure *his* back was the one that made contact with the floor. Nevertheless, Wei Wuxian continued to carry the unconscious Jiang Cheng. He barely seemed to notice the pain.

And yet, before all this, Madam Yu had whipped that back over and over and over and over again. And then told him to protect her son, rendering him *incapable* of caring about himself.

Was it even possible to regret something this much?

(She would tear out the spines of every last Wen in the world.)

Then, as if intentionally contradicting the thoughts running through Madam Yu’s mind, the captive Wen Ning spoke, “Wei… Wei-gongzi. I’m here to help you.”

“...To help me?”

Wen Chao laughed, “Nice try Wen Ning, but my Wei Wuxian isn’t stupid enough to fall for that. Though I guess you’re too weak to be useful another way!”

Drowning in despair, Wen Qing didn’t bother to refute that.

Wei Wuxian anger surged, “Hey! Wen flunky, what are you up to?”

“You… you don’t remember me?”

‘*He never remembers anyone*,’ Jiang Cheng thought, and couldn’t help but be grateful. At least now Wei Wuxian wouldn’t be lured into whatever trap this was.

‘*Remember me?*’ Wei Wuxian mentally repeated, keeping a tight grip. ‘*Did an ally dress themselves in Wen robes to serve as a spy?*’

But the voice was completely unfamiliar.

Wei Wuxian slammed Wen Ning against the wall again and shouted, "Don't play any tricks!"

"I-I'm not! Young Master Wei, you can look at my face!"

'*Look at his face? Maybe he's hidden something inside his mouth and he's prepared to spit it out?*'

As humorous as Wei Wuxian abysmal memory was, no one felt like laughing.

'*Is this… the Wen disciple who stepped between me and Wen Zhuliu after Jiang Cheng saw his parent's bodies?*'

The memory replayed. Jiang Cheng snapped off a piece of burnt wood, but, when Wen Zhuliu looked, he instead saw a Wen disciple who was coincidentally in the way.

"Huh?" Wen Chao blinked, tilting his head in confusion. "Well, I guess Wen Ning really would be that incompetent."

'*So long as it was actually a coincidence,*' Nie Huaisang thought.

'*...I don't know him,*' Wei Wuxian decided.

All the blood left Wen Qing's face.

"Who are you?" Wei Wuxian demanded, uncharacteristic levels of killing intent flashing into his eyes.

Wen Ning frowned in disappointment and explained, "I… I'm Wen Ning. From the Cultivation Conference."

Wei Wuxian paused for a moment, thinking '*The Discussion Conference in Qishan… The Discussion Conference… Shooting arrows… Ah!*'

"Huh?"

"You're that Wen… Wen-something… the one who was quite good at archery?"

Wen Ning lit up, "Yes! It's me! Don't worry Master Wei, I won't harm you!"

"...Wei Wuxian actually didn't remember?" Wen Qing asked.

Jiang Fengmian looked down, recalling the advice Cangse Sanren had told him time and time again.

'Remember the things others do for you, not the things you do for others. Only when people don't hold all that in their hearts can they finally be free.'

No one lived by that statement more than Wei Wuxian, and yet Jiang Fengmian had somehow forgotten who he was. In addition to being the Jiang Sect's head disciple, Wei Wuxian was

Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze's son.

(What would they think, if they knew what Jiang Fengmian's last words to Wei Wuxian had been?)

"I can get Jiang-gongzi to somewhere safe!" Wen Ning declared.

"Huh?" Wen Chao asked.

"What?" Wei Wuxian demanded, glaring skeptically.

"Eh? W-well, I'm also a member of the Wen Clan. I even have a group of disciples who follow my orders."

"Follow your orders to kill people?"

Jiang Yanli flinched.

"N-no!" Wen Ning rushed to say. "My disciples never kill people at random! I haven't killed any of the Jiang Sect's disciples either! I only hurried here after hearing that something had happened in Lotus Pier. It's true!"

Wei Wuxian continued glaring. He looked much, much closer to the first version of him they had seen. The Yiling Patriarch, who easily took on *armies* by himself.

And not even Lan Qiren could blame him for that.

Slowly, after thinking it over for a moment, Wei Wuxian released Wen Ning's neck.

"...What?" Wen Qing breathed out, hopelessly lost. It looked genuine. As far as she could tell, Wei Wuxian was letting Wen Ning go.

But if not now, then when?

Wen Ruohan frowned; as time went on, Wen Ning's actions were seeming less and less like a trap.

(And more and more like a traitor.)

After glaring skeptically for several more seconds, Wei Wuxian dropped his gaze and asked, "Then… could you… could you help me…."

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji asked, and both Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen stepped closer in concern.

"Can you help me reclaim the bodies of Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu?"

Both flinched back at that.

After the desecration their bodies had suffered, their minds had shut their self-interest off. Since then, they had only focused on their children's safety.

But for Wei Wuxian to think of that as a priority-

The rumors truly couldn't be more wrong about him.

"I… I'll try my best," Wen Ning agreed.

"Wen Qing."

Wen Ruohan's voice was stern and sharp, making the suddenly hopeful crowd freeze in their spots.

On the other hand, Wen Qing had expected this. Without wasting a second, she stood and bowed low, her torso nearly perpendicular with the simulated floor.

"...Do you understand what has happened?" Wen Ruohan asked. To his left, Wen Chao looked down at the bowing girl with unhidden glee.

"I do, Your Excellency," Wen Qing reported. "I assure you, I will punish him appropriately for this."

Nie Mingjue laughed openly, "What? For doing the right thing?"

"For betraying his sect," Wen Ruohan answered evenly. "We have all agreed to not blame for things that haven't happened yet, so I don't see a need to go too far. However, my generosity has limits; this will not be forgotten. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Your Excellency. I assure you, I will handle it."

Even with the glares coming from all sides she refused to falter. Regardless of Wen Ruohan's promise to not punish for things that hadn't occurred, she knew her family would not get off lightly in the face of such blatant treason.

Yes, her sweet, loving, *stupidly* kind brother had done the right thing. He had also probably died as a result, so Wen Qing didn't think his strategy was especially reliable.

As they were speaking, Wen Ning had run off. The simulation flashed forward, showing Wen Ning returning along with several of his most loyal disciples.

Wen Ruohan instantly memorized their faces.

"So?" Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow. "Where's this so-called 'safe-haven?'"

Wen Ning squeaked, "Oh, Wei-gongzi, walk this way! I-I have a ship!"

Wei Wuxian's untrusting gaze followed his every step.

At first most of the watchers didn't know anything about Wei Wuxian; then, they learned more, and wondered how on earth such a bright person could have turned into the famed Yiling Patriarch.

Then, they learned even more, and understood.

(Although he would never condone demonic cultivation, not even *Lan Qiren* could fault Wei Wuxian for his newfound ruthlessness.)

Carrying Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian followed Wen Ning towards a hidden ship, keeping an eye out for potential traps all the while. Once Wei Wuxian was able to set Jiang Cheng down, Wen Ning cleaned Jiang Cheng's wounds and applied bandages with ointment.

While everyone else stood frozen in confusion, Wen Qing watched carefully, mentally grading her brother's performance. It helped distract her from the expressions on Jiang Yanli's and Wen Ruohan's faces.

Neither overflowing hope nor darkening rage were safe things to acknowledge.

Soon, the boat reached land, and they arrived at Yiling. The trio traveled discreetly, stopping at a large, beautiful residence. They snuck inside from a back door and walked into a smaller building.

'*A-Ning, don't be stupid,*' Wen Qing thought. Yes, she had grown to adore the heroic, cheerful, spirited boy Wei Wuxian was, and she didn't agree with her clan's actions whatsoever. However, the more Wen Ning did now, the more of a precarious position he would be in once they got out.

(Suddenly, Wen Qing wondered if it would be smarter to simply *abandon* the Wen Sect once she got outside.)

Wen Ning closed the door.

In the next second, Wei Wuxian had grabbed Wen Ning by the neck again, hissing, "Where is this place?"

Holding up his hands in surrender, Wen Ning quickly denied, "I-no, I haven't…."

"What do you mean 'no?'" Wei Wuxian asked. "'No,' this *isn't* the Yiling Supervisory Office? I heard the whispers in the hallway as we walked in. Just what are you planning?"

"Nothing, it seems," Wen Ruohan growled slightly, making Wen Qing pale even further.

"Young Master Wei, l-listen to me! This is a Supervisory Office, but… but I really don't have any plans to harm you! If I did, I could have just told them I saw you. I-I wouldn't have led you all the way here!"

If Wen Qionglin was telling the truth — and Lan Wangji was beginning to think he was — then that confirmed once in for all that he and Wei Wuxian were right. The Jiangs would surely have been attacked regardless of whether Wei Wuxian stood up for MianMian, but if he hadn't supported Wen Ning, then he and Jiang Wanyin would surely be dead.

That small silver lining wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

Despite Wen Ning's rather convincing argument, Wei Wuxian remained alert — ready to explode at any moment.

"T-this is a Supervisory Office," Wen Ning reminded. "If there's anywhere the Wen Sect won't look for you, it'd be here. So long as no one finds you, you two can stay here."

"More and more betrayal with every word," Wen Chao huffed. Due to agreeing completely, Wen Ruohan made no move to silence his son. On the other hand, Nie Mingjue's emotions began to tumble like boulders rolling down a mountain.

Why was a *Wen* doing this?

Wei Wuxian had unblinkingly stared at Wen Ning for several excruciatingly long seconds, trying to get a feel for the boy's trustworthiness. He watched and watched as Wen Ning began fidgeting under his gaze.

Then, finally, he whispered a low, "Thank you" and "sorry."

He carefully laid Jiang Cheng on the bed before them.

"What?"

Watching the two interact left Wen Qing breathless.

What was this? What was she supposed to do now? What did this mean? Why hadn't Wei Wuxian killed him? If not now, then when? Was it just a mistake? Wei Wuxian wasn't killing her brother but being helped by him because Wen Ning was an *idiot* and now Wen Ruohan was seeing-

Did the other-Wen Ruohan find out?

(Did the other-Wen Ruohan kill him?)

With this new theory, Wen Qing suddenly felt an enormous divide crack open between her and the other Wens.

Once Jiang Cheng had been set down, Wei Wuxian's eyes landed on Wen Ning again, watching cautiously. The tentative truce between them helped, but the tension was still there. Wei Wuxian was alert, ready to respond at the slightest hint of a trap.

The doors slammed open.

"*No!*"

Half the watchers jumped out of their seats.

Wind rushed inside as Wen Qing walked through the door.

“No, no, no,” Jin Zixuan whispered, and Jiang Yanli grew impossibly pale.

Wen Ning turned around in surprise, and Wei Wuxian immediately stood up, growling at the threat. He glanced back at where Wen Ning’s sword hung from the wall.

Wen Qing’s heart stopped.

Stunned, Wen Ning breathlessly greeted, “A-Jie-”

His own blade was at his neck a second later.

“Don’t move, or I’ll kill him!”

“No!” Wen Qing shouted running over.

By contrast, her other self — who *didn’t know* that Wen Ning was going to *die* soon — remained calm. She merely closed the door and walked forward.

“Alright,” she said. “Go ahead. Anyway, he had it coming.”

Perfectly calm; calling his bluff. Wen Qing supposed she should be grateful that her other-self was managing to approach the situation rationally.

(And, if she wasn’t worried, then Wen Qing knew she must have heard all about Wei Wuxian from her brother.)

Nie Huaisang squeaked in concern for the kind Wen Ning.

“Jie?” Wen Ning cried out. “Jiejie?”

“Is she your sister?”

“Don’t call me sister,” Wen Qing snapped, making Wen Ning flinch back.

Would she turn them in to earn more favor from Wen Ruohan? The version watching with them seemed to care deeply about her brother, but the simulated one-

Nie Mingjue turned his glare on Wen Qing. He didn’t like the Wens, but if Wen Ning was turned in or hurt because of this…

Subconsciously, his mind had already separated Wen Ning from all the other Wens.

“Are you losing your mind?” Wen Qing asked. “Since when have you been so bold? How dare you hide people?”

“Oh, are *you* the one who killed him?” Jin Guangshan wondered, and, even though she didn’t believe it for a second, the comment made dread rise up in Wen Qing.

(Not because she thought she would turn Wen Ning in, but because she knew she wouldn’t.)

Slowly, she began separating herself from the Wen side of the simulation.

After sighing in annoyance, Wen Qing continued, "So this is why you wanted to go to Yunmeng. How full of yourself are you? Who gave you so much courage? If Wen Chao finds out about this, he'll stop at nothing to tear you apart! If he's really set on killing someone, do you think I could stop him? The Wen Clan has announced to the world that anyone who catches sight of those two must kill them. Every child in the streets knows they're marked die."

'*Because I failed,*' rang in Jiang Fengmian's head. '*And then asked a child to pick up the pieces for me.*'

"How dare you hide them?" Wen Qing asked again, standing tall and glaring down at the pair. With her arrogant expression, high rank — on the same level as Wen Chao — and her brilliant red clothes, Wen Qing could leave almost anyone intimidated.

And yet, Wen Ning spoke back regardless.

"But… But Wei-gongzi…."

"I don't care about what's happened between you two. Gratitude is an understandable reason to do something, but they *cannot* stay. You went suddenly and left suddenly, a time in which Wen Chao lost track of them. Do you think Wen Chao is that stupid? His search will reach here sooner or later! What do you think will happen then?"

When phrased like this, Wen Qing's best option seemed obvious.

"No, no, please don't!" Jiang Yanli begged pointlessly.

Growing, Nie Mingjue moved to stand between Wen Qing and the simulated figure of Wei Wuxian, consequently defending Wen Ning from her as well.

Because that shy, stuttering, heroic boy just *couldn't* be a Wen.

"Jiang-gongzi!" Wen Ning shouted, barely noticing the sword Wei Wuxian still had to his neck. "Jiang-gongzi is also injured! He can't move! Moreover, it's… the Wen Clan's fault."

Wen Chao laughed, "'Fault?' He says that like we didn't mean for it to happen."

After a pause, Wen Qing shook her head, "What the Wen Sect does has nothing to do with us. We don't need to pay for their sins!"

Behind Wen Ning, Wei Wuxian's glare sharpened.

"Excuse me?" Wen Chao asked, rearing back, but Wen Ruohan was unsurprised. He had always known Wen Qing didn't necessarily approve of his plans, but, due to the knowledge and skill she had, allowed her to stay uninvolved.

Still, he was starting to wonder how far her disapproval went.

"...Wei Ying, don't look at me like that," Wen Qing ordered. "I'm a doctor. I work to save people. I have never killed anyone, and I never hurt anyone from the Jiang Sect. Besides, your lives are not my concern."

'And you think that excuses you?' Nie Mingjue wanted to shout, but couldn't. Normally he would have, but, before him, was Wen Ning. A shy, incompetent, stuttering, shaking, trembling, easily-crying boy who should not remind him of Huaisang but did anyways.

A boy who had *betrayed* the Wen Sect to save Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian, the former being the Jiang heir, and the latter being the reason they won the war.

Could he really say Wen Ning deserved to die?

Finally, Wen Qing began to walk off and concluded, "I have no reason to risk the dozens of lives in my branch of the clan just for your sake."

And yet she still hadn't raised an alarm. Was it because she genuinely thought Wei Wuxian might kill Wen Ning, or because….

"Jie?"

Just as Wen Qing raised her hand to open the door, someone spoke.

"Do you think he could have come this way?"

Wei Wuxian tensed. Then, seeing that his threat hadn't done anything, immediately let go of Wen Ning to stand defensively in front of Jiang Cheng.

"They did say they saw a boat go towards Yiling. Should we spread out the search?"

A drop of cold sweat began to fall down Wei Wuxian's face, and Wen Qing turned a thoughtful gaze toward the door. Wen Ning immediately rushed forward, grabbing her sleeve and shaking his head.

A rush of awe passed into Nie Huaisang. Like him, Wen Ning had relatively low cultivation and a powerful older sibling; despite that, the boy was actively getting involved and fighting for what he believed to be right.

Lan Wangji nodded once at Wen Ning, similarly impressed by the boy's actions.

Wen Qing indifferently watched her brother's silent request, then sighed.

"Why so noisy?" she snapped.

"Eh? Lady Wen! Our people are looking for Wei Wuxian."

"This room…" she turned her head, glancing at the boy, "has no one called Wei Wuxian."

His eyes widened.

Was it a secret message? Some discrete way of asking for help? Some way to alert them of the situation without tipping Wei Wuxian off? Or -

(Or was she actually saying-)

"You *bitch!*" Wen Chao screeched, swinging out towards her. He phased straight through, but Wen Qing backed up regardless.

"What is the meaning of this?" Wen Ruohan asked. Clenching her fists, Wen Qing stood tall and looked right back.

"I don't know, Your Excellency. Perhaps my other-self has some more elaborate plan in mind in order to ensure Wei Wuxian is dealt with. We've already seen how effective most of the soldiers are."

"Do you truly think so?"

"Of course."

Not a single person believed her.

"My brother has been unwell lately," she continued. "He's in poor health. Keep your voices down and stop bothering him."

"Ah, y-yes! We were just leaving!"

As the soldiers outside walked off, Wei Wuxian froze. What was he supposed to do now that he had seen all this?

Slowly, Nie Mingjue turned to stare at the subtly retreating Wen Qing, a look of utter astonishment on his face.

Wen Ning, leaning his ear against the door, suddenly brightened up and declared, "Great, they're gone!"

Sighing again, Wen Qing turned to address Wei Wuxian, "I'm in charge of Yiling, not Yunmeng. Don't raise a fuss."

With that, she walked away.

"Don't raise a fuss?!" Wen Chao repeated. "Jiang Cheng was asleep and Wei Wuxian would never have left him! What, even with all your paralysis needles or whatever there was *nothing* you could do?"

"Nothing she wanted to do," Wen Ruohan corrected, his gaze turning arctic-cold.

Although she refused to tremble before them, Wen Qing's mind was running at the speed of light. She had just betrayed her Sect, hadn't she? She had never agreed with Wen Ruohan's imperialism, but to go so far as to do this?

It had barely taken anything to convince her.

And Wen Ruohan had seen everything.

(Although he remained silent, Wen Qing could see the way he contemplated whether chopping off her limbs or hanging her above the field would leave a stronger message.)

Abruptly, the adrenaline left Wei Wuxian's body. He sat down on Jiang Cheng's bed, only able to sit upright due to making a post with Wen Ning's sword against the ground.

"Don't worry," Wen Ning reassured. "My sister is a good doctor."

"Understatement of the century," Jin Zixuan grumbled, making Jiang Yanli giggle. Now that *this* had happened, the pair's earlier stress had transitioned into an awkward sort of humor.

Jiang Yanli turned a tentative glance over, but Wen Qing was keeping her eyes focused on Wen Ruohan.

"The renowned doctress Wen Qing," Wei Wuxian muttered. "Of course she's good."

Well, if Wei Wuxian knew of her skill, it would be much easier to convince him to get examined once she got out. No matter what, she still hadn't given up on that.

(Though, now, it seemed like Wen Qing wouldn't have access to any of her usual resources during the examination.)

"Ah, my sister won't expose you," Wen Ning added unnecessarily.

Nie Mingjue could help but flinch as if something had stabbed into him.

'Not a single Wen will be left alive!' he had said.

'What they have done has nothing to do with us,' she had announced.

He didn't agree — her robes and food and power were all *from* the Wen Sect, she wasn't *unrelated* — so he knew she wasn't completely right but….

But right now, he couldn't bring himself to say that.

From the spot where he sat, Wei Wuxian's eyes glistened, then closed.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji muttered, standing close. It broke him to hear such a happy, optimistic, cheerful person sounding so *hopeless*, especially when there was nothing he could do to help.

Jiang Yanli's eyes drifted to Wen Qing, wishing there was a way to thank her without creating tension with the Chief Cultivator.

Suddenly, Jiang Cheng shifted on the bed.

“Jiang Cheng?” Wei Wuxian immediately spun around to check on him.

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli breathed, moving to kneel by his bedside.

“He’s waking up,” Wen Ning realized. “I’ll go get some medicine for him.”

Slowly, Jiang Cheng’s eyes scrunched together, then blinked open.

“Jiang Cheng?” Wei Wuxian asked again.

Hope began returning to Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian. The knowledge that Jiang Cheng was here, safe, and alive allowed them to finally relax the tension in their clenched fists.

The dark circles under Jiang Cheng’s eyes were now frighteningly visible. With the pallor of his skin and the slouch in his posture added on, he barely looked alive.

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian breathed out in relief. The solace Wei Wuxian felt was clear in his soft smile.

Now that the hopelessness in Wei Wuxian’s expression had been relieved, Lan Wangji felt himself relaxing again. They knew that in the future Jin ZIxuan would die, Jiang Yanli would die, and Wei Wuxian would die, but those were all after the Sunshot Campaign. It seemed likely that this was as bad as the Wen’s actions would get. Now, they could start fighting back.

Demonic cultivation was still far too dangerous to use, but it seemed that even his uncle was starting to understand why Wei Wuxian thought it would be a good idea.

Surely it would all get better from here.

Several seconds passed, and Jiang Cheng remained unresponsive.

“Jiang Cheng, you… can you see me? Can you hear me? Do you know who I am?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Due to their glimpse at the 13-years-later future, they all knew Jiang Cheng wasn’t deaf. However, that only made the complete lack of response from him even more worrying.

Both Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue moved closer to the boy, older-brother instincts kicking in.

“What happened to you?” Wei Wuxian worriedly demanded, reaching forward to check his temperature.

Jiang Cheng batted his hand away.

‘*At least he hasn’t been temporarily paralyzed?*’ Nie Huaisang thought. He considered voicing the comment, but the apprehensive expressions on everyone else’s faces stopped him.

As Wei Wuxian blinked at him in confusion, Jiang Cheng stared down at his own hand, watching it tremble. There was no shock or fear or anger or panic; instead, Jiang Cheng seemed stuck in a too-calm null.

“A-Cheng?” Jiang Yanli asked.

A fire within Madam Yu swarmed. On one hand, she was right; she had *known* that trying to treat Wei Wuxian as a brother would only cause problems for her kids. This was happening because Jiang Cheng had saved Wei Wuxian. It was the boy’s fault that Jiang Cheng was like this now. Part of her sang out that perhaps Jiang Cheng would finally learn better than to care for him.

On the other hand, her family clearly viewed the boy as one of their own. She didn’t know how much she agreed with that, but she couldn’t disagree as much as she once would have — not after everything she had seen. The fact that the adult Jiang Cheng quite clearly *hadn’t* viewed Wei Wuxian as family was-

Possibly a direct result of this.

That change in Jiang Cheng’s perception of Wei Wuxian had filled her with joy only a few days ago. She couldn’t bring herself to muster up that same satisfaction now.

Jiang Cheng glanced down at the mark across his chest.

The discipline whip had been used on him. Even if it was just a single time, that was probably a far more serious experience than he had ever felt before. The mark would never go away.

Jiang Cheng had received a discipline whip because he tried to protect Wei Wuxian. As soon as that realization sank in, horror spread across Jiang Yanli.

“A-Cheng,” she whispered. “D-don’t worry. You’ll be fine. We saw the future. You’ll… it’s going to be fine. You don’t need to worry, it doesn’t impede you at all. You’ll recover just fine from this.”

As it was quite clear that Jiang Yanli was saying that to convince *herself,* neither Jin Zixuan nor Jiang Cheng tried to stop the stream of comfort she was giving.

“Stop looking at it,” Wei Wuxian advised, directing Jiang Cheng’s attention away from the mark. “I’m sure there’s a way to get it off. Don’t worry about it.”

Madam Yu glanced at her husband, then tilted her head at her son.

‘*Well? Say something!*’ her expression seemed to say. What was the point of him finally building up the courage to talk to their kids if he only did that once?

In all honestly, if Madam Yu tried to say something, it would probably come out in a way that would just make Jiang Cheng feel even worse. Knowing that, Jiang Fengmian accepted his wife’s advise, and kneeled down beside his son.

“A-Cheng,” he whispered, making his now highly-uncomfortable son meet his eyes. “I-I know this isn’t a good thing, and I would never wish the discipline whip on you. I’m so sorry that this had to happen, but… but you were very brave, and I’m proud of you. Just remember, your life is important. Don’t try to throw it away.”

A hot flush spread across Jiang Cheng, and he glanced away from his father’s now-open affection.

Then, he cooled again, and looked back at his other self. Even considering the discipline whip, he couldn’t understand why the other-Jiang Cheng was just lying down, nearly despondent.

Wei Wuxian leaned closer, trying to figure out what was wrong with his brother.

Then, Jiang Cheng slapped him.

Unflinching, Wei Wuxian added, “Go ahead. Hit me. As long as you’ll feel better.”

‘*Is that why you let him choke you?*’ Lan Wangji wondered.

“Did you feel it?” Jiang Cheng asked.

Wei Wuxian paused, “Feel what?”

“Did you feel my spiritual power?”

A sinking sensation of dread began to pass over the watchers.

“What spiritual power? You didn’t try to use any.”

“I did.”

“...What?”

“Perhaps he got heavily drained,” Lan Qiren suggested, though, for some reason, he couldn’t help but feel like that was a naive hope.

Wei Wuxian frowned, “Just what… what are you talking about?”

“I said, ‘I did,’” Jiang Cheng repeated, his voice so uncharacteristically quiet that it didn’t even sound like him anymore. “When I hit you I used all my spiritual power. So tell me, did you feel it?”

A pause, and then, “Try again?”

“That’s a ‘no’ if I’ve ever heard one,” Nie Mingjue huffed, morbid humor making his attempt at a smile turn grim. Whatever had happened to Jiang Cheng was clearly far more serious than just the discipline whip — and wasn’t that a sentence the watchers could have never imagined themselves thinking.

"...Never mind," Jiang Cheng decided. "Even if I hit you a thousand times, it won't change a thing."

The tone of Jiang Cheng's words sounded almost indifferent. He had gone past downcast, pathetic, and even *despairing* until he reached a state of unresponsive apathy.

There was nothing left inside of him.

Thunder rumbled outside.

"A-Cheng? What-"

"Wei Wuxian, do you know why Wen Zhuliu is called the Core Melting Hand?"

Ice spread through Jiang Cheng's blood.

"Because his hands can melt away golden cores so thoroughly that you can't ever form a new core again. Your spiritual power will disperse. You'll become useless," he began to laugh, the dark circles under his eyes becoming black holes which sucked in all light.

"What?" Jiang Cheng asked. "But-but the future-me… *what*?"

"An average person who descended from the cultivation world is no better than a good-for-nothing."

"...Maybe you're wrong?" Lan Xichen suggested. "You could be mistaken-"

"I don't… I don't think I am," Jiang Cheng shook his head, horror sinking in.

"Your whole life will be spent doing worldly business," Jiang Cheng muttered. "You aren't allowed to dream of being at the top ever again."

Jiang Yanli wanted to reassure her brother, to tell him that there was nothing wrong with being a civilian, so long as he lived on, but couldn't. Unlike her, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian had spent nearly their whole lives working on their cores. It was no surprise that losing it after all this made Jiang Cheng feel like he had nothing.

If Jiang Cheng truly didn't have a core, Yunmeng Jiang would be lost forever.

"A-Die and A-Niang had their cores melted away by Wen Zhuliu, making it easier to kill them."

Based on his expression, some couldn't help but wonder if he wished that had happened to him as well. Before, Jiang Cheng had been mad with grief and not thinking rationally, so Wei Wuxian had constantly reminded him that he could always get revenge another day.

Until this was fixed, his revenge was as realistic as a child's fantasy.

And Jiang Cheng knew that better than anyone.

Lifting a hand to cover his eyes, Jiang Cheng whispered, "Wen Zhuliu, Wen Zhuliu. I want revenge. I want revenge, but how could I?"

He began to laugh.

"I don't have a core anymore. I won't ever be able to form a core again! Revenge? How can I get my revenge now?!"

He laughed and laughed and laughed. His laughter built on itself until it became an unsettling sound of madness. But why not? What did Jiang Cheng have to live for now that he had lost his core?

What else could he do?

"But… A-Cheng, you… I…." Jiang Yanli couldn't say anything, too shocked by change in her brother to speak.

Wei Wuxian stepped back, then stumbled and collapsed onto the ground, unable to say anything in response.

Lan Wangji moved closer to him.

To Jiang Cheng, his cultivation was everything. No one knew better than Wei Wuxian how ambitious Jiang Cheng was, and now….

Even without an especially powerful core, Nie Huaisang knew a cultivator's life was centered around theirs. With Jiang Cheng, who now wanted revenge more than anything, that was especially true.

With a strike of the Core Melting Hand, Jiang Cheng's dreams, cultivation, self-esteem, and hope for revenge had all been smashed to dust.

Huaisang looked down solemnly.

In a situation like this, what could Jiang Cheng do but laugh?

"I don't even have my golden core," he whispered through his laughter. "There's just no way!"

Outside, the thunder rumbled again, and a flash of lightning cut through the sky.

Silently, Jin Zixuan moved closer to the real Jiang Cheng, hoping to provide support.

A symphony of thunder, wind, and laughter formed around them, the outside branches rumbling like a stampede. Jiang Cheng laughed and laughed and laughed until that was all that could be heard.

"Wei Wuxian, why did you bother saving my life?"

"...What?"

“What’s the use of saving me?! Now I have to live on in shame, watching the Wen-dogs go rampant, knowing I can’t do anything?!”

“A-Cheng!” Madam Yu shouted. “I don’t care if Lotus Pier is gone or if you have your core. Your life is worth more than all of that combined, understood?”

“I-”

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian spoke softly. “Revenge is no where near as important as your life. I don’t care what happens, never give up like that. Please.”

“I….”

Jiang Yanli sat next to him, whispering “Your life is precious, A-Cheng. You need to keep is safe.”

“I know, I-” he paused. “I know.”

It would have been a touching moment if the watchers couldn’t hear the simulated Jiang Cheng laughing madly in the background. As it was, the sound made the Jiangs turn back to the other-Jiang Cheng.

The madness in his eyes was overwhelming.

They knew he would recover — would get back his core and would rebuild the Jiang Sect — but, as it was, Jiang Cheng had essentially lost *everything*.

“How could it possibly get worse than this?” Jiang Yanli whispered.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji cried out, making Jiang Fengmian glance away from his son. It was a bit silly — in a situation like this, why *wouldn’t* he look at his son — but he did anyways.

And the expression on Wei Wuxian’s face shocked him to his core.

In all Jiang Fengmian’s years with the boy, he had never seen him look like *this*. No matter what Yu Ziyuan did, and no matter how bad things seemed to get, Wei Wuxian was always able to remain calm.

As his daughter had said, Wei Wuxian was born with a smile on his face.

But now-

‘A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him.’

“He thinks he failed,” Jiang Fengmian whispered, finally speaking his thoughts aloud.

“Well, hasn’t he?” Madam Yu snapped. “Look what happened to A-Cheng! In less than a day, he’s-”

“But-but A-Niang, it was *my* choice-”

“He should have known that you would need to be-”

“He shouldn’t have had to put himself aside to help me! He’s our head disciple, but he’s also my bro-”

“Don’t say that word! He’s not!” Madam Yu shouted. “I… how can you say that when I’ve spent years….”

She cut herself off, but the damage had been done. It was now clear that she was objecting on a basis of her own guilt, rather than an actual dislike of the boy.

“A-Niang,” Jiang Yanli whispered. “He-he is, and it wasn’t his fault.”

“A-Li?”

“A-Niang, this was A-Cheng’s choice. It was… not completely thought out, but… you can’t blame A-Xian for it. Please, I… A-Xian deserves more than that.”

Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, Lan Qiren, and Madam Jin all nodded in agreement.

The wind was cut from her sails, and Madam Yu backed off. She knew her daughter was right. Just like she knew she had a tendency to wrongly blame Wei Wuxian.

(The simulation couldn’t have made that any more clear.)

Her children genuinely saw Wei Wuxian as their brother. She didn’t have to be his mother, but she didn’t have to treat him like a slave either. Looking at it from the outside, Madam Yu could clearly see their relationship.

~~And knew she was wrong.~~

As Madam Yu fell silent, Jiang Fengmian glanced between the simulated Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian. Jiang Fengmian had never allowed Madam Yu to pressure him into kicking Wei Wuxian out of the sect. He and Wei Wuxian had personalities that went well together, and Jiang Fengmian had trained him into one of the strongest cultivators of his generation despite his late start.

But they both knew that Wei Wuxian wasn’t *really* part of the family.

(What would Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze think if they knew about this?)

Jiang Fengmian’s legs seemed to give out under him as he fell into his seat, completely agreeing with his daughter.

How could it get worse than this?

The door squeaked open.

“A-Ning?”

Wen Ning stepped inside, a fawning smile on his face.

Jiang Cheng froze.

“Wait, A-Cheng, he-”

Jiang Cheng kicked Wen Ning to the ground, toppling over the bowl of medicine and spilling the black liquid everywhere. Wei Wuxian rushed to help.

“Hey!” Wen Qing shouted.

“What’s wrong with you!” Jiang Cheng shouted, grabbing Wei Wuxian by the collar and shaking him.

“Jiang Cheng-”

“What are you waiting for?! He’s from the Wen Clan! And you still went to help him? Kill him!”

“Calm down Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian commanded, but Jiang Cheng wasn’t listening. Instead, his eyes focused on the Wen flags hanging on the walls, and realization sank into his expression.

Glaring back at the real Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji growled, “If you touch him again-”

“I *know*-”

“Where is this place?” Jiang Cheng demanded. “Did you walk into a trap?!”

“No-”

“No? Then how did you get back here? Don’t tell me — you asked for help from the Wen Clan?!” Jiang Cheng shook him ferociously. “Do you want to die?!”

His hands wrapped around Wei Wuxian's neck.

Then, he fell forward. For his newly-coreless body, even that much exertion was too much.

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian whispered.

“Does he regret it now?” Jin Guangshan wondered. “If he was hoping to die heroically saving his brother, then this is probably the worst outcome imaginable.”

“How dare you?” Madam Yu snapped.

“Are you really going to take his sacrifice and rationalize it as if you were the one doing it?” Lan Qiren asked. “If he completely regretted it, he would have told Wei Wuxian what he did to make the boy feel guilty. He hasn’t, so he doesn’t.”

“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian said, wrapping his arms around and trying to help the heavily-coughing boy.

“Perhaps,” Jin Guangshan allowed. “But, considering what he turns into in the future, I can’t help but wonder if he’ll hesitate before helping Wei Wuxian next time around.”

“How dare you-”

“And I guess we have you to thank for what he turned into, don’t we, Madam Yu?”

Right as Madam Yu was about to explode, Madam Jin glared and hissed, “Not another word, Guangshan.”

Her husband turned to her, frowning in confusion.

“Jiang Cheng, you’re injured,” Wei Wuxian reminded. “Don’t-”

Jiang Cheng pushed him back, refusing the offered help.

“Wei Wuxian!” he shouted, panting heavily as his laughter started up again. “I see. My parents’ corpses aren’t even cool yet, and yet you seek help from them?”

“No, no, Jiang-xiong, that’s-”

“What a great Head Disciple of Yumeng!”

The deranged, insane laughter returned, shaking the building.

A silver needle flashed forward, and Jiang Cheng collapsed again.

A light flush spread across Jiang Cheng’s cheeks, and he sank down, wishing he could disappear into the floor.

“Are you two insane?” Wen Qing demanded. “Anyone could find you if he shouts and laughs that loudly.”

Relief spread across Jiang Yanli’s expression, and Nie Mingjue found himself reluctantly impressed by what he had seen. Wen Qing had truly decided to help Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng.

In the face of that, Jiang Cheng’s reaction should have seemed unreasonable. However, Nie Mingjue knew all too well that ‘kill all Wens’ was exactly the strategy he had spent the last few days advocating for.

He sat back in his chair, mind racing.

“Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian spoke, kneeling beside his brother and practically ignoring Wen Qing’s words.

Annoyed, she continued, “I’ll throw you out immediately if you don’t shut up.”

“What did you-”

“Don’t pull out the needle,” Wen Qing commanded, interrupting Wei Wuxian. “That brat will start throwing a fit if he wakes up. I could hear him even when I was outside! Pull it out after his injuries have healed. Don’t cause trouble. I don’t want to interact with Wen Chao, and I especially don’t want to deal with that woman he takes around with him.”

The power she spoke with was undeniably impressive.

(The disgust she felt for Wen Chao drew a clear line between her and them. If the glare Wen Chao was sending her meant anything, then she wouldn’t be welcome with the Wens once they got out.)

Hesitantly, Wen Qing began drifting farther away from her clan, moving closer to the open spot Jiang Yanli was silently offering her.

“Thank you, A-Jie,” Wen Ning said.

As he said that, Jiang Yanli couldn’t shake the feeling that Wen Ning looked like a fluffy, doe-eyed lamb.

Wen Qing confidently walked towards the fallen bowl, picking it up for closer observation. She sniffed once, then glared, making Wen Ning jump.

“If you’re really grateful then put in some effort! What kind of medicine is this? He’s too weak to take a supplement right now! We need to focus on strengthening his body! How many times do I have to tell you that? I’ll brew it!”

Smiles flickered across many faces.

Wen Ruohan remained silent as he observed that, thinking it over. Considering what he knew of Wei Wuxian’s character, Wen Ruohan knew the boy wouldn’t forget this kindness. This interaction was the most positive connection binding Wei Wuxian to the Wen Sect.

And, outside, Wei Wuxian was working with Wen Ning.

(So, was the danger of Wen Qing’s lacking loyalty more or less than the advantage of her possible applications?)

Wen Qing stormed off, leaving Wen Ning to tell Wei Wuxian, “Medicine prepared by my sister will definitely turn out great! Hundreds of times better than mine!”

Breathlessly, Wei Wuxian nodded, “Thank you.”

“He’s rather polite when he wants to be,” Lan Qiren observed, finding the disconnect between the Wei Wuxian before them and the Wei Wuxian from the Cloud Recesses to be odd. Then again, regardless of how he had acted at the Cloud Recesses, even Lan Qiren knew Wei Wuxian had a righteous core. Sighing, he decided the boy’s behavior both times was acceptable, even if he wasn’t anywhere near as proper as a Lan.

(With that, Lan Qiren couldn't help but wonder how many Lan disciples were like Su She — appropriately polite while under scrutiny, but unquestionably unrighteous when backed into a wall.)

A conflicted expression flashed across his face.

Their surroundings changed in a flash forward, showing Wei Wuxian sitting next to Jiang Cheng's bed, watching his sleeping form. Slowly, he reached his hand out and condensed his spiritual power.

A red glow enveloped his hand.

He looked back at Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Fengmian's hands began to shake.

When his other-self had told Wei Wuxian to protect Jiang Cheng, Jiang Fengmian hadn't thought twice. Why wouldn't he protect his son first? It would be illogical to expect anything else.

And yet, could Wei Wuxian be blamed for Jiang Cheng choosing to risk himself? What else could Wei Wuxian have done? And even if Jiang Cheng had moved to defend him, Wei Wuxian didn't know.

All he knew was that he had failed to carry out Jiang Fengmian's final order less than a day after it was given.

The guilt creeping into him began to overflow.

After a bit of switching back and forth between his hand and Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian's gaze finally stilled. He took a deep breath, and his fear was replaced by determination.

He turned back to Jiang Cheng, resolution clear in his expression.

Given that, Jin Guangshan felt it was safe to assume that Wei Wuxian had come up with a solution. It should be impossible (there was a reason the Core Melting Hand was so feared), but if anyone could do it, it would be him. However, if Wei Wuxian — the boy who made himself *bait* against the Xuanwu of Slaughter — was hesitating, it was obvious that the price for regaining a core was immense.

"What a waste of a loyal soldier," he muttered.

"What exactly is that supposed to mean, Jin-xiong?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

"Nothing, nothing," he smirked. "I'm simply curious how much Wei Wuxian is willing to give up for your family without receiving anything in return. Perhaps a slave is truly the most accurate description for him."

Wen Ruohan's lips quirked into a smile.

“How dare you?” Madam Yu hissed. “It isn’t like that. If he has a way to get back his… his brother’s core, why wouldn’t he?”

“You say that, and yet you’re the one who-”

“Guangshan!” Madam Jin snapped. “Enough.”

Several confused gazes turned her way. She knew what they were confused about; she had made it quite clear that what the other-Madam Yu said about her son would not be forgiven. How was she supposed to forgive “you should have let him die” when it had been said so straightforwardly? Madam Jin’s anger had bubbled up within her.

But then the other Madam Yu had died, her corpse pushed down by that *whore* and her husband dying next to her without being able to show that he cared for her.

She couldn’t forgive Yu Ziyuan, but she couldn’t bring herself to despise her either.

“Madam Jin?” Lan Xichen prompted, seeing that Madam Jin was struggling to continue.

Finally, she took a deep breath and explained, “We’ve all grown fond of Wei Wuxian over the course of the simulation. And, as we established in the previous segments, Ziyuan’s actions against the boy were wrong.”

“And you think you’re better?” Madam Yu hissed defensively.

At those words, Madam Jin was thrown into the past. Memories of a party — Zixuan’s party — and an uninvited guest.

Last year, a boy had shown up on Jin Zixuan’s birthday. Realizing that he was yet *another* bastard child, Madam Jin had fallen into a deep fury. Not wanting to upset her further, Jin Guangshan had kicked the boy down the steps of Koi tower. As he looked up, the boy’s shocked and betrayed eyes had been scarily reminiscent of the ones she had seen in Wei Wuxian.

Scared; terrified; uncertain; alone.

But he deserved it for coming.

(Was his existence the boy’s fault, or her husband’s?)

“I… I am not ignorant to what I’ve done,” she looked at Yu Ziyuan. “We’ve both made… mistakes. We’ve established that.”

When Madam Yu raised an eyebrow in disbelief at Madam Jin’s words, Madam Jin glared right back.

‘*I still don’t forgive you,*’ her eyes seemed to say.

Madam Yu merely nodded.

‘*I didn’t expect you to.*’

While the watchers discussed, Wei Wuxian remained solely focused on Jiang Cheng. The confliction in his gaze was easily apparent, but steady determination shone through as well.

He was scared, but he had a plan.

‘*I hope this all works out,*’ Nie Mingjue thought with a breathed-out sigh.

Finally, Wei Wuxian took in a deep breath. He dropped his hand, and stepped towards Jiang Cheng. Reaching forward, he pulled out Wen Qing’s silver needle.

“Jiang Cheng.”

Said boy twitched, his eyes scrunching tighter, then slowly blinked them open.

“Wens?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“They’re gone.”

Although his other-self wasn’t given anywhere near enough time to understand what Wen Qing and Wen Ning had done, Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but feel guilty for the blatant hatred that appeared on his other-self’s face.

Oh, well. Once his other-self got some time to process what the Wen siblings had done, he would be able to move them out of his “kill all Wens” plan. He hoped he would get a chance to thank them.

(Or maybe he’d let Yanli thank them for him; she was much better at that sort of thing.)

Then, after a moment of thought, Jiang Cheng’s body went slack again. He rested against the bed like a corpse. Unnaturally calm, Wei Wuxian gave a Jiang Yanli-style smile and began to explain.

“You’ve been asleep for a few days. You’re very weak right now. Come and eat something.”

Jiang Cheng didn’t move.

They had seen traces of it before, but it was becoming more and more obvious that Jiang Cheng would rather die than live on without his core. Slowly, his family and new friends crowded around him, trying to offer support.

Jiang Cheng thought it was rather stupid of them (*he* still had his core, after all), but opted against saying anything when a warm and fuzzy feeling began to spread across his chest.

“Jiang Cheng, come on. Eat.”

Wei Wuxian's words were ignored. From there, the watchers were treated to a montage of Wei Wuxian's continuous attempts. However, when the subject has no desire to live, it doesn't matter how hard you try.

Time passed, yet Jiang Cheng didn't move at all. He didn't ask any questions, drink any water, or eat any food. It seemed that all he desired was death.

'*Well, if this doesn't push Wei Wuxian into seaking out desperate measures, then nothing will,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*So then, little Patriarch, what is your solution to this?*'

In some ways, a success here would be even more impressive than demonic cultivation.

(Wen Qing, who had spent years researching the topic and only made it as far as a theoretical transfer, watched intently for any clues she could find.)

Finally, Wei Wuxian caved in.

"Do you really want to die?" he asked, looking down.

"I can't seek revenge even when I'm alive. Why shouldn't I die? Maybe I'll be lucky enough to turn into a ferocious ghost."

"A-Cheng-"

"I know. I-I know," he assured. "*I* wouldn't do that. It's just that he's… right now he's…."

He cut off, distracted by the absolute anguish spreading across Wei Wuxian's face.

"You've undergone soul calming ceremonies since you were young. Even if you die, you won't be able to turn into a ferocious ghost," Wei Wuxian reminded him, pushing some more food forward.

"If I can't seek revenge regardless of whether I'm dead or alive, then why would it matter which of the two I am?"

The last of Wei Wuxian's resistance seemed to crumble before their eyes.

"You better not do anything stupid," Jiang Cheng hissed at his brother.

Wei Wuxian tried to speak with him more, but, no matter what he said, Jiang Cheng refused to respond. For some time, Wei Wuxian sat by the bed, looking at him.

"You're going to die of dehydration if you don't drink soon," Madam Yu growled, watching her stupid, *stupid* son gradually erode away. Without access to his core, Jiang Cheng couldn't practice inedia.

If Wei Wuxian didn't do something, Jiang Cheng was going to *die.*

"Sorry," Jiang Cheng whispered, too soft for anyone to hear.

Then, Wei Wuxian slapped his knees and stood up, immediately moving to busy himself. The watchers flashed forward in time to evening, right as Wei Wuxian finished making a meal. Unfortunately, it was just as bright red as all of Wei Wuxian's meals.

He set everything on the table, then spoke, "Get up. It's time for dinner."

Jiang Cheng ignored him.

The real version breathed out in frustration, annoyed at his other-self. Then again, he couldn't even *imagine* losing his core. People who lost theirs had a high chance of committing suicidal.

The simulated Jiang Cheng, who had lost *everything else* too, had all the more reason to feel that way.

Wei Wuxian didn't blink at Jiang Cheng's reaction. Instead, he calmly picked up his chopsticks and smiled mischievously.

"If you don't replenish your strength, how are we going to get back your golden core?"

At 'golden core' Jiang Cheng finally blinked.

Lan Wangji breathed out in a disbelieving half-laugh, "Of course he has something."

"My…" in addition to not having had water in quite some time, the shock of Wei Wuxian's words made it nearly impossible for Jiang Cheng to speak.

Jin Zixuan laughed, "I *knew it*. I knew he could do it!"

"Wei-xiong is just destined to attempt the impossible, isn't he?"

"Or maybe he's lying?" Lan Qiren suggested. "He would probably be willing to say anything if it meant Jiang Cheng would eat a little."

"It would be proven wrong immediately," Lan Xichen disagreed. "Besides, we know the future Jiang Wanyin has a golden core, so-"

"So that boy genuinely archived the impossible," Madam Yu furnished. Despite the words, there wasn't the slightest trace of annoyance or jealousy in her tone.

Wei Wuxian was once again doing the impossible for her son.

And it seemed like the simulated Jiang Cheng was starting to realize that as well.

"My core?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"That's right. You didn't hear a word wrong. I said we're going to 'get back your golden core.'"

Jiang Cheng moved his lips, speaking through a crackly, dry throat, "...You know how?"

"I do."

Wen Qing stepped closer, unwilling to so much as *blink* on the off chance that she might miss something.

Finally, Wei Wuxian turned to face him.

"Did you forget who my mother was? Who Cangse Sanren studied under?"

"Studied under? Wait, then he-"

"...You mean…. You mean…." Jiang Cheng couldn't even bring himself to say it.

Nie Mingjue laughed, "I guess if anyone could do that, it would be her."

"It means I can take you to Baoshan Sanren's mountain."

For a brief moment, every mouth gaped open in shock.

"An immortal," Jin Guangshan whispered. With a connection like that, Wei Wuxian was more than just a good investment — he was quite possibly the most valuable piece on the board.

Wei Wuxian wouldn't lie about this, not now. He wouldn't raise Jiang Cheng's hope for nothing. Which meant he had a free ticket to a miracle from an immortal.

No one could speak.

"But…" Jiang Cheng whispered. "I thought you'd forgotten everything from your childhood."

Remembering what Wei Wuxian had told Lan Wangji about his only memory of his parents, traces of suspicion began to slip back into several minds.

"I remember a few things," Wei Wuxian responded vaguely. "Some phrases were repeated to me so many times that even I haven't been able to forget them. I can still hear a woman's voice repeating something to me, telling me a location and giving me instructions. The voice said that if I ever find myself in a hopeless situation, I can go up the mountain and ask the immortal for help."

If it was Baoshan Sanren….

"That just might work," Lan Qiren acknowledged.

Nie Huaisang laughed, "Wow, so the future you sorta owes Wei Wuxian your core, huh?"

“Wei Wuxian is the reason I lost it to begin with, it cancels out,” Jiang Cheng laughed back, too overjoyed to even pretend to be angry. If what they had seen of the 13-years-later future was true, then it absolutely, 100%, worked.

But-

“He’s giving me his chance at a miracle?” Jiang Cheng wondered.

“Of course he is,” Jiang Yanli answered. “We’re siblings. You’re both willing to give up anything for each other.”

Although he didn’t say so out loud, Wen Ruohan wondered how much of Wei Wuxian’s decision was based on the last orders Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian gave him.

(He thought he had failed to protect Jiang Cheng. If he was willing to do anything to fix it, then there was much more at play than a ‘sibling’ willing to sacrifice himself.)

(Then again, the Jiangs had truly sunken their teeth deep into Wei Wuxian. It was equally possible that the boy was genuinely doing this just because he cared.)

Wen Ruohan told himself to keep his mind open to the possibilities.

Regardless of the reason for Wei Wuxian’s offer, it was still enough to make Jiang Cheng roll out of bed. When he threw himself over the table, Wei Wuxian handed a bowl and a pair of chopsticks to him.

“Eat,” he ordered.

“I think he’s turning into you,” Jin Zixuan whispered, making Jiang Yanli laugh delightedly. It was all going to be fine; Wei Wuxian had a solution.

Of course he did. Sometimes, it seemed like he could do *anything.*

Lan Wangji stared in awe.

Seeing that Jiang Cheng was hesitating, Wei Wuxian reiterated, “Eat. Either we talk while eating, or we sit in silence.”

Jiang Cheng immediately swept food into his mouth, powering through the overwhelming spice.

Seeing this, Madam Yu felt an earlier thought return anew: no one in the world was better for her son than Wei Wuxian. And to think she had spent years trying to separate them.

How was she supposed to talk to him now?

Once he confirmed that Jiang Cheng had started, Wei Wuxian felt comfortable explaining, “I’ll take you there in a few days.”

“Today!”

Wei Wuxian laughed, "What's the rush for? Do you think a centuries old immortal will disappear in just a few days? It'll take a few days because there are many taboos in place. If you anger the master, it'll be over for both of us."

Jiang Fengmian shook his head, gaping in awe, "I can't believe he remembers all of those."

"Wei-xiong's memory makes absolutely no sense," Nie Huaisang decided.

"You… are you lying to me?" Jiang Cheng asked, suspicion growing.

Instead of answering, Wei Wuxian took out a sack of purple cloth.

"Yunmeng Jiang fabric?" Madam Jin wondered aloud.

Eyes downcast, Wei Wuxian pursed his lips, then explained "I asked Wen Ning to find Madam Yu and Uncle Jiangs' bodies. They've been… properly buried now. He also grabbed this for us."

Disbelievingly, Jiang Fengmian slowly turned and bowed to Wen Qing, "Thank you. This is… a debt that can never be repaid."

Jiang Cheng looked down, and found Jiang Fengmian's hair ornament and a clarity bell inside the sack.

At the reminder of what had been lost, the watchers' good mood fluctuated back and forth. Jiang Yanli was forced to look away, unable to stare at the reminder of her parents' fates.

A clear stream of tears fell down Jiang Cheng's cheeks. His breathing became fractured, and he slowly sank to his knees, bowing before the symbols of his parents.

Not speaking another word, Wei Wuxian joined him. He moved into position, bowing lowly out of respect for Madam Yu and the former Sect Leader Jiang.

In the presence of such a scene, no one could bring themselves to speak.

The world around them faded away.

Taking shallow breaths, Jiang Yanli quickly wiped her returning tears.

No one was quite sure what to feel. On one hand, things had reached an all-time low: Jiang Cheng's core had been destroyed, something their glimpse at the further future had caused them to believe was impossible. Anger at the Wens, pity for Jiang Cheng, and embarrassment on Jiang Cheng's part were all prevalent.

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian knew how to fix it.

"I keep forgetting that his Grandmaster is Baoshan Sanren," Nie Mingjue laughed.

Xichen smiled as well, "I think we all forgot. It's just so…"

“Unbelievable,” Wen Qing finished. “Considering that he has no connection to his father’s family, but has a free wish from Baoshan Sanren-”

“I know,” Madam Yu responded, cutting her off. Normally, Wen Qing would have been annoyed by that, but she understood. Of all the things both versions of Madam Yu had done, calling him “son of a servant” was probably the least important.

There was no reason for Wen Qing to press the matter.

Throughout the interaction, Wen Ruohan’s eyes remained glued on Wen Qing. Unlike the death-glares being given to the rest of the Wens, Wen Qing was being accepted without reservation.

Which meant-

There was a sound of shuffling, and then someone cleared their throat.

“Um… Everyone? Hi, um…. Are you… is it better now? Have you… I-”

“A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian responded. “Thank you for contacting us again. Yes, we’re better now.”

Wei Wuxian was silent for a moment as he analyzed Jiang Fengmian’s voice, searching for a hint of hesitance, fear, or spiritual possession. Not finding anything, he breathed out a sigh of relief.

“That’s good — that’s great. I’m… I’m glad.”

In a complete reverse of last time, the watchers were fairly positive, while Wei Wuxian appeared uncomfortable. Though, given what had happened last time, they couldn’t blame him.

(Madam Yu looked down, her other-self’s last words to the boy echoing in her head.)

“The Concealment Zone Add-On is going pretty well,” Wei Wuxian explained, picking up energy. “When I visited the Lans a little while ago, I got the idea to use musical cultivation as a way to more easily manipulate the simulation. I tried it out, and it’s working fantastically! Wen Ning and I were practicing it earlier since he’s apparently going to need to be involved when we apply the Concealment Zone, so we put on a little performance for the kids. I played the dizi, and he used a fǒu. I even managed to get fourth-shidi to join in and play his eru. It was great!”

Remembering the Wei Wuxian in the flash forward — the one who had taken on an entire *squadron* with just a dizi — left the watchers stunned speechless for a moment.

After a long period of thought, Lan Qiren instructed, “Be careful. Manipulating that kind of energy is dangerous.”

Despite the disapproval, his tone was far from the uncaring condemnation most had expected.

“Yeah, I had a lot of trouble at first. Luckily, using the return message feature didn’t require much energy, and since then Mo Xuanyu has been really helping me out.”

“That explains it,” Madam Jin muttered. If Jiang Cheng was *known* for hunting demonic cultivations down, there would have to be a significant number of people who could use it in the future. With instructions from the Yiling Patriarch himself, it was no surprise that the real Wei Wuxian was learning demonic cultivation much earlier than his other-self had.

And, because the cultivation was needed to contact them, not even Lan Qiren could raise a fuss over it.

“Well, we’ll probably be done soon. Everyone in Lotus Pier has been super nice about it. They haven’t even really complained about the experiments and flute-playing!”

“And everyone else?”

“...You already know about the help Wen Ning is offering me. And the Lans have contacted me whenever they have questions, and the Nie Sect provided me with a lot of texts! It’s going great!”

If it hadn’t been for the pause before he spoke, they might have believed that.

It seemed the Lans were still distant, the Nie couldn’t provide much help, the Wens were trying to manipulate Wei Wuxian, and the Jins were too class-focused to listen to the son of a servant.

A sting bit at Madam Yu’s heart.

“So, anything I can do for you dearly beloved sect leaders?”

“Wei Ying!”

“Uh, yes?” Wei Wuxian responded, instantly regretting what he had just said. He had forgotten, for a moment, that Madam Yu was present as well.

He tensed apprehensively.

“I…” Madam Yu clenched her fists, nearly unable to speak. “I…”

“Madam Yu?”

“...I apologize.”

More than one jaw dropped open.

“...I’m sorry, I-could you say that again?”

“I *said*, ‘I’m sorry.’ Are you deaf?”

“Right, right. No, it’s… um, there’s nothing for you to be sorry for?”

“Do you accept my apology or not?!”

“I do,” Wei Wuxian rushed to say through his confusion. “Um… I’m glad you’re all doing better?”

“About to be much better soon!” Nie Huaisang laughed, glancing at Jiang Cheng. As soon as Jiang Cheng’s core was back, they would be able to take the fight to the Wens.

“O… kay?”

Then, Huaisang clapped his hands together, “Oh, speaking of that-”

“Speaking of what?”

“Do you know where Baoshan Sanren’s mountain is?”

Several confused gazes flashed his way, and Wen Ruohan huffed a slight laugh. It seemed both he and Nie Huaisang weren’t entirely convinced by Wei Wuxian’s story.

A pause, and then “You need Baoshan Sanren?”

“Yup!” Huaisang lied through his teeth. “It’s really, really important.”

“...Is it.”

His skepticism couldn’t have been more clear.

“Actually, it is,” Jiang Fengmian countered, chuckling lightly.

“Super important,” Jin Zixuan added.

“Life changing!”

“Ground breaking!”

“It’ll shock Jiang Cheng to the core!”

“Oh, shut up!” JIang Cheng snapped at a laughing Huaisang. “Wei Wuxian, just tell us. Do you think you’d be able to find Baoshan Sanren’s mountain?”

The watchers might be joking around, but the fact that even Jiang Fengmian thought it was important made Wei Wuxian hesitate to say ‘no.’ There had been no objection regarding its importance, not even from the super-serious-don’t-know-the-meaning-of-the-word-’fun’ Lans present.

It seemed genuinely important.

If that was the case, then there was no way Wei Wuxian would give up before trying.

“W-well, I don’t know off the top of my head, but I could try going to some of the places my parents took me. I bet if I searched through them, I could find something. Maybe.”

After thinking it over for a moment, Huaisang accepted the explanation. He couldn't figure out another way for Wei Wuxian to have helped himself remember. And, as Jiang Cheng *did* recover his core, there weren't any other possibilities.

"I see. No need to look into it, I was just asking. Thank you, Wei-xiong!"

"...Sure. Anything else?"

"Just one thing," Wen Ruohan's grin widened. "I need you to pass a message along. Tell my son that Wen Ning can invite you to Qishan if you need any of our resources. It would be nice for you two to get closer."

Wen Qing froze.

"Thank you, Your Excellency. I'll tell him. Since it seems like you got things figured out, I might go back to checking in every few segments. Would that be okay?"

"I.. wait, A-Xian don-"

"Is there something wrong?" Wen Ruohan asked. "If you're not feeling well, you're always welcome to leave."

The watchers froze. If they objected too much, Wen Ruohan was willing to walk out of the simulation and start the Sunshot Campaign immediately.

"...No, nothing," Jiang Fengmian answered hesitantly. "...Checking in every few days is fine."

"...If you're sure."

"I am…. Stay safe, A-Xian."

The exact opposite of his other-self's last words to the boy.

"Okay! Bye Bye~"

His voice vanished.

Wringing her hands together, Wen Qing turned and said, "Your Excellency, my brother-"

"Shouldn't be spending so much time away from Qishan," Wen Ruohan explained. "If he and Wei Wuxian need our resources, then who am I to deny them? Though, I must commend you on a job well done."

"Excuse me?"

"If it weren't for you, Wei Wuxian might have died there, and demonic cultivation would never have been invented," Wen Ruohan explained, smiling without a trace of his earlier anger. "The relationship you and Wen Ning have formed with Wei Wuxian could be instrumental to the future of the Wen Clan."

And now, he was keeping Wen Ning in Qishan so that Wen Xu could watch carefully for any sign of betrayal.

“And of course, should anything happen to those two, I’m sure you’ll want to be nearby. Neither of us want Wen Ning or Wei Wuxian to be damaged.”

‘*But you would hurt them, if it meant punishing Wen Qing?*’ Lan Qiren thought. ‘*Or do your plans regarding Wei Wuxian involve him being hurt regardless, and you want to make sure the best doctor in the world is on standby to keep him safe?*’

Either way, Wen Qing heard the threat loud and clear.

(Wen Ruohan had thought long and hard about this. On one hand, Wen Qing's actions meant wringing her neck would be too merciful a punishment. On the other, who else could he trust with Wei Wuxian's health?)

(And, if he happened to change his mind later, there would be nowhere for Wen Qing to run.)

Jiang Yanli cast a nervous glance between Wen Qing and Wen Ruohan. Before, it had seemed inevitable that Wen Qing and Wen Ning would be kicked out of the Wen Clan, if not *killed* for their treason. That created a simple line dividing Wen Qing from Wen Ruohan.

But instead, Wen Ruohan had *strengthened* her family’s ties to the main branch, and made it so that, when they got out, it would be extremely likely that Wen Ning would be *in* Qishan.

Wen Qing couldn’t leave without Wen Ruohan knowing, and she wouldn’t be able to get Wen Ning out of Qishan before he found them. It wasn’t quite a hostage situation — Wen Xu didn’t know why Wen Ning was under watch, and Wen Ning had no reason to betray the sect — but it was skirting the edge so closely that the smallest tap would cause it to fall.

If she wanted to ensure her brother was safe (and away from Qishan), she would have to leave *now*.

But then her questions would remain unanswered.

Baoshan Sanren was going to do what she couldn’t. In all her years of study, all Wen Qing had been able to theorize was how to transfer cores, not make new ones. She briefly considered that Wei Wuxian might have chosen to do that, but quickly rejected the idea. Wei Wuxian might be able to kidnap an enemy with a suitable core, and she was fairly confident that the operation was painless and perfectly safe for person receiving it. However, when it came to the person giving the core, she wasn't so certain. If the patient needed to be kept awake or if she couldn't use anesthetics (two very likely possibilities in her untested theory), then it would be impossible for the donor to make it through the operation — especially if they were unwilling.

They would die, and then Jiang Cheng would die. His future self was alive, so Baoshan Sanren had restored his core.

But was finding out about Baoshan Sanren's medical abilities really worth risking her brother's life?

No, of course not.

But she still didn't know how Wen Ning died.

For the longest time, she had thought Wei Wuxian hunted him down to add him to his ghost army. She didn't know why, and she didn't know how, but that had seemed certain.

It wasn't now.

She couldn't leave until she knew how her brother died.

Wen Qing looked away, conceding to her sect leader's desires.

The interaction between Wen Qing and Wen Ruohan did not go unnoticed by the other watchers; Huaisang felt that it was time to switch topics.

"Say, now that we know that the whole 'Wei Wuxian is responsible for the fall of Yunmeng' thing is wrong, how much do we believe the other things that group said?"

"It wasn't technically false," Lan Wangji pointed out. "Wei Ying made the right decision, but it's not as though the people we heard at the beginning were intentionally lying."

"But… you don't really think he killed A-Jie, do you?" Jiang Cheng asked. "I mean… if nothing else, you love him. Why would you suggest that?"

Lan Wangji jumped at that statement, hating at the way his budding, uncertain feelings were treated like an inevitable fact. The invasiveness of the situation was grating him.

He fell silent.

"Demonic cultivation corrupts," Lan Qiren answered. "All of us know that he would never choose to do something like that, but he obviously thinks that the power demonic cultivation offers is worth it. I won't condemn him for being tempted by the opportunity for revenge, but that doesn't change the fact that the things he does as a result of the corruption are his fault."

"Besides," Lan Xichen added solemnly. "When we first learned about it, it was from his point of view. He was remembering the things people said, and had no defense."

Nie Huaisang hummed, thinking that over, and the Jiangs clenched their fists.

"Still," Wen Ruohan laughed. "You wouldn't have won otherwise."

"We don't know that-"

"I think we do," he disagreed. "They said the Yiling Patriarch was an ally of the sects during the Sunshot Campaign. If everyone reviles him, and yet he's still considered a major contributor, then he did so much that no one could deny it."

After a pause, Lan Xichen stood up, “In this world, we won’t need to resort to demonic cultivation. In that world, we did. However, we also know *why* Wei Wuxian felt pressured into that. Rather than blaming him, it seems more appropriate to consider how *you* caused its creation.”

“I may have prompted it, but unlike all of you, *Wei Wuxian* knew this was coming.”

“And then he fixed it,” Jin Ziuan added. “Once Wei Wuxian invents demonic cultivation, you don’t stand a chance!”

“He won’t need it in this world, but he still succeeded there,” Lan Wangji added.

Madam Yu huffed, “A-Cheng losing his core was the worst thing you could have possibly done, and Wei Wuxian managed to fix even that. After this, things will inevitably get better.”

“It can’t get worse than this,” Jiang Fengmian agreed. “We’ll only go up from here.”

They knew Wei Wuxian killed Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan, so the Wens wouldn’t touch them. They knew Lan Wangji wasn’t sect leader, so Xichen would survive. They knew Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng would turn out stronger than ever. They knew Wei Wuxian died later, so the Wens wouldn’t hurt him again. The narrative showed a build in tension, so the scenes were probably arranged to escalate. What could possibly be worse than losing your core?

The watchers were confident that from here on out, it could only get better.

(Nie Huaisang thought back to his *seventeen year old* friend trying to fight the world, and decided he wasn’t so sure of that.)

Chapter End Notes

You obviously don’t have to agree with me, but I thought I could try and explain my thought process for what I wanted to show. MXTX revealed Jiang Cheng’s sacrifice right at the end of the book. This shows who Jiang Cheng was: no matter what happened between them afterwards, there was a time in which Jiang Cheng loved Wei Wuxian. He’s not *the* villain, and probably won’t continue chasing Wei Wuxian down/hunting demonic cultivators. It also shows us how much Jiang Cheng has developed: he doesn’t try to tell Wei Wuxian what he did because, after everything that’s happened, he knows it doesn’t matter anymore. I appreciate and understand that, but I felt like my story didn’t need those things because the watchers can just talk to the real/adult Jiang Cheng once they get out; there’s no point.

On the other hand, the core transfer reveal is done where it is because that’s where MXTX thought it would leave the strongest impact. We’re getting unending disasters now, so everyone’s subconsciously preparing for the worst. On the other hand, after the second siege of burial mounds, we’re somewhat lured into a false sense of security. This

makes the reveal that much more heartbreaking. I like it this way, so I’m leaving that where it is. :)

Spoiler #2: It Gets Much, Much Worse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hello, Xiongzhang,” Lan Wangji greeted as he sat down.

“Wangji,” Lan Xichen smiled warmly. “How are you and Young Master Wei doing?”

For a moment, Lan Wangji seemed to glow with happiness at his brother’s question. Although Lan Xichen and Wei Wuxian hadn’t made any concrete plans about whether or not to interfere with Meng Yao, the conversations they had seemed to be greatly improving their relationship.

“A little overworked,” he finally answered. “Unfortunately, we received some troubling news.”

“Oh?”

“Apparently, when Sizhui and the others used Wei Ying’s invention, they were somewhat careless,” he glanced up. “There’s a chance that Wen Ruohan is inside the simulation as well.”

“Wen Ruohan?” Lan Xichen gasped out, his eyes going wide. “How sure are you?”

“...Wei Ying has a few doubts,” Lan Wangji frowned. “His younger self heavily implied it while he was speaking to us, but, as we don’t actually know what’s happening in that dimension, it’s… difficult to tell whether he’s right.”

It was bad enough when the younger Wei Wuxian revealed that the people within the simulation didn’t want to leave. Now, the chance of creating a far *worse* world had become exceptionally high.

“Do you have any way to confirm?”

“Wei Ying thinks he knows a way for us to go inside the simulation. We won’t be able to talk to the watchers, but he thinks we’ll be able to see them,” he paused. “...Would you like to join us?”

And leave seclusion, went unsaid.

For a strange, terrifying moment, Lan Xichen actually considered it. To leave seclusion — to rejoin society without his sworn brothers haunting him — and help. To return to work. To offer assistance.

His hands began to tremble.

Leave now? How could he? How could he even consider that when he still didn't understand what went wrong? He knew he shouldn't have trusted ~~A-Yao~~ Jin Guangyao, but he didn't know when he should have stopped. He had no idea when some trust became too much.

How could he trust himself to make the right decision now?

(They wouldn't need him anyways.)

But he still hadn't convinced Wei Wuxian to help the other-dimension's Meng Yao.

But was that really the right thing to do?

Xichen flinched when he felt a hand cover his trembling ones, and looked up to meet his brother's eyes.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked," Lan Wangji frowned.

"No. No, you were right to do so. I… just don't think I'm ready yet."

Lan Wangji nodded once in understanding.

"...I hope the other Wei Wuxian is wrong," Lan Xichen finally said.

Another nod, "So do I."

When the simulation started again, the optimistic energy of the watchers still hadn't faded away.

And the simulation reinforced that mindset. After days of darkness and fire and blood, the crisp, cool mountains — even if they couldn't feel the wind — were a blessing.

Smiling brightly, Jiang Yanli did a little twirl, observing the mountains in their entirety.

(Jin Zixuan's cheeks turned scarlet at the sight.)

"Is this really where Baoshan Sanren lives?" Jiang Cheng asked, staring up at a steep path.

Frowning, Lan Wangji looked around. Based on the environment and wildlife there, it looked like they were somewhere near Yiling. Was that really where Baoshan Sanren's mountain was?

Then again, they had almost no information on the immortal; this mountain was just as likely as any other.

(Nevertheless, Wen Qing, who also recognized the foliage, stored that piece of information away in the back of her mind.)

From behind Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian began to laugh reassuringly and responded, "It's definitely where she lives. Why do you keep doubting me?"

'*Because some of the things you said don't quite add up, Wei-xiong,*' Nie Huaisang thought, smiling outwardly.

"Why would I lie to you? So that you can be happy for a few days only to crash into even bigger disappointment?"

However, Huaisang had no response to that. After all, Jiang Cheng *had* gotten his core back; there weren't any other possibilities.

"That's it," Wei Wuxian decided. "Come and let me cover your eyes."

'*Cover his eyes?*' Wen Ruohan wondered. '*Do you have something to hide?*'

Or was that just part of the instructions his mother had left him with?

Jiang Cheng turned, allowing Wei Wuxian to wrap cloth around his head, blocking his sight. Then, Wei Wuxian handed him a walking stick.

"Walk slowly," he advised. "There are no beasts here. You'll be fine. Remember, you can't take the blindfold off even if you fall. Never…. It's forbidden. We can't upset the grandmaster or the other seniors. Whatever they tell you to do, you have to do."

The more he talked, the more awed Jin Guangshan felt. Wei Wuxian had ties to a whole culture full of independent governance and rules, which no one else could access. How on earth had he been satisfied being constantly demeaned as a "son of a servant" by Madam Yu?

(Unless he was lying.)

But how else could the Jiang heir have regained his core?

Clearing his throat, Wei Wuxian concluded, "And don't forget the most important part. If you're asked who you are, you have to say that you're the son of Cangse Sanren. You can't reveal your true identity."

"Okay!"

Madam Yu flinched slightly, momentarily furious at the fact that *her son* was going to claim that Cangse Sanren was his *mother*. However, a moment later, that anger vanished.

If Jiang Cheng claimed to be Wei Wuxian, then Wei Wuxian would never be able to ask Baoshan Sanren for something. She would think he was lying about his identity.

Wei Wuxian had given up his only chance at a miracle for her son.

"Stupid, stupid boy," she whispered, unable to keep the gratitude out of her voice.

Wei Wuxian reached forward, then hesitated, his hand hovering just above Jiang Cheng. After a moment's pause, he forced himself to move again, squeezing his brother's shoulder and giving him a little push up the trail.

"Go ahead. You'll need to finish the journey on your own. I'll wait for you at the foot of the mountain."

Jiang Cheng nodded once, then began walking up the path.

While most of the watchers paid attention to Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji instead focused his eyes on Wei Wuxian's expression. As Jiang Cheng stepped higher and higher up the mountain, a million indistinguishable emotions flashed across Wei Wuxian's face.

Wangji moved closer, wishing there was something he could do to help.

Finally, Wei Wuxian turned and walked in the opposite direction.

"Thank you, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered.

"Seven days later!" Lan Jingyi enthusiastically declared.

Wei Wuxian waited anxiously at the bottom of a mountain, pushing dirt around with a stick. There were terribly dark circles under his eyes, and his hand seemed to tremble slightly.

Despite that, Jiang Cheng couldn't help feeling a little giddy. His core would be back now! Wei Wuxian was clearly tired after having waited for seven days, but soon it would all work out. The so-called "Massacre of Lotus Pier" was over. Now, with his and Wei Wuxian's power added into the mix, their victory was inevitable.

"...Say," Huaisang began, "I'd always figured Wei-xiong would start using his demonic cultivation during a high-stress situation. When the Massacre of Lotus Pier started, I figured that would be it, but, clearly, that was wrong."

"I guess?"

"Of course, of course. But then… what do you think will motivate him?"

"...Your theory had merit," Lan Qiren admitted. At the beginning, he had felt like after they got out they would need to spend every waking moment actively working to prevent Wei Wuxian from inventing demonic cultivation. Now, even Lan Qiren knew that wasn't the case.

When Wei Wuxian had promised to not use demonic cultivation after rescuing the bunnies, he had meant it.

However-

"Revenge is a powerful source of temptation," Lan Qiren added. "In addition, the Massacre took place over a single night. It's impossible to invent anything that quickly. This is more logical."

Nie Huaisang made a slight shrug of acceptance, acknowledging the man's point.

A satisfied grin crept onto Nie Mingjue's face at the reminder of the weapon Wei Wuxian was about to give them. It was unorthodox, certainly — and somewhat unethical, considering the usage of corpses — but, after Lotus Pier, no one could bring themselves to care.

An impatient grin spread out across Jiang Cheng's face.

As Wei Wuxian began to make another circle in the dirt, he heard a *crack*.

Something was there.

Lan Wangji stood up, subconsciously preparing himself to respond in case a threat attacked Wei Wuxian. He knew he couldn't interfere, but the adrenaline pumping through his veins remained.

"...Maybe I'm back?" Jiang Cheng hoped.

Wei Wuxian scanned around, but couldn't see anything unusual in the grotto.

"An animal?" Lan Xichen suggested, though even he knew that was optimistic.

The simulation hadn't shown them anything irrelevant so far, and that seemed likely to continue.

Soon, they could hear Wei Wuxian's breathing pick up in speed. Combined with the darkness under his eyes, Wei Wuxian's form began to resemble that of a cornered animal.

Something moved behind him.

A shadow struck his chest.

"*What the-*"

Wei Wuxian flew back, smashing into a tree. He collapsed in a heap, coughing out blood onto his dirt-stained robes.

His attacker, Wen Zhuliu, paused, eyes widening in surprise.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji whispered, running to his side.

Wei Wuxian hurried to his feet.

A sword pierced through from behind.

Jiang Yanli *screamed.*

He collapsed to the ground, Wen Chao's smirking face behind him.

"Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng shouted.

The Jiang, Lan, and Nie leaders gaped in shock at the scene.

“A-Li!” Jin Zixuan shouted, watching his fiance collapse to her knees. He called out her name again, but she couldn’t hear him because Jiang Cheng might be okay now but her brother had just been *impaled* and now-

Wen Chao laughed, “What? Already down on your knees?”

‘*Where he should be,*’ Wen Chao thought gleefully, turning to his father for encouragement. However, neither Wen Ruohan nor Wen Qing were paying attention to him. Instead, they stared down at Wei Wuxian.

‘*His core wasn’t broken.*’

In the past, when Wen Zhuliu broke a core, they would be brought in to watch it shatter. Wei Wuxian was the focus of the simulation — it wouldn’t skip that. Now, it was entirely possible that Wen Zhuliu simply hadn’t used his core melting hand. To most of the watchers who barely knew him, that was the obvious conclusion.

However, to the two people present who knew Wen Zhuliu well enough to see the shock that had flashed across his face, that wasn’t a reasonable explanation.

Right as he tried to get up, Wei Wuxian coughed out an ocean of blood. He was kicked back to the ground. Weakened, Wei Wuxian trembled and gasped, unable to raise himself again.

“What’s wrong? Fight back! I thought you were supposed to be good.”

“You *ambushed* him!” Jiang Cheng screamed. “How dare you-”

“Someone like you isn’t worth the dirt he walks on!” Jin Zixuan hissed.

“Wei Wuxian will *always* be better than you,” Nie Mingjue growled.

Right as Wen Chao was about to respond, he felt his soul leave his incorperal body.

‘*They can’t do anything to you,*’ he reminded himself. ‘*There’s no reason to be scared.*’

And yet he couldn’t bring himself to move at all. Because, kneeling next to the illusion of Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji glared at him with an all-consuming *hate*.

A darkness seemed to surround the second jade, only broken by the piercing gleam of his golden eyes. All Wen Chao could do was tremble like a frightened animal under the gaze of the being before him.

Lan Wangji was *seething* in rage.

“You brat!” Wen Chao’s simulation self mocked. “Didn’t you jump around quite a bit back in the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s cave? You’re finished with just a strike? Go on! Keep on jumping! Show me how arrogant you are!”

Revulsion was painted across every face.

Then, the dark cloud around Lan Wangji turned into an all consuming *abyss*.

Xichen flinched, "Wangji-"

"W-what?" Wen Chao stuttered. "He's a fugitive. I'm not… I'm doing…. Don't look at me like that! When we get out, I'll tell my Wei Wuxian to-"

"*D*o**n'** ***t*** **s**p***e*** ***a****k* h*i*s **n*****a****m*e."

Wen Chao's jaw snapped shut.

Silently, Jin Guangshan moved closer to loom over the collapsed and injured Wei Wuxian, enjoying his view of the trembling boy.

"Where's Jiang Cheng?" Wen Chao asked.

Other than the heavy breaths leaving his body, Wei Wuxian remained silent.

"What? Don't want to talk?" he laughed. "You can't save him even if you stay silent. Right now, Jiang Cheng is merely a waste of space, no better than livestock."

Madam Yu growled defensively.

"The Yunmeng Jiang Clan is finished."

Here, finally, Wei Wuxian glanced up, glaring at the gathered Wens.

Rolling her eyes, Wen Qing looked away from her ecstatic second young master. Even ignoring the lacking morality of his claims, they knew for a fact that what Wen Chao had said wasn't true.

The Yunmeng Jiang Clan still existed in the future; it was the Wen Clan that was gone.

"What's wrong?" Wen Chao asked. "Your old masters are gone. You should wag your tail and bow down before your new ones."

Enthusiastically, Wen Chao nodded to himself. This was what they were trying to do; this was what would happen once they got out of the simulation.

"Wen-gongzi~" Wang Lingjiao whined, "Quick! Chop off his hand. He still owes me one of those!"

"You-"

"Contemptful *witch!*"

"No, no, no, let's not hurry," Wen Chao decided.

A low growl began to escape Lan Wangji's throat.

Meanwhile, Wen Zhuliu stood on the side, staring down at his hand in confusion.

And only three people thought to look his way.

(Nie Huaisang, Wen Qing and Wen Ruohan stared at the Core Melting Hand, watching the unquestionable confusion on the man's face. He had tried to break Wei Wuxian's core.)

(And he had failed.)

(Why?)

Unaware of the thoughts running through his bodyguard, the simulated Wen Chao hummed for a bit and continued, "Yes, that's right. It took us so much time to find the brat, let's not rush this."

Jiang Cheng growled.

"Chopping off his hand causes too much bleeding. If he dies afterwards then it won't be fun anymore."

"What are you planning on doing?!" Lan Wangji shouted.

Not a single person was surprised by Lan Wangji's loss of composure.

(Wei Wuxian was heroic. And kind. And self-sacrificing. And beautiful. And clever. And smart. And brave. He was, in some ways, perfect.)

'*What are you going to do to him?*' was a question on *everyone's* mind.

"Alright! First melt his core," Wen Chao ordered, kneeling down to grab Wei Wuxian's hair and yank it back, forcing the boy to make eye contact with him. "I want to hear him scream like that bastard Jiang Cheng did!"

Madam Yu growled, then stood.

"With his core back, there'll be nothing you can do to him anymore," she hissed, glaring at the Wens.

Wang Lingjiao laughed, "Great idea, Young Master Wen! Melt his core first, then chop off his hand!"

Wen Qing, Jiang Yanli, Lan Xichen, and Nie Mingjue jumped forward to join Lan Wangji.

"*Run!*" Nie Huaisang begged.

Instead, Wei Wuxian spat blood onto Wen Chao's cheek.

Jin Guangshan's lips quirked up in amusement.

Wei Wuxian began to laugh.

“What are you *doing?!*” Jiang Cheng shouted.

“A-Xian, just run!” Jiang Yanli begged. “Try to escape.”

But he was now surrounded by Wens on all sides. Even without the Core Melting Hand being present, escape would be impossible.

“Sure!” Wei Wuxian laughed again. “Whatever torture techniques you’ve got. Bring them out!”

“*A-Xian!*” Jiang Yanli cried out, her voice some impossible mix between begging and angry and hopeless and terrified and horribly, *horribly* confused.

“What is he *doing?*” Lan Wangji hissed.

No one had an answer.

Wang Lingjiao grinned, “How long will you keep saying that?”

Wen Chao nodded, “You’re so close to death, and yet you’re still playing hero?”

“What is *wrong* with him?!” Jiang Cheng demanded, watching his brother all but *beg* for death.

Wen Qing growled, “Is he *trying* to provoke Wen Chao?”

She’d meant it to be a rhetorical question.

It wasn’t.

“It’s exactly because I’m close to death that I’m happy!” Wei Wuxian explained, grinning wildly. “Go on, torture me if you dare! The crueler the better!”

The madness in his eyes made them step back.

“After I die, I’ll return as a fierce ghost. I’ll haunt you until you’re forced to join me!”

Wen Chao flinched back.

Every mouth gaped open in silence.

“Ha! A fierce ghost?” Wen Chao took a deep breath and recovered his nerve, smacking Wei Wuxian’s head to the ground.

“A-Xian!”

“Young Masters of the great sects have received soul calming ceremonies since they were young,” Wen Chao laughed, unknowingly repeating what Wei Wuxian had told Jiang Cheng just a few days before.

But Wei Wuxian still laughed.

“Oh, young master, you couldn’t be more wrong,” he snickered, his tone turning patronizing. “I haven’t been raised in the Jiang Clan since birth. I’m the son of rogue cultivators. I haven’t gone through the ceremony.”

If that was the case….

“He could do it,” Nie Huaisang whispered. “He could return as a fierce ghost.”

If Wen Chao killed him, Wei Wuxian would hunt him down and repay the favor.

It still might not happen.

But it also might.

“If I die full of resentment, I’ll pay you back a *hundredfold* after my death!”

Wen Chao paled.

Somewhat relieved, Lan Wangji moved back to his chair, allowing the Jiangs to huddle around Wei Wuxian.

(He hadn’t even *met* Wei Wuxian yet; what right did he have to stand between him and his family?)

“Young Master Wen, don’t listen to this nonsense,” Wang Lingjiao suggested. “Not everyone becomes a ferocious ghost after they die — the time, place, and situation all need to be right. Besides, even if he did become one, the Qishan Wen Sect can handle a single ghost.”

And yet Wen Chao still hesitated.

Some hope began to reform in the watchers.

“Maybe he escapes now?” Nie Huaisang suggested.

“He has to,” Jiang Yanli agreed. “I mean, this — it’s not *supposed to* happen.”

Jiang Cheng was getting his core back. It was supposed to be easy from here on out. They were supposed to attack back. Wei Wuxian wasn’t supposed to *die*.

(Yet.)

Annoyed, Wang Lingjiao continued, “Don’t tell me that you’ll let him go just because he threatened you?”

“O-of course not!”

Madam Jin cursed, “I’ll skin her alive.”

Knowing that he’d definitely die, Wei Wuxian grew calm. The bone-deep hatred within him settled into iron-hard determination.

“A-Xian, don’t just *accept* it!” Jiang Yanli protested. Yes, it was true that none of them could see a way out of this, but Wei Wuxian could do anything. And yet, it seemed like he wasn’t planning on fighting back at all.

(Wen Ruohan’s gaze turned back to Wen Zhuliu, who was still staring down at his hand with a befuddled expression.)

Finally, Wen Chao couldn’t stand the indifference he saw in Wei Wuxian. There was annoyance that his threats weren’t working, but there was something else too.

Fear.

He kicked Wei Wuxian’s stomach, and the other Wen disciples quickly followed suit.

“You’re welcome to try,” Nie Mingjue threatened, seeing the gleeful look on Wen Chao’s face. “Just see what happens.”

Bruises formed on Wei Wuxian’s face, chest, and limbs, painting his body black and blue. A Wen landed a kick straight to his back, knocking the wind out of him.

Lan Wangji bit his tongue.

After what felt like an eternity, Wen Chao commanded, “Enough!”

Wei Wuxian spat out another mouthful of blood, then looked back, still calm.

‘*Is it time to kill me?*’ he wondered. ‘*It won’t be all that different even if I die. Can’t be worse than living! And there’s a one in three chance I’ll become a fierce ghost and seek revenge.*’

This thought filled him with an unparalleled thrill.

“Wait… what?”

“He’s just *accepting* it?”

“Not fighting back-”

“What is he *doing?!*”

As more outraged shouts passed through the watchers, Wen Ruohan glared down at the boy. Given what he knew of Wei Wuxian, this behavior was odd. The circumstances left him with limited options, but it was undeniable that the Wei Wuxian before him was *trying* to die.

Why?

"Can’t be worse than living,” he had said.

Why?

(To cover up the fact that he no longer has a golden core.)

That was impossible.

(But what other explanation was there?)

How could Wen Zhuliu not know? The Core Melting Hand was the only way a cultivator could lose their core.

'No,' both Wen Ruohan and Wen Qing realized simultaneously. '*There's one more possibility.*'

"But that's impossible," Wen Qing whispered, too quietly for anyone but Wen Ruohan to hear.

As shamelessly as always, Wei Wuxian continued to cheekily stare up at Wen Chao. Faced with such an unusual prisoner, Wen Chao felt somewhat intimidated. All this time, he had been planning on bringing Wei Wuxian to his knees and making him beg for mercy.

The former had happened, but the latter was seeming more unlikely by the second.

Then, his mouth turned into a smirk, and he came to a decision.

"Wei Ying, you think you're fearless, don't you? That you're brave and mighty, huh?"

Lan Wangji's teeth grit together.

"Oh, look at that. A Wen-dog who can speak like a human."

Wen Chao slammed his fist down.

"Laughing even in the face of danger," Jin Guangshan muttered. Glancing up momentarily, Wen Ruohan nodded in agreement, then looked back down.

(Maybe, if he thought back hard enough, he'd be able to come up with another explanation for why Wei Wuxian didn't have his core.)

Then Wen Chao smirked, his smile hideous, "Fine, keep showing off how clever your tongue is! Let's see how long you can keep up this heroic act for!"

Wen Chao motioned to Wei Wuxian, and Wen Zhuliu picked him up.

"No," Lan Qiren whispered, a crushing fear flooding into him until 'Wei Wuxian must leave' overpowered all else. For that moment, even demonic cultivation seemed like a reasonable tactic.

He shook himself out of that thought a moment later, but the fact that it had appeared at all shook him.

'*Nothing is worth it,*' he reminded himself. '*I can see why Wei Wuxian wanted to do that, but no situation could possibly be bad enough to make demonic cultivation worth it.*'

No matter how many times he told himself that, it didn't change the fact that both his nephews looked faint with worry.

As he hung in Wen Zhuliu's arms, Wei Wuxian's body remained slack. After all the injuries he had sustained, he was too weak to run. He had no choice but to lay limp as the Wens mounted their swords and flew to the skies.

His clarity bell broke off and fell to the ground.

Flinching back as if hit, Jiang Fengmian was forced to look away.

(Yes, Jiang Cheng was fine, but what about Wei Wuxian?)

He would also be fine. He was going to invent demonic cultivation and become a terrifying force against the Wens.

(But why did he invent demonic cultivation?)

Mere curiosity. They figured that out in the third segment, when Wei Wuxian first proposed the idea to Lan Qiren.

(He couldn't say that now.)

Then it was desperation. After the Jiang Clan's destruction, why wouldn't he invent it?

(But what's happening next?)

No one had an answer to that.

The watchers were pulled along as the Wens sped off, traveling through the sky with them. Over time, the mountains became farther and farther away, leaving behind the recovering Jiang Cheng.

'*Why are they taking me so high into the air?*' Wei Wuxian wondered, barely conscious through the pain. '*Are they going to drop me from somewhere and let me fall to my death?*'

The trace of hope in his tone slit Jiang Yanli's nerves in two.

"What… what are you doing to him?" she asked Wen Chao. The Wen heir had no answer.

"I… I'm sure it won't be too bad," Jin Zixuan comforted.

"Well, we know he survives," Nie Huaisang pointed out, trying to keep the terror out of his voice. "I'm.. I'm sure he'll be fine. He scared Wen Chao into leaving him alive, so he's probably about to escape."

"Right," Lan Xichen smiled grimly. "We know he survives with all his limbs intact. He's already so injured — how much worse could it get?"

The watchers were flashed forward in time.

Now, they stood on a cliff.

All around them, jagged mountains jabbed into the sky, their dark forms melting into the blackness of the clouds overhead. Not a trace of light escaped the pitch black valley at the bottom of the cliff, looking to be an endless abyss. A faint, red glow shown through in the ravenous darkness.

But the watchers didn't notice any of that.

Wen Ruohan gasped, swaying on his feet. All around him, the air turned to lava. It was as thick as molasse and as hot as the sun. In the simulation, the only thing the watchers could feel was resentful energy.

And nowhere had more of that than here.

Collapsing onto their knees — an ocean of pressure weighing them down — the other watchers struggled to speak.

"Is… is this…."

"It can't be-"

"The Burial Mounds," Wen Ruohan finished. Everyone else gasped out, then found they couldn't breathe in again.

The energy was trying to *suffocate* them.

Squawking crows circled overhead, ignoring the simulated cultivators below. They didn't care about Wen Chao, overlooking the valley maliciously. They didn't care about Wen Zhuliu, who remained as complacent as always. They didn't even care about Wei Wuxian, thrown to the ground so he laid at Wen Chao's feet. They didn't find the mere concept *inexcusable*.

The watchers weren't so indifferent.

"Wei Ying," Wen Chao called out. "Do you have any idea where we are?"

Wei Wuxian forced himself to look up, then flinched.

"That's right," Wen Chao grinned. "The Burial Mounds."

An enormous crack resounded throughout the room. Everyone looked over, startled by the unexpected noise. If they couldn't touch anything, how would that sound get made?

They had forgotten that the one thing they could touch was their chairs.

And Lan Wangji's grip had snapped part of his off.

Even crushed by resentful energy, his fury was strong enough to snap stone in two.

And yet there was nothing he could do.

Completely unhindered, the simulated Wen Chao continued, "It's right in Yiling. I'm sure even you Yunmeng people have heard about it. It's a mountain of corpses — an ancient battleground. You'll be able to dig up a corpse anywhere on this mountain."

In addition to being the sight of a battle, it was also a place for dumping unwanted corpses.

The resentful energy here was higher than anywhere else in the world.

"Look at the darkness in the air. Tsk, tsk, tsk, the hostile energy is strong, isn't it? And the resentful energy is thick, *isn't it*? Even the Wen Sect couldn't do anything about it. We could only block it off."

With a smirk, his foot slammed Wei Wuxian against the ground.

"How *dare you*?!" Nie Mingjue shouted, reaching out to grab Wen Chao. But it was pointless. Not only did his hand phase through, but the pressure weighing him down rendered him barely mobile to begin with.

Even though he was collapsed against the ground, Wen Chao's smile only grew at Nie Mingjue's attempt. Not even Lan Wangji's strongest glare could dampen Wen Chao's exhilaration.

'*Look,*' his eyes seemed to say, glowing in perverse delight. '*Look at the power I have over The Yiling Patriarch. His life is mine to command, as it should be*.'

"Wei Ying, can you smell the resentment here?"

His foot grinded Wei Wuxian's head into the ground.

"*You-*"

"What? *This* is too much?" Wen Ruohan smirked. "You were perfectly fine with everything Wei Wuxian sacrificed for *your* son. His back, his chance to escape, his miracle from Baoshan Sanren, his-"

"Enough," Jiang Fengmian commanded, watching his wife's anger build.

Then, the simulated Wen Chao began to laugh, "Don't forget, anyone who ventures inside remains trapped for all eternity."

"He'll get out," Jiang Cheng told himself. "He has to."

"Of course," Lan Xichen agreed. Throwing someone into the *Burial Mounds* surpassed even the worst torture imaginable.

No one could survive that.

And Wei Wuxian would live past this, so-

Wen Chao grabbed Wei Wuxian's hair to pull him up, a grotesque grin on his face.

He would live, so this couldn't be happening.

Without wasting another second, Wen Chao took off into the air again, hovering high enough off the ground to not be pulled in by the pit of death around him.

Because no one could escape it.

So Wei Wuxian *couldn't* be thrown in.

The simulation lifted the watchers into the sky as the Wens brought Wei Wuxian high above the valley of darkness. Still paralized from his injuries, Wei Wuxian couldn't fight back.

It didn't make sense for Wei Wuxian to be thrown into the Burial Mounds.

And yet-

"No," Lan Wangji whispered, forcing himself up on trembling arms. "Stop! This-"

"This isn't right!" the crushed Nie Huaisang gasped out, barely conscious under the pressure. "This isn't-he survives. He lives past this, how-"

"Wei Wuxian, what are you doing? *Move!*" Jiang Cheng shouted.

And yet Wei Wuxian could do nothing as Wen Chao finally located the part of the mounds with the densest resentful energy.

"Stop!"

"This isn't-"

"It's not *supposed* to be this way! He's supposed to be fine!"

"*Wei Ying!*" Lan Wangji shouted, his Lan strength finally giving him the power to shakily stand and stumble towards Wen Chao. Soon, he had forced his body to get within a meter of distance from him.

He reached out to the simulated body of Wei Wuxian.

And phased right through.

Wen Chao smirked.

"So you-"

"No-".

“Will never-”

“Stop!”

“Escape!”

Wei Wuxian fell.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji shouted, instantly sinking to his knees to catch Wei Wuxian, but slamming against the floor instead. He punched the invisible barrier beneath him, but could only watch.

Wei Wuxian fell down….

Down….

Down….

Down.

“*Wei Ying,*” Lan Wangji whispered brokenly, slamming his fists helplessly against the floor. “*Wei Ying!*”

No response.

‘*No,*’ he thought, barely registering the resentful energy anymore. ‘*No, this can’t be happening. Not to him — not to Wei Ying. No, no, no-*’

Crows swarmed overhead and Wen Chao smirked, watching the figure of Wei Wuxian shrink as he fell into an abyss from which none had ever escaped.

Every watcher had become as pale as ivory.

And as silent as a corpse.

Wei Wuxian had vanished into the darkness below.

“What?” Jiang Yanli whispered, vulnerably.

“He didn’t…” Jin Zixuan struggled to speak the words. “He didn’t escape.”

“What?” Jiang Yanli repeated.

No one had an answer.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. Wei Wuxian had found a way to fix Jiang Cheng’s core — that was the end of their struggle. They were supposed to group up with the Lans. They were supposed to start the Sunshot Campaign. They were supposed to be victorious in battle after battle against the Wens.

(Wei Wuxian was supposed to invent demonic cultivation out of a desire for revenge.)

"*...What?*"

The pressure weighing them down abruptly vanished as the watchers were brought back to the grassy grotto Wei Wuxian was abducted from.

In the center of the field, Wei Wuxian's clarity bell laid next to a puddle of his own blood.

At the sight of that, the shock which had frozen Jiang Yanli in place turned into *terror*. Her breathing picking up to a jackrabbit's pace, and light-headedness overcame her.

Ignoring the way Jin Zixuan tried to offer his sister assistance, Jiang Cheng nearly tilted over, equally dizzy.

Wei Wuxian was in the Burial Mounds.

Wei Wuxian had been captured and *thrown* into the Burial Mounds.

Wei Wuxian had been whipped, choked, chased, stabbed, beaten up, and *then* was tossed into the Burial Mounds. He hadn't escaped Wen Chao.

But that didn't make sense.

Wei Wuxian was the strong one. He was always able to bounce back up no matter what Yu Ziyuan did to him, and he could spend as much time goofing off as he wanted while still being the head disciple. He wasn't *supposed* to be in danger — that just wasn't who Wei Wuxian was.

(He got trapped in a cave with a murderous Xuanwu.)

(But he killed it. It wasn't that big of a deal.)

"M-maybe he escapes?" Jiang Cheng suggested. "Maybe… the Burial Mounds aren't that big of a deal after all. If that idiot got away just fine, then I'm sure everything'll be… fine."

"You think its reputation is exaggerated?"

"Probably," Jiang Cheng shrugged in a false show of bravado.

Breathing gradually returning to normal thanks to Jin Zixuan, Jiang Yanli added, "That makes sense. I'm sure the fall will hurt him, but… maybe he'll figure out demonic cultivation relatively fast? Es-especially if the rumors about the Burial Mounds are actually exaggerated."

Her parents nodded in agreement.

(Wen Ruohan wondered whether he should remind them that the pressure of the Burial Mounds had brought nearly all of them to their knees. Even if the feeling was amplified according to the weakness of whoever's memories were used to make it, something like that couldn't be just written off.)

(Then, he remembered Wen Zhuliu's expression, and decided he had more important things to worry about.)

Slowly, the watchers began to hear a shuffling sound as someone walked through the forest.

Jiang Cheng straightened up, hoping it would be him. Maybe he would rescue Wei Wuxian before the day was up.

Instead, pure white robes swept into the clearing, and Lan Wangji approached the fallen bell. As soon as he laid eyes on it, his expression crumbled into despair.

He knew Wei Wuxian was most likely dead.

Despite knowing that wasn't true, Wen Qing thought Lan Wangji's reaction was accurate. She had seen Wen Zhuliu's reaction. She didn't see how it could be possible — couldn't see how *anyone* would make that choice — but, with the way Wei Wuxian hadn't been able to fight back, it was seeming more and more likely by the second.

How would you know someone was dead? You might be able to see their ghost, but other than that certain injuries would count. He was decapitated, of course he's dead. He was hung, of course he's dead.

He gave away his core and was thrown into the Burial Mounds, of course he's dead.

And yet, Wei Wuxian had somehow survived.

(Were the Burial Mounds really not as bad as they seemed?)

Slowly, Lan Wangji reached forward and picked up the bell, then held it close to his chest.

"Lan-er-gongzi," someone behind him greeted. "According to the villagers, Wei-gongzi and Jiang-gongzi may have come through here a few days ago. Our people have searched everywhere, but have failed to find them."

Lan Wangji's hand gripped the bell tighter, then slowly stored it inside his robe.

His brother's trembling hands made Lan Xichen's heart break a little. Lan Wangji was seventeen. He shouldn't need to be strong and lead a resistance while his friend might be dead.

(Wei Wuxian was just seventeen too, wasn't he?)

Lan Xichen sat down, forcing himself to take deep breaths.

The Lan disciple frowned at the silence, "Are they…."

He didn't finish, and Lan Wangji ignored him to look up at the sky.

“Wei Ying,” he whispered, praying desperately with just a name.

Realizing the implications, Jiang Fengmian nodded once at Lan Wangji and said, “Thank you for looking for them. Your assistance is greatly appreciated.”

All three Lans nodded in return.

Behind them, Madam Yu was forced to look away. By now, the simulation had made it unquestionably obvious that the Wens would have attacked Lotus Pier regardless of Wei Wuxian’s actions in the cave. But, if he hadn’t interfered and had allowed Lan Wangji to die, then the Jiang Clan would have received no help after the massacre.

She scoffed.

With an internal roll of her eyes, Madam Yu bitterly thought, ‘*Of course the wonder-child was right. He’s just incapable of doing anything wrong, isn’t he?*’

~~But now he’s stuck in the Burial Mounds. Isn’t he.~~

(Then again, knowing that boy, he’d probably have the whole place conquered and loyal to him within the hour. Madam Yu didn’t know why she was so worried; they already knew he would survive.)

As the grassy clearing faded away, Sizhui’s voice returned.

“In the twentieth year of the reign of Xuanzheng, the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng was destroyed.”

At least half the people present flinched at the reminder.

(But the head disciple would be fine. They knew he would survive. It was fine.)

“The Qishan Wen clan became more and more aggressive as time went on, trying to set up a supervisory office in every major city.”

Nie Mingjue growled and directed a fierce glare at the Wens, but had nothing to add that hadn’t already been said.

(Nie Huaisang found Lan Sizhui’s tone when discussing the Wens to be a bit odd. Almost… *personally* regretful.)

And continuing in that strangely guilty tone, Lan Sizhui forced himself to conclude, “Any disobedience was met with great misfortune. People shed blood like water.”

‘*Including Wei Wuxian,*’ Wen Qing thought.

Wen Chao had injured him severely before throwing him into the Burial Mounds. So badly, in fact, that Wei Wuxian couldn’t fight back afterwards.

But even *that* didn’t explain Wen Zhuliu.

(Had Wen Zhuliu found him earlier — no, he'd been surprised. Had some sort of beast gotten him? No, he had clearly used his core while escaping Lotus Pier the second time, and Wei Wuxian had stayed close to the unconscious Jiang Cheng since then. Could he still have his core, and just be too tired to use it? Maybe Wen Zhuliu just made a mistake. Maybe Baoshan Sanren had truly recovered Jiang Cheng's core.)

(Or maybe Wen Qing already knew what had happened, and simply couldn't accept that a *coreless teenager* had just been thrown into the Burial Mounds.)

No, she was being ridiculous. Due to an inability to actually test the budding theory, Wen Qing's recent paper on core transfers was not widely known. However, even with just the beginnings of the theory down, she and Wen Ruohan knew no one would ever volunteer to test it.

Wen Qing scanned the room, and saw that, despite his uncanny ability to make accurate predictions, Nie Huaisang didn't seem at all concerned by the possibility. That was no surprise; Nie Huaisang had never been interested in cultivation, so he would have no reason to know about an obscure, untestable cultivation theory. But Wen Qing knew.

And Wen Ruohan knew.

Suddenly, she made eye contact with him.

After Wen Ruohan had blackmailed her into keeping her silence on certain topics, she had done everything in her power to avoid his attention. However, now she felt like she had no choice.

After all, it *couldn't* be possible. *No one* was willing to test that. No one would agree to it. Wei Wuxian was one of the strongest in their generation; he had spent almost every day of every week of the last eight years practicing and refining and working on his core. It was his *life*. And besides, the Jiangs had whipped him and disrespected him and blamed him and then choked him. He *couldn't* have that much loyalty for them.

Not even Wen Zhuliu would give Wen Ruohan his *core*.

And yet, Wen Qing and Wen Ruohan had both looked towards each other, the same thought running through their heads: they didn't have another explanation.

But it *couldn't* be true.

(But, if it was, no reward Wen Ruohan could possibly offer Wei Wuxian would dent his loyalty to the Jiangs.)

Nie Huaisang watched the two of them, lacking the cultivation background to know of the operation, but recognizing the confusion in their faces all the same.

As the pair thought through that, the simulation continued.

"Jinlintai, Lanling City."

Jin Zixuan perked up slightly in hope.

That hope instantly disappeared when the laughter of many women began to ring out.

A slight growl escaped Madam Jin's throat.

Jin Guangshan sat in a pavilion, surrounded on all sides by girls with the Jin's peonies tucked into their hair.

Both Madam Yu and Madam Jin gave simultaneous scoffs at the scene, but neither was surprised.

"Clan Leader," one giggled, sitting on his lap and feeding him a cherry.

"Clan Leader! Clan Leader!" a far more frantic voice called out.

Jin Zixuan followed the sound of the voice, and saw the terrified face of an older disciple.

"What is it?" Jin Guangshan inquired, glaring at the interruption. "Did Lan Qiren come to persuade me to cooperate again? Tell him I'm out."

"We're not helping?!" Madam Jin demanded, and the Lans, Nies, and Jiangs turned deep glares on the Jins.

(Jin Zixuan sank down into his seat.)

"I see," was all Wen Ruohan said, eyes alight with amusement. Although they surely helped out towards the end, Jin Guangshan's hesitance proved the Jins were not on the Sunshot Campaigns side. Jin Guangshan nodded rapidly, relieved that Wen Ruohan had seen this.

"N-no, Clan Leader," the disciple reported. "It's about Qishan. The Qishan Wen Clan has sent a message."

"Ah? What is it?"

Nie Mingjue stood, "So you'll listen to *them*, but not-"

"They… want to establish a supervisory office here."

Everyone froze in their arguments and focused on the simulation.

"You'll have to submit all our great weapons within five days. Or… or…."

"Or what?"

"Or we will face the same fate… as the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng."

Jiang Cheng and Jin Ziuan both stood up, glaring as Wen Chao began to laugh.

But Jin Guangshan merely sighed, "No need for that…. Send word to His Excellency. I would like to meet with him."

Appeasing Qishan with funds and ignoring the other clans, it seemed.

Face flushing, Jin Zixuan quickly sat down, unwilling to make eye contact with anyone else.

"Gusu," Sizhui explained, allowing the world around them to fade into the black of night. The only sound in the tranquil landscape was the rushing of one of the Cloud Recesses' waterfalls.

For a moment, the sight filled Lan Xichen with an intense homesickness. Although they had been inside the simulation for less than a week, it truly felt like years had passed.

In the half-second before Lan Xichen managed to regain his usual calm smile, Jiang Yanli saw his distress and sent him a blinding smile of reassurance.

(In the backs of their minds, no one's thoughts left Wei Wuxian for even a second.)

~🎵~

Guqin music rang through the air as Lan Wangji's experienced hands began to strum. The player's talent was undeniable.

"Ah, Lan-xiong, it sounds so nice~" Nie Huaisang commented, an appreciator of the arts as always.

"Not for entertainment," Lan Wangji responded.

A moment later, the meaning behind those words became clear. Lan Wangji was playing inquiry, pulling in spirits from all around to answer his call. Glowing balls of condensed spiritual energy began gathering around him, attracted to the sound like crows to jewels.

At the end of a riverbank just outside the Cloud Recesses, Lan Wangji sat and played, joined only by a single Lan elder. Once the spirits came into range, they began floating idly around him, observing the area.

One of the first things they noticed was the clarity bell presented to them on a nearby rock.

At the reminder of what had happened to Wei Wuxian, the watchers' good mood faltered.

After all, *no one* could survive the Burial Mounds. It didn't matter what those civilians in the first segment said; it was suicide to go there. Then again, that was almost a reassurance; even if time was passing without Wei Wuxian's return, they were sure he had gotten out within the first few hours. Perhaps he was simply recovering before he returned. Or maybe he had lost his memory after the fall, and didn't know there was a place he needed to return to.

(The Jiangs never thought there would come a time in which they would *hope* Wei Wuxian had gotten a concussion.)

Having given the spirits ample time to observe the bell, Lan Wangji finally asked his question.

He waited, and one of the spirits ventured forward to answer.

It bounced lightly on a guqin string, then backed off.

Lan Wangji's face fell.

Footsteps began to approach, and he instantly turned towards them.

Lan Qiren tensed, praying that his nephew wouldn't be put in danger.

Silently, Lan Wangji stood up, preparing for a possible confrontation with the intruder. A moment later, a man stepping into the clearing, and Lan Wangji's tension instantly switched to shock.

"Xiongzhang," Lan Wangji breathed out, relief rushing into him at once.

"Da-gongzi!" the Lan disciple beside Lan Wangji proclaimed, his entire demeanor lighting up. And indeed, Lan Xichen stood before them, looking completely unharmed.

Lan Qiren collapsed into his seat, showing none of the order and discipline he was so known for. Lan Xichen had returned; his nephew had survived.

The gratitude he felt was so potent it overcame all other emotions he could have felt.

His nephew was *alive*.

(He had been sure that was the case based off the future, but the future hadn't stopped Wei Wuxian from being thrown into the Burial Mounds. His hopes had been tentative at best.)

(But now Xichen was *here*. Safe. Alive.)

The storm raging in Lan Qiren's heart finally began to disperse.

"Wangji," Lan Xichen greeted. "I trust you've been well."

A moment later, Lan Wangji managed to ease the shock on his face and return to his usual blank expression. He bowed lowly, saluting his brother.

"Xiongzhang," he whispered.

No one else could see it, but the blatant *relief* that remained on his brother's expression sent a wave of warmth through Lan Xichen.

Now, if only they knew what was happening to Wei Wuxian.

"I heard someone playing inquiry and knew it was you," Lan Xichen commented, then hesitated. "It seems Wei-gongzi is still missing."

Lan Wangji clenched his fists, turning another vicious glare towards the smirking Wen Chao.

“But it’s so strange,” the unknown Lan disciple muttered. “It’s been several days, and we’ve found plenty of information regarding Jiang-gongzi, but nothing about Wei-gongzi. Has he been caught by the Wen Clan or not?”

“Nothing?” Jiang Yanli repeated.

“Well, if there’s anywhere that no spirit would be able to find out about….”

Nie Mingjue didn’t finish his sentence, but he didn’t have to. If there was anywhere no spirit would be able to get out of, it would be the Burial Mounds.

(But surely Wei Wuxian couldn’t still be there. It was *impossible* to survive.)

~~But where else would it be impossible to find him?~~

“Lan-er-gongzi has been asking everyone we see, including the deceased, but there hasn’t been a single clue about Wei-gongzi. It’s like he just disappeared.”

Graceful as ever, Lan Wangji merely reached forward to pick up Wei Wuxian’s clarity bell, not acknowledging the hopelessness of the situation.

“Thank you,” Jiang Yanli whispered, bowing slightly to Lan Wangji. Unconsciously, Jin Zixuan did the same, then flinched back in surprise.

Technically, Wei Wuxian didn’t know him. Technically, they weren’t even friends. Technically, he had no right to thank Lan Wangji for a kindness done to someone unrelated to him. Technically, Wei Wuxian wasn’t legally a member of the Jiang family. Technically — and even though they had *seen* their *son* — he and Jiang Yanli weren’t married yet.

And yet, every time he saw Wei Wuxian triumph over impossible odds or struggle through unimaginable circumstances, all he could think was “that’s my brother in law.”

Realizing what he had done, Jiang Yanli wiped away the tears that had begun forming in her eyes again and smiled at him in gratitude.

Keeping his expression blank, Lan Wangji stared down at the clarity bell.

Finally, he spoke:

“...Whether he’s dead or alive, there will be clues somewhere. We will find an answer.”

Watching what was turning out to be the greatest love story of all time unfold before his eyes, Nie Huaisangs overjoyed tears begin to form.

(If his worry for Wei Wuxian was also contributing to the water in his eyes, no one had to know but himself.)

(Wei Wuxian escaped the Burial Mounds. The only question was how long he stayed inside.)

After a pause, Lan Wangji turned. With a dramatic sweep of his sleeve, he dissipated the gathered spirits, then bowed to them in thanks for their help.

"Wei-gongzi is strong and clever," Lan Xichen commented. "He'll be fine."

Jiang Cheng nodded furiously in agreement. After all, they knew Wei Wuxian would survive this. No one knew what actually happened in the Burial Mounds, but it couldn't be too bad. Besides, how long could he have stayed there?

(Hours? Days? *Weeks?* Surely not.)

(Given that it was Wei Wuxian, he had probably already escaped. Attempting the impossible as always.)

Lan Xichen stepped closer to his brother, advising, "Wangji, don't worry too much."

Lan Wangji's gaze fell to the ground, unresponsive.

Seeing that his reassurance had proved unsuccessful, Lan Xichen continued, "A few months ago, I heard that you and Uncle had begun working on uniting the clans. How much progress have you made?"

Wen Ruohan listened with interest.

(What else was he supposed to do? For a second, he had been foolish enough to think that Wei Wuxian would *give up his core* for the person who had just choked him half to death. Clearly, the simulation had warped his perception of normalcy. He would need to remain vigilant.)

"Most clans are hesitant and haven't made a final decision," Lan Wangji responded calmly.

"Your brother's pretty amazing," Nie Mingjue muttered, causing Lan Xichen to smile warmly. Given who they were up against, Nie Mingjue was sure he was involved too. That didn't make Lan Wangji stepping forward and possibly making himself a target any less impressive.

Seeing the proud expressions on the two older brothers, Lan Wangji felt his ears warm to a dusty pink.

On the other hand, unaware that the Sunshot Campaign would be successful, Lan Xichen seemed to deflate at the clans' hesitance.

"That isn't a surprise," he admitted. "The Qishan Wen clan is powerful. They destroyed the Yunmeng Jiang Clan in a single night. Not every clan will have the courage to face them."

With every word, Wen Chao seemed to glow in happiness. Soon, Lan Qiren, Nie Mingjue, Jiang Cheng, and Yu Ziyuan were glaring at him in disgust.

The dark clouds which had covered the moon were swept away. Moonlight entered the grotto in which the Lans stood, allowing their white robes to shine in the night.

Seeing the sweet glow, Lan Wangji couldn't help but be reminded of the playful gleam in Wei Wuxian's silver eyes.

The simulated Lan Wangji looked up, "The Wen Clan's power won't last forever."

Hearing that, Lan Xichen began to smile.

Lan Qiren nodded once, giving Lan Wangji an approving gaze.

(Wei Wuxian would surely escape the Burial Mounds soon. Perhaps, once he got out, he and Wangji would get a chance to talk things through. Lan Qiren still didn't *approve* of Wei Wuxian, but he could at least acknowledge that there were many, many worse options.)

"Cloud Recesses, Gusu," Sizhui explained.

The watchers were moved within the Cloud Recesses, and the sky brightened under the sun.

It was the next day.

Or the day after.

Or the day after that.

But it *had* to be the next day, because Wei Wuxian still hadn't been found.

"He's probably escaped already," Madam Yu muttered to herself. "It would be just like him to hold off on showing up so that he could make it more dramatic."

Everyone wanted nothing more than for her to be right.

As the watchers mentally prayed, the Lan conference hall formed around them. Dozens of Sect Leaders from minor and major sects were seated around, and Lan Qiren stood in the center.

"Everyone," he greeted sternly. "The Qishan Wen Clan has pushed us too far. If you continue to stand back, you'll soon find yourselves in the line of fire."

Silently, Lan Qiren and Jiang Fengmian began wondering whether they would be holding a similar meeting once they left the simulation.

Their agreement not to punish for things that 'hadn't occurred yet' was seeming more and more tenuous by the hour.

As they listened, the other sect leaders made eye contact with each other.

Then, a laugh.

“Lan-xiansheng, our presence here proves we want to discuss it. It’s just….”

“Sect Leader Jin, what are you trying to say?”

Sneaking closer to Jiang Yanli for reassurance, Jin Zixuan hoped his father’s next words would be acceptable. As a filial son, Jin Zixuan knew better than to speak openly against his father, but — no matter how flowery Jin Guangshan managed to word it — an alliance with the Wen Sect now was inexcusable.

‘*They killed A-Li’s parents!*’ he metally shouted at his simulated father. ‘*They threw Wei Wuxian into the Burial Mounds! Even if you don’t care about that, at least care that they tried to kill me!*’

But Jin Guangshan merely fluttered his fan delicately, explaining, “In my humble opinion, we shouldn’t rush towards fighting against the Wen Clan. Right now may be too hasty.”

Nie Mingjue didn’t even try to hide his scoff.

“I agree,” another Sect Leader said. “We still have time to think it through.”

As he spoke the watchers’ view was switched to the path leading to the conference hall, where a hooded figure walked with Lan Xichen. The figure’s face was shrouded in shadow, but their stride was confident and sure.

The sect leader continued, “If we really provoke Wen Ruohan, then there’s no way out.”

Practically oozing arrogance, Wen Chao lifted his head high and smirked at the sect leader who had just spoken. Nie Huaisang couldn’t help thinking that the gathered sect leaders would be far more willing to fight the Wen if they could see Wen Chao’s expression.

On the other hand, Wen Ruohan seemed to be barely listening to the discussion. He would occasionally glance up and take note of who had spoken, but it was clear that his mind was elsewhere. By the third time that happened, Nie Huaisang’s confusion had reached its peak; wasn’t the Sunshot Campaign the part Wen Ruohan cared about the most? Why wasn’t he paying attention to such a pivotal moment?

Unbeknownst to everyone except Wen Qing, Wen Ruohan was frantically racking his brain for an explanation — a sign — a bit of doubt — *anything* that would indicate his theory wasn’t true. A *core transfer* was so impossible that he almost didn’t want to bother.

And yet, the longer he spent trying to come up with proof against it, the more probable it seemed.

(After all, Wen Qing had already proven whose side she was on.)

“Timing?” Lan Qiren repeated. “Way out? You’re saying you’d rather give up your treasures and live under their supervision?!”

A deep laughter answered him.

“Forgive me for being blunt,” Nie Mingjue began. “But if we give up our weapons and techniques to Wen Ruohan, we’ll just be lambs waiting for the slaughter!”

Jiang Yanli flinched at the description, remembering the piles and piles of Jiang disciple bodies she had been forced to watch. Seeing that, Jiang Fengmian silently moved to kneel beside his daughter.

“I…” he cut off, unsure of where to go from there. He had plenty of experience guiding and instructing, but comforting was unfortunately outside of his skill set. The inexperience he had made him hesitate.

But it was because of that hesitance that Jiang Cheng had apparently spent years thinking he didn’t love him.

“A-Die?” she asked.

“...It won’t happen with us,” he whispered, smiling warmly. “I promise.”

Although it wasn’t quite as reassuring as he had hoped it would be, it nonetheless caused his daughter to give a small laugh, then nod once at him.

“I know.”

As they spoke to each other, the sect leader who had commented huffed in indignation at Nie Mingjue.

“How dare-”

“Now, now,” Jin Guangshan placated. “Everyone calm down. I just mean we should avoid direct confrontation. Qingheng-jun was also powerful, and the Gusu Lan clan is one of the strongest, but the end result of the Wens' attack remained as expected.”

The door swung open.

“Thank you for your generous praise,” Lan Xichen said, voice alight with easy humor. “In my opinion, a lack of capabilities isn’t an excuse to avoid one’s enemies.”

Lan Qiren’s face lit up into a genuine smile when he saw who had arrived.

“From what you just said,” Lan Xichen continued, “does the Lanling Jin clan plan to surrender and serve the Wen clan?”

‘*It’s about time someone said that to him,*’ Nie Mingjue thought, making eye contact with Lan Xichen and smirking gleefully.

Despite rolling his eyes, Lan Xichen couldn’t keep an amused smile off his face.

“What?” Jin Guangshan instantly backed up, clearing his throat and looking away.

Jin Zixuan was a filial son. He really shouldn’t be feeling as pleased by this as he was.

“Greetings Uncle, clan leaders,” Lan Xichen bowed.

“Xichen. I heard that you were coming back. Why are you so late?”

“Ah, I had to deal with something on my way back. I’m sorry I caused you to worry.”

Lan Qiren reached a hand forward and rested it on Lan Xichen’s shoulder, “it’s alright. I’m glad you’re back. It’s been… months. I’m sure it hasn’t been easy.”

“You’re the one who’s had to work hard,” Xichen replied, smiling warmly.

‘*Months,*’ the real Lan Qiren mentally echoed. ‘*He was gone for months.*’

His gaze landed on Wen Ruohan, and Wei Wuxian’s numerous warnings rang in his head. Refusing to oppose the Wens while they attacked smaller clans had led to his nephew being on the run for months.

‘*It will not happen with us,*’ he promised himself.

“Lan-gongzi!” someone interrupted snidely. “That’s easy for you to say, but the Yunmeng Jiang Clan put up a fight recklessly and ended up being destroyed!”

Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian had too much training to flinch in a political situation like this — virtual or not.

That didn’t stop the words from ringing in their heads.

(Should have prepared better. Should have fought back sooner. Should have acted before letting them nearly immobilize Wei Wuxian. Should’ve, should’ve, should’ve.)

Then, the hooded figure scoffed.

“So you’re saying that if there’s no chance of victory you’re willing to submit to the Qishan Wen Clan?”

“Wait-”

“That voice!” Jiang Yanli stood.

“Who are you?!” a sect leader demanded.

The cloak fell back, and Jiang Cheng stood tall and proud.

“A-Cheng!” Jiang Yanli declared with a cheer.

“Jiang-xiong!”

“Jiang Wangyin,” Lan Xichen’s eyes widened in surprise. Jiang Cheng’s family huddled around him, whispering ecstatically, and infectious smiles spread across all the viewers.

Except for Wen Ruohan.

‘*No longer suicidal,*’ he observed. ‘*Standing proud. No longer thin.*’

All evidence seemed to indicate that Jiang Cheng had his core again.

Everyone else would view this as a miracle only an immortal could achieve. They would think there was no other option. But Wen Qing knew. And Wen Ruohan knew.

But that *couldn’t* be true.

(But. Wen Qing had already joined his side.)

Of course not; she had no reason to help Jiang Cheng.

(But if Wei Wuxian begged her to-)

She knew better than that.

(It was the Wens who had destroyed Jiang Cheng’s core. She might claim to be uninvolved, but did she truly feel that way?)

Guilt wouldn’t control her.

(But she could understand loving your brother.)

But *no one* would offer their own core. The mere suggestion was ludicrous.

(But. Jiang Cheng’s core had reappeared.)

(But. Wen Zhuliu couldn’t destroy Wei Ying’s core.)

(But. Wei Wuxian hadn’t even *tried* to fight back.)

There must be some other explanation-

But.

Unaware of what Jiang Cheng’s presence might mean, the simulated sect leaders reacted in shock.

“Sect Leader Jiang!”

Jiang Cheng flinched.

“Of course you can say such things! The Yunmeng Jiang Clan has already been destroyed!” Sect Leader Yao yelled, causing JIang Cheng’s mouth to switch into a scowl. “We’re different! We need to protect our clansmen!”

“Right,” Jiang Cheng forced his mouth into a smirk. “Everyone has different ideas. *You* may think it’s fine to make slaves and prostitutes of your people, and *you* may be willing to do and tolerate anything for as long as you continue to live.”

Nie Mingjue gave a low, long whistle.

The sect leader reacted in indignation, standing up.

“Jiang Cheng!” he shouted. “Don’t push your luck! You’re trying so hard to persuade us. You just want to seek revenge even if it means taking us down with you!”

“That’s right! I want revenge!”

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian whispered mournfully, making his son glance over. Now that Jiang Cheng had spoken with Jiang Fengmian, he could see that it wasn’t judgement in his father’s tone, but sympathy.

After everything the simulation had shown them, it was hard for there to be anything else.

Jiang Cheng took a deep breath, then hissed, “As long as I can destroy the Wen Clan, I’m willing to do anything! If you don’t have the daring to join me, then sit back and wait for Wen Ruohan to destroy you!”

Lan Xichen raised a hand, silently reminding Jiang Cheng to tone it back.

Nie Mingjue smirked, recognizing the determination on his friend’s face.

“Wen Ruohan is suspicious and cautious. We all know that,” Lan Xichen reminded the gathered sect leaders, speaking so formally that it was impossible to interrupt him. “If we compromise now, we will face even greater trouble in the future.”

“Well said!” Nie Mingjue slammed his cup against the table. “I’ll make this clear right now. Whether you join me or not, I swear I will kill Wen Ruohan!”

Nie Huaisang tensed, turning to the chief cultivator and preparing for an outburst at the blatant rebellion. He waited, but nothing happened. Although Wen Ruohan was still listening, it seemed his thoughts were still occupied by something else.

‘*What on earth could be distracting him during such a pivotal scene?*’ Nie Huaisang wondered.

Nodding once, Lan Xichen saluted Nie Mingjue, saying, “Sect Leader Nie is a righteous man. I’m impressed by your courage. Our Gusu Lan Clan will do the same.”

Wen Chao’s face began turning a flaming red at the open rebellion from all sides.

Jin Guangshan began to look around nervously.

Seeing that, Lan Qiren spoke, “Any who decide to join us should speak now before the whole world. If one does not join now but instead starts taking part halfway through, we’ll have to discuss whether they should be rewarded or punished once the fighting ends.”

At those words, Jin Guangshan's scanning eyes came to an abrupt halt, and he turned towards Lan Qiren.

"H-however, how can we possibly win against Wen Ruohan with just the clans that are present?"

Hearing that, Wen Chao was able to make himself sit down again. That was right: the Wen Clan had Wen Zhuliu and his father. How could the other clans possibly stand up against those two — not to mention their thousands of disciples!

However, Lan Xichen didn't miss a beat and steadily responded, "The Wen Clan may be powerful, but their people are not as loyal as they think. We can persuade the clans they have enslaved to join us,"

And yet Jin Guangshan continued to hesitate.

"But I doubt any of them would take the risk of fighting against the Wen Clan."

Hearing that, Lan Xichen gave a pleasant half-laugh, then gestured outside.

The watchers were brought to the hill around the conference room, where a large group of cultivators were marching uphill. The clan leaders stood up to get a better look, and even Jin Guangshan's eyes widened in surprise.

Before them, an enormous congregation of hundreds of people had gathered. They were the initial army of the Sunshot Campaign.

Here, finally, Wen Ruohan glanced up.

He had always known it would take a while to convert the clans he had conquered into loyal followers, so some rebellion was hardly a surprise. That said, there was no harm in taking some time to memorize the clans of those who were arrogant enough to think they could kill the sun.

The clans began to announce themselves.

"Ouyang Xin from Baling! The Qishan Wen Clan ruined our ancestral shrine and killed my clansmen! Thanks to Lan-er-gongzi, we were able to survive. Now, I bring with me hundreds of clasmen to join you!"

"Wang Jin from Runan! The Wen Clan killed my family and insulted my sisters. I came here at Lan-er-gongzi's invitation! I swear to help destroy the Wen Clan!"

"Fu Huan from Hedong! Lan-er-gongzi helped me, too! I have over 200 people ready to join you!"

Even Jin Guangshan's mouth had dropped open in shock.

"Hanguang-jun, indeed," Wen Ruohan muttered, glancing at the boy.

When the Sunshot Campaign broke out, Nie Mingjue would be annoying, but Wen Ruohan was more than capable of dealing with him personally, should the situation require that.

The Twin Jades of Lan were a bit of an unknown factor — especially considering the power Lan Wangji had shown as "Hanguang-jun" — but he doubted the teenage versions would be able to do much once the Core Melting Hand was brought in. Wen Xu had managed to break Lan Wangji's leg already, after all. They had inspired many people to join them, but he was sure they could be dealt with.

Even if Jin Guangshan wouldn't openly ally with the Wens now that Jin Zixuan had been injured in the camp, Wen Ruohan was certain the man wouldn't be a massive contributor in the Sunshot Campaign. His son was also not a concern.

Yes, this was more than he had expected. The Sunshot Campaign might even survive for a few months — surely longer than many of his highest ranking disciples expected them to — but they still wouldn't win.

(Unless, of course, they got demonic cultivation.)

"Any more objections, Clan Leaders?" Lan Xichen asked. The announcements continued as "Sun Shan," "Li Tong," "Wu Ye," and "Yang Zaihan" introduced themselves, but the point had already been made.

Jin Guangshan broke eye contact.

The Sunshot Campaign was beginning.

Jin Zixuan gave a massive cheer, covering up Wen Chao's grumbles. This was followed by Nie Huaisang and Jiang Cheng, who both began laughing in delight.

"A-Cheng, you got your core back! A-Xian did it!" Jiang Yanli declared, eyes glistening in grateful tears.

"Good job, Wangji, Xichen," Lan Qiren said.

Madam Yu nodded once at her son.

"Great!" Nie Mingjue declared, stepping forward to address the entirety of the gathered crowd. "In the era of Five Emperors, ten suns caused the rivers to dry. The suffering the Wen Clan has brought is no less than that disaster! In ancient times, Da Yi shot down the suns to save the world."

He stepped onto the stage, addressing the hundreds present with an energy that spread like wildfire, and smirked.

"You people who have gathered here are today's Da Yi! We shall name this battle against the Wen Clan The Sunshot Campaign!"

He lifted his cup into the air, and a tremendous cheer broke out across the crowd.

The smiles amongst the watchers were infectious. No one could deny the delight which spread throughout. Then, Nie Huaisang laughed.

“It’s kinda funny. The burning of Lotus Pier started because Wang Lingjiao claimed a kite meant you wanted to ‘shoot down the sun.’ I guess she wasn’t too far off.”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes at that, but even Lan Wangji seemed to smile slightly.

Then wind picked up, and the sky darkened to a stormy black. Crows cawed in the distance like harbingers of doom. An eerie creaking of wood resounded.

When a soul-crushing pressure brought the unprepared to the ground, it removed all doubt as to where they were.

But Wei Wuxian had escaped, hadn’t he? No one could survive the Burial Mounds. They didn’t know how Wei Wuxian could have gotten out, but it made more sense than him surviving there.

Still standing, Wen Ruohan released a shuttering breath as he adjusted to the strain.

‘*Why are we back here?*’

At the dips between the mounds, bones littered the ground. There seemed to be a new skull two feet in any direction. In the distance, there was a trace of movement along the ground.

The figure blended into the shadows behind them, but their dusty red ribbon gave them away.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji breathed out, heartbeat quickening.

Pressed up against the ground, Wei Wuxian struggled to lift his head.

How long had it been? Jiang Cheng had met up with Lan Xichen — had made it all the way to Gusu, in fact. Wouldn’t that mean this was *days* later?

“He’s okay,” Jiang Yanli whispered. “He’s fine. He’s still alive. He’ll be fine.”

With each beat, her heart seemed to jump out of her ribs.

Slowly, Wei Wuxian continued to crawl forward. All around him, the spirits which made up the Burial Mounds’ potent resentful energy whispered and giggled in his ears.

He could barely keep his eyes open.

“Can’t he stand?!” Jin Zixuan demanded. The pressure the watchers felt was what nearby spirits felt. It shouldn’t affect a cultivator to the same degree.

“Thrown,” Lan Wangji whispered. “He was thrown from the sky.”

After a fall from that height, it wouldn't have been surprising if he had died on impact. Were his legs broken? His spine? His ribs?

Wei Wuxian's fingers dug into the dirt as he forced himself to keep moving, ignoring the hisses and screams that echoed in his ears.

Flat against the ground, barely able to drag himself forward. He was being crushed by more resentful energy than anyone had ever felt before. And, in the past week, he had been whipped, choked, slammed against the ground, beaten up by Wen Chao's disciples, hit by the core melting hand, and thrown in.

Were *any* of his bones still intact? He could barely move — could he even breathe? There was so much resentment and what if a rib had punctured his lung or what if his throat had been damaged on collision or what if he had a broken arm or broken leg or gotten a concussion or a-

A hand snatched his ankle.

Nie Huaisang *screamed*.

Wei Wuxian was jerked back, pulled in as the arm sank deeper and deeper into the dirt. It was a fierce corpse, buried under the ground Wei Wuxian had just crawled over.

Wei Wuxian kicked at it and tried to stand.

Nearby resentful energy reacted to Wei Wuxian's movement, condensing into another arm and grabbing the leg trying to kick the corpse away.

Wei Wuxian gasped out.

Jiang Fengmian stood, "A-Xian, run-"

But his movement had attracted more spirits' attention.

They *swarmed.*

"*Wei Ying!*"

***Thousands* of fierce ghosts attacked at once, slamming into his body like a tidal wave. Their screams grew in volume, and they flooded Wei Wuxian's blood with their hate.**

Lan Wangji darted to Wei Wuxian's side, but could do nothing to interfere with the simulation's spirits as they tried crushing Wei Wuxian's bones to dust.

"Get lost!" he shouted, his voice breaking under the physical strain. "All of you, leave!"

The spirits just laughed louder.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji shouted helplessly.

A tornado of resentment formed around him, attracting other fierce corpses to their prey. The bodies lumbered forward, circling around Wei Wuxian and closing in.

"Stop it!" Jiang Cheng shouted, trying to block them from his brother's body.

The corpses walked through the watchers, and Wei Wuian fought to escape. However, no matter how hard he pushed off the ground or twisted, he couldn't move.

A corpse snatched his foot and yanked it close, nearly dislocating his knee and causing him to scream. Wei Wuxian kicked out and dislodged its grip, but the resentful energy swarmed in and flooded his lungs.

Recovering from where it had been kicked back to, the corpse stepped forward again. The spirits followed along, circling around Wei Wuxian.

Soon, they would devour him whole.

Lan Qiren felt his heart stop.

The spirits lifted themselves high into the air — nearly outside the Burial Mounds — then aimed at their prey and *dived*.

They slammed into his chest, and Wei Wuxian choked on his own blood.

Yanli turned away.

The tornado of resentful energy then dispersed, replaced by a white void containing crimson maple leaves. In the center of the void stood Wei Wuxian, his clothes straight and clean despite the way he had dragged his body across the dirt only a few seconds ago.

"A dream?" Nie Mingjue muttered.

"He was exhausted," Wen Qing added. "Given the stress his body is going through, that's no surprise."

The only sound in the void was Wei Wuxian's steady footsteps. Then, in a large sweep, the Lotus Pier formed. It was as lively and vibrant as it was before the Wens had ever shown up.

After the destruction they had been forced to witness, the watchers couldn't help but find the former version of the pier breathtaking.

Wei Wuxian looked up, then flinched back, seeing Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Fengmian sitting at a table up ahead. He heard childish laughter behind him, and turned to see two 10 year olds run by him.

"Wei Wuxian, come on!"

"Jiang Cheng, wait!"

What an unspeakably cruel thing to show someone who had just lost everything. Even knowing her own parents were still alive and well, Jiang Yanli couldn't stop her eyes from watering at the sight.

Jiang Fengmian turned to face the kids, and even Yu Ziyuan's face softened into a smile she had never used in Wei Wuxian's presence before.

Seeing that, the teenage Wei Wuxian smiled warmly.

Lan Wangji detested physical contact with strangers, but, for a moment, the urge to wrap his arms around Wei Wuxian was so strong it overpowered all else.

"A-Xian."

At his shijie's voice, Wei Wuxian lit up even further and glanced to the right, where a thirteen year old illusion of Wei Wuxian sat eating with Jiang Yanli.

"Slowly. Don't choke," she advised.

"I won't! Thanks!"

At the domestic scene, Jiang Yanli couldn't resist the smile that formed on her face. When he saw it, Jin Zixuan began to smile as well.

Right as Wei Wuxian began to approach them, his surroundings rippled and switched to the roof of the Cloud Recesses. It was the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian, standing across from Lan Wangji during their first meeting.

"Here! Emperor's smile!"

"Drinking is forbidden here."

"It seems he values you quite highly," Lan Xichen whispered to his brother. Despite the teasing tone, there was a tension still present in his body.

After all, this was just an illusion; they couldn't forget where the real Wei Wuxian was.

Then, the illusionary Lan Wangji turned towards them.

"Wei Ying!" he shouted.

The illusion disintegrated, and Wei Wuxian's eyes snapped open.

On all sides, resentful energy was shooting into his body. Just as he tried to move, it exploded out. Dead trees were thrown off the ground, and dust was kicked into the air. When it cleared, Wei Wuxian's body was rising unnaturally off the ground.

Two arms made of resentment reached out to lock fingers with Wei Wuxian's, and more arms appeared to wrap around his chest, pulling him in. The nearby fierce corpses reached up like fervent worshipers, hoping for any scraps the spirits left behind.

“It’s sucking him in!”

Lan Wangji reached out and futilely attempted to pull Wei Wuxian up, but there was no way for the other boy to receive any help.

The energy *growled*, and two crimson eyes snapped open next to Wei Wuxian’s head, one spirit separating from the pack to show its starved expression.

Below, the fierce corpses began frantically climbing on top of each other as they fought for a taste. They and the spirits impatiently began to grab at Wei Wuxian’s form, waiting for his flesh to be lowered into their arms.

Where they would *tear* him apart.

Lan Wangji couldn’t move Wei Ying away. He couldn’t stop the fierce corpses. He couldn’t purify the spirits dragging him down. He may be one of the strongest cultivators of his generation, but there was *nothing* he could do to help Wei Wuxian.

His own powerlessness ate him from the inside out.

Then, Wei Wuxian was brought low enough for the yao to reach him.

He *screamed*.

Jiang Yanli turned away.

It was a fight — a *battle*. Each fierce corpses was trying to pull him down but some spirits were trying to pull him up and they were all on different sides so he was being stretched to the left and right and up and down at the same time and and they jerked and yanked and twisted and human bodies were *not supposed to bend that way* and his screams got even louder and-

If he didn’t have a broken arm before, he certainly did now.

Nie Huaisang stood up and ran to his brother, feeling nausea build up in his throat.

It didn’t matter how long Wei Wuxian screamed, the fierce corpses and resentful ghosts had no reason to care.

He snapped his mouth closed and tried fighting back, but the corpses just turned him around and started slamming him into cliffsides to silence him. Meanwhile, the spirits began attacking his body directly. They flew through his veins, making them bulge and crack as they invaded his body like parasites.

His screams became choked-off gasps of agony.

Then, the ground cracked open, and a tsunami of resentful energy swept through the fierce corpses to wrap around Wei Wuxian’s limbs like tendrils. The spirits suffocated him; the corpses broke him; the resentful energy invaded his mind.

In a flash, visions swarmed into Wei Wuxian's thoughts. The burning of Lotus Pier, the Jiangs' bodies.

His eyes opened again, alight not in fear, but determination.

A bony hand scratched at his chest, and a stream of blood began trailing down his arm. The nearby corpses smelled it.

Drooling heavily, the closest one opened its mouth-

"*Stop!*" Wei Wuxian commanded. For a moment, it looked like it would work.

Then, his body *spasmed*.

"*Wei Ying!*"

Just like when he had used demonic cultivation to save the rabbit, the resentful energy poured into his body and made his veins bulge from the strain. Last time he had been in a forest of the Cloud Recesses, fighting a single fierce corpse.

Now he was in the Burial Mounds, fighting *thousands*.

Wei Wuxian gasped out and choked on his scream, not having enough air in his body to make a sound. He thrashed and writhed in the spirits' hold, pain spreading throughout his body.

But the corpse had indeed stopped.

Wei Wuxian wasn't dead yet.

The watchers were silent, watching the boy shake in agony as he fought the resentful energy for control.

Suddenly, Nie Mingjue laughed in a self-deprecating, broken way: "We have to 'keep him away from the temptation,' we said."

Hearing that, Lan Qiren froze.

Ever since the opening scenes, Lan Qiren's main reason for watching the simulation was to figure out how to prevent demonic cultivation from being invented. He needed some way — any way — to keep Wei Wuxian from following his curiosity and rebelliousness to their dark conclusion. He had thought the hardest part would be deciding whether there was a way to stop Wei Wuxian without killing him. That he would need to turn Wei Wuxian away from the power at every turn.

That Wei Wuxian had *chosen* to invent it.

His body continued to shake, and Wei Wuxian slowly gasped out, "Off."

The spirits which had been swarming inside his body and pressing down on his throat moved back a handful of centimeters.

If he had stopped them even a second later, he might have been suffocated.

It was possible for someone to be too tired to resist an attack. It was possible for someone to be unconscious while an attack occurred. It was an awful when it happened, but it was *possible* for someone to be suicidal.

But *no one* would *not resist* if they could feel themselves being choked. That simply wasn't something humans were capable of doing. If he thought there was even the slightest chance of escaping, his body would make him do so.

"It…" Lan Qiren turned his eyes on the trembling Wei Wuxian. "It couldn't be easier to prevent this."

Shaking on the ground, Wei Wuxian fought with the resentful energy for dominance. His voice was too hoarse to scream, but the unbearable agony remained.

"How long do you think he'll be stuck in the Burial Mounds?" Jiang Yanli wondered aloud, too afraid of the answer to bring her voice above a whisper.

They had thought it would be impossible to survive more than a few hours. The only reason it was taking longer was because of Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation; the Burial Mounds were clearly just as deadly as rumored.

How many more days would he be trapped in that tortuous hellscape?

The glares sent Wen Chao's way would have incinerated a braver man.

Then, with a disgustingly calm tone, Lan Sizhui narrated, "Two days later."

"Excuse me?" Madam Jin demanded.

Nie Mingjue cursed, then turned his glare on Wen Ruohan as well.

First, they heard Wei Wuxian's heavy panting.

Next, they saw him racing through the valley.

Then, they saw what he was running from.

"A-Xian," Jiang Fengmian breathed out.

Everyone else was frozen in shock.

Although fierce corpses usually weren't very fast, these were the ones in the Burial Mounds. Their resentment was unparalleled by anything on the outside, so, despite their worn-down bodies, even a trained cultivator would struggle against them. Wei

Wuxian, with a hand-made splint around his possibly broken leg, had very little chance of escaping one.

And right now, *dozens* were chasing after him.

Wei Wuxian turned a sharp corner around one of the mounds, then stumbled on his bad leg. His body crashed against a small hill.

"Wei-xiong, move!"

A spirit dived, and created a crater where Wei Wuxian had been just a half second before. Wheezing from the strain, Wei Wuxian forced himself to stand up and continue moving.

Although it appeared the leg wasn't completely broken, his speed was still diminished considerably.

But he was *trying* to avoid demonic cultivation.

And yet he'd still been forced to develop it.

"And four days after that."

"*More?*"

Wei Wuxian stumbled through a field of bamboo soaked in resentful energy. Although the fierce corpses were unable to reach him there, the spirits were even faster. By now, the dirt covering his clothes had turned even the scarlet inner robe pitch black.

No one missed the fact that Wei Wuxian's cheek bones were far too obvious.

(The lack of food and rest was making him wither away.)

Jiang Yanli clenched her firsts.

"And six days after that."

"*Again?!*" Lan Qiren demanded.

Wei Wuxian was driven into a corner, and fell to his knees. The strain on his legs forced him to double over; not even he could make his body work through this much pain. The spirits reached out hungrily.

"Stop," he ordered again, barely able to speak with how dry his throat had become. This time, instead of spasming under the resentful energy running through his body, he merely took a few deep breaths, then forced himself to stand again on shaky legs.

Hearing the state of his throat, a sudden thought occurred to Nie Huaisang.

Food was one thing, but water was even more important than that. Any water that was in the Burial Mounds was sure to be heavily contaminated by the energy there.

What kind of effects would that have on a person?

“And eight days after that.”

“Just *stop!*” Jiang Cheng begged.

Once again, Wei Wuxian was running without any regard for his damaged leg or his broken arm or his sprained ankle or his hacking lungs. His lips were so dry that they seemed to crack anew every time they moved, and his eyes fought valiantly to keep themselves pried open.

Every few meters, he would stumble as if he had fallen asleep mid-step.

“...How long had he been running for?”

“Has he been able to sleep at all?”

“Has he gotten anything to drink?”

Silence was their only answer.

Even without the pressure of the Burial Mounds weighing him down, Nie Mingjue would be forced to sit.

War was a terrible, traumatic event which could leave even the strongest soldiers with nightmares. He had heard stories of non-cultivating soldiers becoming terrifying fierce corpses after death due to their experiences. Although he hadn’t personally taken part in a war (yet), some night hunts carried similar risks. Sect Leader Nie was far from unaccustomed to exhaustion from constant battles. Soldiers and cultivators could be forced to fight multiple times a day, and their sleep was plagued by unspeakable terrors. This combination had driven many men insane, filling them with resentful energy and creating some of the most powerful monsters ever.

But at least they *could* sleep.

Right now, Wei Wuxian was spending every minute of every hour of every day running for his life without a second of rest. Sleep was a luxury he could barely afford to think about. And, if he couldn’t rest, how could he drink? How could he sleep? How could he eat?

(*What* could he eat?)

By now, Wei Wuxian’s skin was so pale that he practically blended in with the corpses. If it weren’t for the now-brown ribbon still in his hair, he would have been almost impossible to recognize.

Wei Wuxian turned to the left.

A hand was waiting.

Jiang Cheng's eyes snapped closed.

Skidding down, Wei Wuxian managed to avoid the hand striking at his neck, which instead grabbed hold of and pulled off his hair ribbon. Wei Wuxian spun around to face the approaching monsters, his hair fluttering down around him.

The exhausted indifference in his eyes belonged to the Yiling Patriarch, not the Wei Wuxian they had spent the last few days learning about.

(But this *was* the Yiling Patriarch, wasn't it?)

Cut off on all sides, Wei Wuxian was slowly backed towards a cliff by the approaching corpses. One jumped.

"Stop!" he shouted again.

The one corpse stopped.

The others were merely slowed.

"Stop!" he repeated, halting another one. "Stop! Stop! Stop!"

But there were too many to stop one-by-one. Too many to concentrate on all at once.

His control slipped, and in the next second he had fallen to his knees, trying to force the energy out of his once again bulging veins. Blood rose up in his throat from the exertion.

"Out," he whispered, not having the energy for anything louder.

The spirits stilled, but didn't leave his body. The corpses continued their ominous approach.

"Stop," he hissed again, desperation breaking through. "Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. *Stop.*"

At last, they did. Seeing that, Wei Wuxian finally relaxed.

The dark circles under his eyes seemed to consume him, and his lids momentarily fluttered closed.

In that half-second of inattention, something snatched his arm and threw him off the cliff.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji shouted, once again forced to watch as Wei Wuxian's incorporeal body phased through his grip.

Wei Wuxian slammed against a rock and gasped — wind knocked out of him — then fell to the ground.

He didn't move.

“He was knocked out,” Wen Qing hissed, kneeling down beside the collapsed Wei Wuxian as if there was anything she could do to help. Up close, the boy’s exhaustion was even more obvious.

A half-second of being relaxed had allowed a spirit to pull him off a cliff. Did that mean Wei Wuxian had to keep himself completely focused at all times? He couldn’t rest for even a second?

(Even with a core, that would be impossible.)

~~Without one, his death was certain.~~

Seeing that their prey had finally stopped moving, the corpses circled around and prepared to move in for the kill. Although they lacked any consciousness for detailed plans, their shared desire to finally catch the prey which had spent the last week slipping through their fingers allowed for some cooperation.

The freshest corpse — missing its legs — crawled on top of Wei Wuxian.

Forcing himself to continue watching, Lan Wangji clenched his fists tightly enough to draw blood.

The corpse pulled itself up Wei Wuxian’s body.

Across his legs….

Over his waist….

Up his chest….

It got to his side, and leaned down.

Nie Huaisang looked away.

Slowly, tiredly, Wei Wuxian blinked his eyes open.

He *flinched*.

“Stop!”

Around his gasping neck, the corpse’s mouth was frozen open, mid-bite. Its ravenous drool dripped onto Wei Wuxian’s neck and slid down his collarbones. When Wei Wuxian realized he could feel the teeth starting to dig in on both sides of his neck, his heart rate tripled.

“Off,” he hissed. “Off. Get off — *get off me!*”

Panicked and unable to fully speak while his throat was being squeezed, the command came out as nothing more than a barely-there gasp. The corpse didn’t move.

After what was surely days and days of screaming, his throat had become too hoarse to make a sound.

Looking at the color of Wei Wuxian's skin, the unhealthy lack of fat on his bones, and his bulging veins from the frequent use of resentful energy, Jin Guangshan was overcome by the impossibility of what was on display before him. It shouldn't have been a surprise — people had tried for *centuries* before Wei Wuxian — and yet the sheer scale of the circumstances stunned everyone present.

Even if he wanted to, Jin Guangshan wasn't sure he would be *able* to force Wei Wuxian to invent demonic cultivation. Was everything he had stayed in the simulation for meaningless now?

Was it all for nothing?

(No. No, it wasn't.)

They couldn't force Wei Wuxian to invent it, but they didn't have to; outside, the real Wei Wuxian was being taught by the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation himself. No one could complain when demonic cultivation was the only way they could get out.

By now, Jin Guangshan had completely memorized the boy's likes, dislikes, nervous ticks, greatest fears, and strongest desires. It would be easy to earn his trust.

Jin Guangshan looked down at the weakened, injured, and exhausted genius, and felt his lips curled up in satisfaction.

In the meantime, Wei Wuxian continued breathing heavily, forcing himself to not get corrupted by demonic cultivation. He swallowed, and the teeth wrapped around his neck pressed tighter.

"*Off,*" Wei Wuxian commanded harshly, then *choked* as resentful energy flooded his veins.

The mere sight made Nie Huaisang nauseous.

However, the corpses and spirits slowly backed off, leaving the heavily panting Wei Wuxian alone as he fought for control of the resentful energy. Trembling, he turned over and shakily pushed himself off the ground.

'*Circulate it through,*' he told himself. '*Don't let it linger.*'

Every time Lan Qiren had seen a chance for Wei Wuxian's redemption, he had reminded himself that there was no excuse to invent demonic cultivation. That *nothing* could justify it.

Perhaps Cangse Sanren was onto something when she called him an old fool.

Wei Wuxian's arm spasmed then went limp, momentarily losing to the resentful energy.

"No-"

“Damn it!” Wei Wuxian shouted, forcefully suppressing the energy again. He bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood, and forced his bloodshot eyes open.

“Look at the dark circles under his eyes,” Jin Zixuan whispered.

Once he did, Jiang Cheng wished he hadn’t.

“Figure it out,” Wei Wuxian ordered to himself, trying to forcefully power through his exhaustion. “Figure it out. Figure it out. Figure it out — get out — find Wen Chao — *kill him!*”

His eyes flashed crimson, and a grin formed on his face.

The world faded to black.

When the watchers were returned to the white void, they were once again struck silent.

Every one of them had thought they would watch the invention of demonic cultivation — the birth of the Yiling Patriarch — with disgust. Why wouldn’t they? Even those hoping to use it for themselves didn’t see how its invention could be anything except a selfish bid for power.

(Jiang Fengmian felt his hands tremble, and wondered why his faith in Wei Wuxian had been so lacking.)

People thrown into the Burial Mounds always died. If Wei Wuxian was the one to change that, it wasn’t because he was *willing* to do something the others weren’t. It was because he was the only one brilliant enough to consider a solution when left with no other options.

And yet they’d mercilessly condemned him for his choice without understanding the full picture.

What could they say now?

Then, the unusually-dazed Wen Ruohan hummed.

“He didn’t use his golden core to escape.”

“*Excuse me?!*” Madam Yu hissed. “He’s been… whipped, and Wen Chao’s disciples hurt him and Wen Zhuliu hit him and he was stabbed! Of course he doesn’t have much spiritual energy left for that!”

But Wen Ruohan wasn’t listening. Instead, he had turned to Wen Qing, who was already looking back at him. They made eye contact for several seconds, and a silent conversation transpired.

Neither of them could find any evidence to disprove the core transfer.

Instead, all they could find were facts supporting it.

Wen Qing broke eye contact first, feeling her racing heart rumble in her head. No matter how long she spent thinking about it, she couldn't see how it was possible for Wei Wuxian to experience all that just *days* after feeling his core get cut out of him.

(Maybe her future self had found a way to use anesthetics?)

(She wanted to believe that, but all the optimism they'd had in the past few days had been proven wrong time and time again.)

'*No, it can't be true,*' she reminded herself. '*Just because His Excellency and I can't come up with proof doesn't mean it's not there. You can't honestly be considering this!*'

And yet, if anyone was willing to give up their core, it would be Wei Wuxian.

Watching Wen Qing slowly begin to fall into acceptance, Wen Ruohan felt a terrifying rage alight within himself. He had *seen* Wei Wuxian's core. Its power was phenomenal, especially given his childhood in the streets. If Wei Wuxian was given the chance to cultivate it for a few more years, the changes he might be able to bring about were limitless. Someone like that was more valuable than a dozen minor sects put together!

And he had *given it away*.

It couldn't be true — Wen Ruohan was sure there was another explanation, even if he hadn't thought of it yet — because cultivation was *everything* to their society. Every clan leader must be a cultivator; anyone worthy of respect must be a cultivator; anyone dangerous must be a cultivator. Even if Wei Wuxian didn't care about that, a golden core was the gateway to immortality. Without one, Wei Wuxian would age like any other non cultivator.

He would be giving the Jiang heir years of his life.

And Jiang Cheng had tried to *kill him* less than a week ago.

But that was the crux of the issue, wasn't it? The Jiangs had broken him so badly that he would rather *tear himself apart for them* than accept a coreless Jiang Wanyin. He could have accomplished anything, and yet he threw it all away for him.

Intentionally or not, the Yunmeng Jiang clan had *ruined* him.

And they would continue to do so unless Wen Ruohan intervened.

After everything that had been shown, there was no chance that the people gathered would agree to send Wei Wuxian to the Wens. That was fine, however.

So long as Wei Wuxian got away from the Jiangs, Wen Ruohan had all the time in the world.

The Nie, Jin, or Lan sects could take him. Nie Huaisang was Wei Wuxian's friend; Jin Zixuan was the fiance of his shijie; Lan Wangji was the boy's partner. Any of those sects would surely be willing to take him.

“Is something wrong, Your Excellency?” Lan Xichen asked, voice frigid. It seemed Wen Ruohan’s gaze had lingered on Lan Wangji a second too long.

However, undaunted, Wen Ruohan merely continued staring and said, “If you need any extra resources to speed up the date of the wedding, Qishan would be happy to lend assistance.”

Even Lan Wangji’s jaw dropped at the offer.

“Excuse me?” Lan Qiren demanded. “No one is getting married-”

“Can you really say that Wei Wuxian is undeserving after everything we’ve seen?”

The silence that followed said far more than words could. Lan Wangji’s ears turned bright pink.

“...Wei Ying and I haven’t met yet,” he reluctantly pointed out, trying to keep his voice from trembling despite the overwhelming embarrassment.

(Luckily, all he had to do to stop blushing was remember the way fierce corpses had nearly torn Wei Wuxian apart.)

“Why would that matter?” Jin Guangshan asked, picking up on Wen Ruohan’s mood. “It’s pretty clear that you fall for each other almost immediately. He might as well just move into the Cloud Recesses.”

“No one is taking Wei Wuxian anywhere!” Jiang Cheng snapped, forgetting who he was speaking to for a moment. Realizing he had shouted at a sect leader, he turned to his mother, wary of an outburst.

But she simply nodded in agreement.

“He should stay with us. He’s our head disciple.”

“Haven’t you spent years wishing he wasn’t?”

“That… that was wrong. He belongs with the Jiang Sect.”

Jiang Fengmian nodded in agreement, “You will not touch him.”

“What? *You’re* going to protect him from me?” Wen Ruohan demanded with a laugh. How ironic to hear that from the people whose last words made Wei Wuxian *cut out* his life’s work.

And yet they had the *audacity* to-

“Why not?” Jiang Yanli asked. “The simulation’s already shown us that A-Cheng is willing to sacrifice himself to protect A-Xian. He still-”

“Given his reaction afterwards, I’d say it’s obvious that he didn’t realize he’d be sacrificing his core.”

The Jiang siblings flinched.

Frowning deeper, Lan Wangji objected, “Nevertheless, it is still-”

“A worthy sacrifice?” Wen Ruohan assumed with a mocking laugh.

(He knew he should reel it back in. He knew he was practically throwing subtlety out the window. He knew he didn’t have any proof. And yet-)

“What exactly are you trying to say?” Nie Mingjue raised an eyebrow.

In that moment, Wen Ruohan’s anger overcame his rationality.

“If Wei Wuxian hadn’t been there, Jiang Cheng would have run back as soon as he saw his parents bodies and lost his core regardless. What you’ve done for him is *nothing* in comparison to what he’s done for you.”

“What?”

“So,” Wen Ruohan continued, impatient enough to abandon all forms of diplomacy. “Will the Lans take him in once we get out?”

Although they didn’t have personal objections, the lack of Wei Wuxian’s involvement in the decision kept the three Lans silent. In that pause, Jiang Fengmian decided to speak.

“...He’s still my head disciple-”

“He’s *wasted* on you.”

Not even Jin Guangshan could understand Wen Ruohan’s sudden fury.

(Silently, Nie Huaisang glanced at Wen Qing, noting the careful distance she kept from the speakers.)

However, after that annoyed outburst, Wen Ruohan seemed to reel his emotions back in. He knew that no one present would agree to taking Wei Wuxian away from the Jiangs quite yet — until he could prove the core transfer, there was no point in asking.

By now, it had been quite clearly proven that Wei Wuxian’s loyalty to the Jiangs was so strong that no form of bribery would draw him away from them. Wen Ruohan would need to restart his brainstorming process. Hopefully whatever caused him to kill Jiang Yanli would give him some ideas. Considering what Wei Wuxian's loyalty had survived, Wen Ruohan couldn’t wait to see what the trigger to that was.

(Briefly, he wondered if he should kill Wen Qing the second they got out to remove any possibility of Wei Wuxian *giving away* his greatest form of protection. An asset had far fewer uses when it could be easily damaged.)

(Though he had to admit, the boy’s unbelievable levels of resilience were extremely impressive.)

Two meters away, Wen Qing very carefully avoided eye contact with everyone else. She honestly didn't know why she and Wen Ruohan were so hung up on an obviously not true theory. They were drawing conclusions far too quickly to be rational. It was entirely possible that Wei Wuxian's story about Baoshan Sanren was actually true.

(But what if it wasn't?)

As the silence stretched on, it soon became clear that Wen Ruohan had nothing more to say. Madam Yu flushed in outrage and considered stepping forward to continue the conversation, but a pleading look from Jiang Fengmian made her begrudgingly back off.

She didn't know what Wen Ruohan was thinking. She treated her head disciple just fine.

(She knew she didn't.)

Then she would start treating him just fine once they got out.

(Would she?)

She would.

However, she couldn't help but think back to the apology she had given Wei Wuxian just a short while ago. The sheer *disbelief* in his response had silenced the rest of what she had planned to say.

Yes, she could apologize.

But would he believe it?

~~Of course not. What reason did he have to trust her? She could tell him to call her 'Aunt Yu' all she wanted, but it was far too late now for it to seem genuine. After everything she had done, how could she expect him to trust her?~~

She scowled, glaring at the floor.

Seeing that, Jiang Fengmian stepped forward slightly, wondering if he should try to comfort his wife. He didn't love her — their marriage had occurred before he could start to, and their frequent arguments kept anything from forming — but she was still his wife. He wanted to have a better relationship than what they had now. He knew he should say something.

Then, he remembered Wei Wuxian's face — steeped in exhaustion and pain — and recalled that one of the last things Madam Yu had ever done was whip Wei Wuxian's back until blood broke through.

And then she had blamed him, but had still expected him to protect Jiang Cheng "even if he died."

(Were his own last words really any better?)

Some grumbles and discussions continued between the adults, but most everyone was simply muted. After Wen Ruohan's outburst, the watchers had finally been given a chance to allow what they had just seen to sink in.

Right now, there was no denying it: they were wrong, Wei Wuxian hadn't had a choice in the matter.

There was nothing they could say.

Shortly before that segment ended, a door in a parallel-but-future dimension was opened.

"Hanguang-jun!" Lan Jingyi greeted with his usual excitement as Lan Wangji stepped inside.

"Ah, is that you Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian called out from another room. "Come over here!"

Once he entered the back room, Lan Wangji saw that Sizhui, Zizhen, and Jin Ling were already present. They sat around Wei Wuxian, eagerly waiting for further instructions.

"Alright," Wei Wuxian clapped his hands together. "Now that we're all here, it's time for the explanation. While this will allow us to see the people inside, we're not going to be able to interact with them. We'll also get to see whatever vision you sent over to them, though that might be a little muddled from how many layers it's going though. Oh, well. What we really care about is the people who are watching anyways, so that's fine."

The quartet of radishes nodded in understanding.

"Great!" Wei Wuxian declared. "Operation 'Figure Out How Wrong Things Have Gone' is a go! Remember to take notes on the people you see there, we'll be having a discussion about how your mistake will impact that world when we get back."

A chorus of "Yes, Senior Wei" followed.

"Okay, then, everyone go lie down now," Wei Wuxian instructed. "I don't have enough resources to do this again, so we better make it count this time!"

With a dip of his finger Wei Wuxian picked up a mixture of his own blood and material from the burial mounds which enhanced the technique's power. The array was fairly simple, but the experimental nature meant that Wei Wuxian would be including every safety precaution imaginable.

He would not accept one of the juniors getting hurt because of him.

Finally, the array was finished, and the red orb of the Píngxíng Gateway was placed in the center. A moment later, everything went black.

"Senior Wei?!"

"Wei Wuxian!"

“We’re all gonna die!”

“Calm down,” Lan Wangji ordered, silencing the screams of Ouyang Zizhen, Jin Ling, and Lan Jingyi. “He told you this would happen, didn’t he?”

“I’m pretty sure I did,” Wei Wuxian added on.

The sudden darkness had started the juniors, but now they were grateful that no one could see the blushes on their faces. At least the only ones present were their Hanguang-jun and Senior Wei; if Lan Qiren had been present, the lecture they would receive would last until the end of the day.

“Oh, I think the light’s settling in,” Wei Wuxian observed.

And he was right. In the next several seconds, the dark abyss around the four radishes and two adults lit the world up into a depressing grey. It didn’t matter to the newcomers, however; their eyes were focused on the other-dimenion’s watchers.

There were some familiar faces and some unfamiliar ones. Thanks to the uniforms, it wasn’t too hard to figure out who everyone was. The teenaged Hanguang-jun, Sandu Shengshou, Zewu-jun, and the Head-shaker were the easiest to recognize, but the others could be deduced easily enough.

“Wait… is that….” Jin Ling spun around to do a double take, but his eyes weren’t deceiving him. “...A-Niang? A-Die?”

Wei Wuxian flinched.

The juniors gaped, staring at Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan, who were huddled close together. It struck both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji as odd, because the pair had only started truly liking each other *after* the war.

(If nothing else, Wei Wuxian was glad Jin Ling’s idealistic image of his parents’ eternal love wouldn’t be broken.)

Silently, Wei Wuxian joined Jin Ling in front of Jiang Yanli, basking in her glow for just a few precious seconds.

“Is this really a young Hanguang-jun?” Lan Jingyi asked, standing close and staring shamelessly.

“It is,” Lan Wangji confirmed. Sizhui and Zizhen ran over, disbelievingly observing a Lan Wangji who was *younger* than them. Zizhen even reached out to touch him, only to phase right through and blush, remembering that they couldn’t interfere. They glanced back to see if the adult Hanguang-jun was staring with them, but his eyes were focused on his brother.

(Had it truly only been a few months since Lan Xichen looked that confident? It felt like it had been years.)

“Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu are here too,” Wei Wuxian observed. “And a young Jiang Cheng.”

It was insanely weird for Jin Ling to see his Uncle at 15, so he quickly turned his attention on the first two Wei Wuxian had listed. As Jin Ling continued to excitedly look around, Wei Wuxian turned to the left, and felt his eyes watering up again.

“Ah, A-Yuan…. Come over here.”

Like the filial son he was, he did.

“This is your Auntie Qing,” Wei Wuxian explained. “Wen Ning’s older sister.”

“You’ve told me about her,” Lan Sizhui nodded, eyes wide. He had heard many stories from Wen Ning and Wei Wuxian, but this was the first time he had gotten a visual image of someone from his past life.

He felt tears start to fall, and hurriedly wiped his eyes.

(Behind him, Wei Wuxian kept his eyes glued on Wen Qing, very intentionally avoiding Wen Chao. There was nothing Wei Wuxian could do to him, so looking would just make him angry for nothing.)

Then-

“Found them,” Lan Wangji reported. Wei Wuxian glanced over, and found Lan Wangji looking back and forth between Jin Guangshan and Wen Ruohan.

Jin Ling and Sizhui couldn’t seem to decide whether or not they wanted to look at them.

On Jin Guangshan’s face, there was a terrifyingly *hungry* smirk that he wasn’t even trying to hide. Then again, his talent laid in swaying the public’s opinion, so perhaps he didn’t see a reason to have a mask up while the only people present were those already familiar with him.

Then, Wen Ruohan.

Unlike with Jin Guangshan, Wei Wuxian had never gotten a chance to become familiar with Wen Ruohan. The man’s mannerisms and motives were almost entirely unfamiliar to him.

Which was why he wasn’t sure if the white-hot rage on the man’s face was a bad sign.

“What are they all looking at?” Zizhen wondered aloud, noticing what appeared to be abject terror on everyone else’s faces. Now that the others had gotten some time to get over their shock at seeing the people present, they saw the same.

Even Jin Guangshan — who was the most interested in what was being shown — seemed to be stunned by the simulation. Concerned, Lan Wangji followed their eyes, but the simulation was too blurry there for him to determine what it was.

There were too many steps between the simulation and the future people; the layers of resentful energy left this part clouded.

“Step aside,” Wei Wuxian ordered, receiving instant compliance. He hadn’t wanted to do this, but the expressions on everyone’s faces were making him concerned.

The simulation cut off one’s access to their body, and spiritual cultivation was impossible without access to a golden core.

Demonic cultivation, however, wasn’t.

With a long, sharp whistle, Wei Wuxian cleared the leftover resentful energy out of the way.

The image it revealed left him frozen.

A young boy — younger than even Sizhui and Jingyi — ran through a grey valley between two hills. He was unhealthily pale, and barely looked alive. A moment later, the image cleared further, and they could see what followed.

Corpses, ghosts, monsters, and yao ran towards the boy, climbing on top of each other and knocking each other over in their haste to hunt down the human.

A hand jumped out, pulling a dirty ribbon from the boy’s hair.

“Is that-”

“I mean, he looks different, but-”

“....Senior Wei?”

They turned to get an answer, but Wei Wuxian was frozen. He stared at the younger version of himself, watching the boy slowly get backed up towards the edge of a cliff.

“Stop!” his other self screamed, the sound muted due to the residual resentful energy, but no less desperate. “Stop! Stop! Stop!”

One by one, the corpses began to stop.

The younger Wei Wuxian didn’t have *time* to stop them one by one.

“Wh…” Jin Ling turned to Wei Wuxian. “Why aren’t you stopping them. I’ve seen you stop this many with a *whistle* before. Why aren’t you-”

“I hadn’t figured out how to do that yet,” Wei Wuxian answered tonelessly, unable to take his eyes off the scene before him.

“Wait, are you saying this is when you *invented* demon cultivation?” Lan Jingyi asked.

Wei Wuxian said nothing, but the scene before them spoke for itself.

“We’ve seen enough,” Lan Wangji decided, looking at Wei Wuxian’s dull eyes. “Wei Ying, it’s time to leave. Open the array that will get us out.”

But Wei Wuxian seemed unresponsive.

“...Wei Ying?”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes remained firmly on the scene before him. As his other self was backed to the edge of the cliff, he focused his attention on the approaching spirits and corpses.

Hands — everywhere — grabbing, pulling, tugging, holding, breaking, *biting*-

Well they weren’t yet, but they would.

They would wrap around his neck and bite into his skin and he could *feel them* on his bones — they had bitten off — were biting — hadn’t bitten yet but *would*-

There was someone shouting something next to him, but Wei Wuxian couldn’t hear what they were saying.

All he could hear were his legs being *ripped* from their sockets — his arms broken — his spine snapped — and their hands and teeth were everywhere — on every arm and leg and his chest and his face and squeezing his neck and ripping his skin and clawing and biting, chewing, crunching — those were his *bones*-

Wei Wuxian was a happy person. He truly, genuinely was. Cheerful, open, confident — almost cocky in his arrogance, but….

One does not simply *forget* the way they died.

“It’s fine,” Wei Wuxian whispered to himself, trying to calm his racing heart. “It’s fine. I got out — I made it out. I got revenge and then-”

And then he’d ***br*****o****k****e****n*** ***t****h****e*** ***se****a****l*** **s**o ***t****h****e****y*** ***turn****e****d*** ***o****n*** ***him*** ***and*** ***ri*****p****p****e****d*** **a****n****d*** ***bit*** ***and*** ***che****w****e****d*** **a***n****d*** ***to****r****e*** **and** **y*****ank*****e****d*** **a****n****d*** ***a*****t****e*** **a****n****d*** ***a***te a*n****d*** ***ate*** — h***is*** ***f*****i****n****g****e****r****s*** his ***fe***et **h****i****s*** ***an****k****l****e*** ***his*** ***ch****e****s****t*** ***h****i****s*** ***th****i****g****h*** ***h****i****s*** ***n****e****ck*** — ***ch***ok**i****n****g** — couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breathe, *can’t* breathe — t***h****e****n*** the***i****r* **t**e***e****t*h **b*****r****o****k****e*** **t*****h****r***oug***h*** s**ki**n **a*****n*****d-**

From the corner of his eye, Wei Wuxian saw a corpse reach out — trying to grab, take, rip, *eat* — and knew his life would be over if he didn’t *move*-

He sent out a tsunami of resentful energy, but only managed to push the corpse back a few feet-

Why? Why? *Why?*

The corpse approached again, and Wei Wuxian raised out a hand.

“Stop!” he commanded, but it was like demonic cultivation had no effect on this corpse.

Wei Wuxian's heart froze.

"Stop!" he shouted again. "Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! No — *stop!* Get off!"

It grabbed his arm — he couldn't escape — and Wei Wuxian gave a *blood-curdling* screech.

"Stop! Get off! Get lost! Get lost!"

The corpse froze and backed off, released its grip, but Wei Wuxian barely noticed. All he could feel were the corpses clawing knuckle deep into his flesh and biting through his neck and tearing out his eyes and he'd destroyed the seal he'd known this was coming but it still *hurt-*

As memories assaulted his mind, all Wei Wuxian could do was fall to his knees and give a mangled scream.

He screamed and screamed and *screamed* and tore at his throat until he felt like he was swallowing shards of glass. He could barely make a sound, but the screams continued nonetheless.

(But why would it matter? None of it mattered! The corpses wouldn't stop no matter how much he screamed.)

Behind him, four radishes stood frozen in shock.

When Wei Wuxian had cleared up the image, they had been confused. Surely that couldn't be *their* Senior Wei. Yes, they knew Wei Wuxian's original body was different from Mo Xuanyu's, but they still couldn't imagine that their senior would have ever been so cornered.

(When Wei Wuxian fainted after saving the sect leaders at the second siege, Lan Wangji had reminded them that Wei Wuxian was human too. Somehow, they had forgotten that.)

(No, even if they hadn't forgotten it, there was no way they could have possibly expected what came next.)

Resentful energy had exploded out from Wei Wuxian, knocking the teenagers off their feet and pushing even Hanguang-jun back a few meters. It had built and built on itself until it tore the zone they were in apart, forcing them out of the simulation.

They had woken up in their real bodies.

And then the screaming had started.

'We could change everything!' the quartet shouted simultaneously.

Sizhui rejected the idea of asking Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian for their memories because he didn't want to force them to remember. He didn't consider the consequences of showing relative strangers their weakest moments.

For the first time, they understood just how naive they had been.

Lan Wangji tried to step closer to his husband, but was pushed back by another wave of resentful energy.

“Stop!” Wei Wuxian shouted. “Don’t touch me! Get lost!”

Lan Wangji flinched again.

“Wei Ying,” he tried. “Wei Ying, it’s me. Wei Ying, please breathe — slowly — in and out-”

“Don’t-”

“*Wei Ying.* In. Out.”

At Lan Wangji’s gentle coaxing, Wei Wuxian finally stopped hyperventilating. The fearful desperation was still there, but the resentful energy didn’t attack when Lan Wangji approached again.

“Stop,” Wei Wuxian whispered, increasingly begging and distraught each time his command didn’t work. “Stop. Stop. Go away — get off. Get lost.”

Not touching him, Lan Wangji kneeled down in front, waiting for Wei Wuxian to make the first move. For several seconds, Wei Wuxian simply gazed unseeingly at him, as if expecting him to attack.

Then, at long last, the resentful energy around them dispersed. Slowly — hesitantly — Wei Wuxian reached forward and curled his fingers into Lan Wangji’s robes, sinking into them as if he wanted to hide from the world.

Just as slowly, Lan Wangji wrapped his arms around Wei Wuxian, pulling him close.

Then, the door opened, allowing Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren to walk in.

Lan Xichen, who was out of seclusion for the first time in months.

“Zewu-jun?” Lan Sizhui asked disbelievingly.

“I…” he blinked twice. “I heard someone yelling.”

The juniors looked down, unable to acknowledge just how badly they’d messed everything up.

Chapter End Notes

I added my own scenes for Wei Wuxian’s time in the Burial Mounds, hope that was okay! I just thought it would be fun to expand on it a little! That “what did he eat” question will be answered in a later chapter. :)

The Return (Cue Dramatic Music)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Why must Wei Wuxian be single handedly responsible for every disaster imaginable?

Lan Qiren had been having a fairly pleasant conversation with his nephew — a somewhat rare thing now that Xichen was in seclusion — on whether to add new clauses to the wall of rules. No one was following "do not talk to Wei Wuxian," so Lan Qiren was willing to compromise. If he could convince the elders to switch it out for "do not speak to Wei Wuxian while he is tired," then he would stop bringing it up.

(That would at least keep things like the current time travel incident from occurring again.)

Lan Qiren had been on the cusp of finishing the argument he would be taking to the elders, when an ear-shattering scream made him spill his ink. It had sounded frantic and terrified, but once Lan Qiren recognized the voice as Wei Wuxian's, he realized what was going on.

This was another one of the boy's foolish pranks. Given who else was inside the room once he and Xichen walked in, he knew Wei Wuxian must have convinced the juniors and Wangji to join him with his usual nefarious tactics. As proof of that, the juniors were now gathered together in one corner, while Wei Wuxian hugged Wangji tightly around his neck.

Were they really dragging *teenagers* into their roleplay scenarios?

("Get lost," Wei Wuxian had shouted. He really had the audacity to say that to Wangji *again?* It figured; Wei Wuxian never took anything seriously. That was exactly why Lan Qiren hated him.)

However, as much as he wanted to punish Wei Wuxian, Lan Qiren knew that if Wei Wuxian was shunned, his nephew would willingly leave the Cloud Recesses. Lan Qiren was therefore willing to permit the demonic cultivator's presence with minimal complaint. That said, if they continued disturbing the peace of Gusu in such a manner, Lan Qiren told himself he wouldn't hesitate to take action.

And yet the shameless couple didn't even bother looking up despite the way their rambunctiousness had disrupted Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren. Had Wangji truly fallen so low? He hadn't taken his eyes off Wei Wuxian at all!

At least the juniors seemed regretful; they were avoiding eye contact out of shame, rather than indifference.

"Wangji," he spoke up at last, seeing that Xichen was too uncertain to continue. "What on earth was all that racket?"

"Apologies, Shufu," Lan Wangji responded evenly, still not looking up from his husband.

Lan Qiren felt his annoyance grow.

“Is everyone alright?” Lan Xichen asked, scanning around the room. When his eyes landed on Sizhui, the boy flinched slightly, then looked away as if guilty.

Lan Qiren tensed in concern.

“Sizhui?” Xichen asked.

“Ah-yes. Yes, I-I think it’s alright now. There’s… no immediate danger.”

The carefully-chosen phrasing infuriated Lan Qiren, and he viciously spun toward the couple.

“*Wei Wuxian!*”

The man jumped and looked back from where he had been shamelessly burying his face in Wangji’s chest. As expected, the boy looked like an absolute mess — his hair disheveled, his lips thoroughly bitten, his eyes red with unshed tears.

Wait-

Lan Qiren stepped closer for further observation, and Wei Wuxian flinched back. As Wangji moved to put himself between them, Wei Wuxian quickly moved to wipe his eyes.

After several seconds of watching, it slowly dawned on Lan Qiren that Wei Wuxian had been *crying*.

An act, surely.

But it looked just genuine enough to leave Lan Qiren unsettled.

“Ah, Shufu,” Wei Wuxian shamelessly greeted despite knowing full well that Lan Qiren hated it when Wei Wuxian called him that.

(He told himself he was just imagining the shake in Wei Wuxian’s voice.)

“What is going on?” Lan Qiren asked, speaking to the whole group but not moving his eyes from Wei Wuxian’s kneeling figure.

“Nothing, nothing,” the boy responded carelessly. “We’ve got it all under control, I promise.”

“If it was under control, you wouldn’t have disturbed half the Cloud Recesses with your yelling!”

“No need to worry, that was just a minor set back. I can handle the rest, I promise,” Wei Wuxian turned a blinding smile on them that nearly covered up how bloodshot his eyes were.

“Are you sure?” Xichen asked.

“Of course! You don’t honestly think this could be too big a problem for the Yiling Patriarch to fix, do you?” he asked, dramatically gasping in faked offence.

Lan Qiren couldn't resist scoffing at the boy's arrogance, quickly turning on his heel and storming out of the building with as much dignity as he could muster. This was exactly why he hated the boy. No, he couldn't reasonably call Wei Wuxian the enemy of mankind — not since that day thirteen years ago when Wangji came home with a toddler in his arms who *they* had orphaned — but the demonic cultivator's actions had brought their family nothing but grief.

Lan Qiren wanted nothing to do with it.

(When Lan Qiren had stepped closer, Wei Wuxian had flinched back. For a half-second, Lan Qiren could have sworn he saw genuine fear in Wei Wuxian's eyes. He knew he was just imagining it, but it shook him nonetheless.)

Once Lan Qiren had walked a sufficient distance away from the building, Wei Wuxian turned to the juniors, who were still huddled together in a corner of the room.

"Are you all okay?" he asked.

They refused to make eye contact. Lan Xichen and Wei Wuxian wandered closer to them, steps as silent and soft as the ones they would use while approaching baby animals. Watching them all, Lan Wangji remained a steady, calming presence.

"Senior Wei?" Lan Sizhui whimpered.

"Yes?"

"What… what's going to happen now?"

Wei Wuxian paused for a moment, frozen as memories assaulted him yet again. Then, however, he forced himself to take a deep breath and smiled confidently.

"Well, *now* I'll be sending you four off with your homework for the day. Tomorrow we'll be discussing how Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan's presences in the simulation will impact that world. Make sure you get a lot of sleep tonight, and don't forget to write down a few notes so that tomorrow's discussion goes smoothly."

"If you feel like you need to talk with someone about what you just saw, you can come to one of us," Lan Wangji added. "Sometimes, discussing it helps."

"But… but what about them?" Jin Ling paused and scrunched his eyes together.

(It had been *his* idea to send the memories over, hadn't it?)

"We'll handle that," Wei Wuxian promised. "You don't need to worry."

It looked like the juniors wanted to protest, but, a moment later, their emotional exhaustion won out. If there were going to offer help, it would be *after* they had gotten a long night's rest.

Lan Xichen looked back and forth. Based on what Wangji had told him, he had an idea of what was going on. The juniors, his brother, and his brother in law had gone inside the simulation, and seen something that left Wei Wuxian in that state.

Perhaps he should offer help.

(And who had he actually ended up helping in the end? Nie Mingjue? It was the cure he had offered which *led* to his sworn brother's death!)

Had they seen something about Jin Guangshan ~~or A-Yao~~ in there? Maybe he should do something.

(Like what? What would he have done if Nie Huaisang hadn't said he'd seen Jin Guangyao move? Would Lan Xichen have actually allowed for the trial? Or would he have taken him back to Gusu?)

He was *not* his father.

(Or was he? It hadn't happened, so he would never know.)

"...I can walk the juniors back," Lan Xichen suggested softly, forcing himself out of those thoughts. "I… shouldn't stay out too long anyways."

Lan Wangji turned and was about to protest, when he saw Wei Wuxian discreetly shake his head. It was a warning.

'Your brother made some good progress, don't ruin it. Leaving seclusion at all was a huge step; now isn't the time to push him farther than he's comfortable with.'

After a moment of thought, Lan Wangji switched his protest to a suggestion: "Would you like us to visit you later? We can update you on the situation."

"Yes. Yes, I… I would appreciate that. Thank you."

With a nod to the couple, Lan Xichen escorted the four teenagers away. They morosely travelled out the door.

The second Lan Wangji heard it snap shut, he turned to his husband.

"Wei Ying, was that… was that what happened those three months you were missing?"

Wei Wuxian laughed cheerily in response.

"Sorry Lan Zhan, I don't want to talk about it. Anyways, now that those four are gone, we should probably start figuring out what to do next."

He began pacing.

"The plan was to get some political power, but I'm not sure we're going to be able to get enough to stop a war. I'd like to say the best thing to do would be to make Yunmeng as

powerful as possible, but it's hard to tell what the world is like over there when we've only got one source. Maybe we could double down on the 'it isn't real' bit — no, there's no way they'd believe that if the memories are that realistic. And they're not stupid either. Maybe the Wens won't want war? They lost but — no, Chifeng-jun will probably use the Sunshot Campaign as an excuse to start a war. We could — no wait, but — or maybe I — no, but the-"

"Wei Ying, stop," Lan Wangji begged, standing up.

Wei Wuxian didn't even falter.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Don't worry so much, Lan Zhan. It was nothing. I'm just tired — you know how I get. It's *nothing*, you know that — oh, wait, but the kids don't. Damn, do you think I scared them? Maybe I should head out and talk to them — no, your brother's probably got it. But I definitely scared them, do you think I should-"

Mid-turn, Wei Wuxian felt arms wrap around him and halt him in his tracks. Lan Wangji had stepped behind his pacing husband and pulled him into an embrace. Despite that, Wei Wuxian was practically *vibrating* with suppressed energy.

"Lan Zhan, I-"

"Wei Ying, it's just us now. Breathe."

At those words, Wei Wuxian unconsciously relaxed. Lan Wangji turned him around so they could face each other, then raised a hand to cup Wei Wuxian's cheek. He used his thumb to wipe off a single tear, which — given the surprise on his husband's face — Wei Wuxian hadn't even noticed.

"I-"

"It's okay. You don't need to explain."

Lan Xichen wasn't ready to completely rejoin the outside world yet; Wei Wuxian wasn't ready to speak about what happened. That was fine. Lan Wangji had lived for 13 years without Wei Ying. He could be patient for a little while longer.

"Lan Zhan-"

"It's fine. You're safe now."

Tentatively, Wei Wuxian reached forward and tugged on Lan Wangji's robe, as if considering hiding his face inside again. Then the moment passed, and Wei Wuxian let go.

"Thanks, Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian laughed with a blinding smile. "Sorry about that!"

"No apologies-"

"Between us, I know, I know. Still, thanks for your help," Wei Wuxian barreled through, needing something — *anything* — to distract himself from his resurfacing memories.

“Though I guess that must have been pretty weird for you, huh? I probably looked like I’d gone crazy!”

To be fair, it wasn’t the first time Wei Wuxian had shouted at him to “get lost.”

(Which only made it that much more painful.)

(Why wasn’t there more he could do to help?)

Lan Wangji was jolted out of his thoughts by a finger poking his forehead. He turned his attention back to his husband, who smiled warmly at him.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Wei Wuxian reminded him. “And I’m not asking you to go anywhere either.”

A genuine smile formed on Lan Wangji’s face, making Wei Wuxian’s cheeks flush as red as his ribbon.

“I-I mean…” Wei Wuxian glanced down, unable to look at his blinding husband. “I just-”

Then, Lan Wangji stepped forward, cupping his husband’s face and placing an *unbearably* sweet kiss on his brows.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, and he was pulling into a hug. Behind his flushing cheeks, a flash of vulnerability flickered through Wei Wuxian’s face.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan…” he curled in tighter. “You’re truly too good for this one, aren’t you?”

“No,” Lan Wangji easily disagreed. “Not at all.”

By now, Wei Wuxian was sure that his face *and* neck were a glowing scarlet that put even resentful energy to shame. He snuggled in tighter, content to spend a few minutes without worries.

The even sound of Lan Wangji’s heartbeats began to lure him into a comforting sense of security.

Then, finally, Lan Wangji spoke.

“What will we be doing next?”

Wei Wuxian hummed, “Well, we’ll definitely need to get the watchers out. I know my other self said he was going to leave them in, but if we just explain that prolonged exposure is dangerous or something I’m sure he’ll forcefully eject them. Then we’ll need to figure out a way to mitigate the damage.”

He paused there and bit his lip, well aware that neither of them had much experience in politics, megalomaniacs, or subtle manipulation. They couldn't physically enter the other dimension, so Wei Wuxian's power, Lan Wangji's cultivation, and their combined reputations were useless.

They needed someone crafty. Someone who could manipulate a situation without any resources but their mouth, and someone who could remain nearly unnoticed all the while.

Someone who had experience taking down power-hungry chief cultivators.

Wei Wuxian's gaze slowly fell to the right, where a stack of papers sat on the table. They were the preparations Lan Wangji was doing so that someone else could take over as Chief Cultivator once he stepped down.

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji asked.

"Say, Lan Zhan?"

"Mn?"

"Do you think you could help me arrange a private meeting with Nie Huaisang?"

"Of course."

"Awesome. Guess we really will be conquering another dimension," he laughed. "Why not? Sounds like fun."

"Hello, Wen-gongzi."

"A-ah. Hello!" Wen Ning squeaked, hurriedly bowing far lower than what was probably appropriate for someone of his rank. As expected, the watermelon seller looked extremely uncomfortable when she saw.

Wen Ning hurried to right himself, blushing furiously.

"...Are you here to pick up some watermelon for Young Master Wei?" the woman asked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. When Wen Ning nodded with a bright red flush spreading to his neck, she laughed and gestured for him to pick a few from her collection. It was a reassuring sort of laughter. The kind that promised he wouldn't be judged over his breach of decorum.

(It was strange to hear it. In Qishan, no one would ever dare laugh with a cultivator from the Great Sects.)

After much deliberation, Wen Ning managed to pick the watermelons he wanted and paid the woman. He began his journey back, praying desperately that Acting Sect Leader Wen Xu hadn't come for another surprise visit while he was gone. He didn't *want* to interact with someone that scary, but he didn't want to leave Wei Wuxian to handle it by himself either. He just-

“Hey, Wen-gongzi!” a male basket weaver called out. “Are you on your way back to Wei-gongzi?”

“Ah, yes!”

“My wife made some extra tanghulu today. Take some home for him as thanks, okay?”

“Huh?”

“The Yunmeng Jiang Sect helped my niece a few days ago. It’s the least I can do.”

And that was just the beginning. As soon as the townsfolk were made aware that Wen Ning was picking up things for Wei Wuxian, he was *swarmed*.

“Here, take a bag of nuts!”

“I got some nice paper he could use!”

“I made a few extra rattle drums. Take some back for the kids over there!”

“A team led by Wei-gongzi saved my little sister from a yao yesterday. Take this flute I made-”

“And these books-”

“And these cards-”

“Dolls-”

“Plums-”

“Peaches-”

“Ink-”

“Th-thank you!” Wen Ning whimpered, trying to not tip over the literal mountain of presents in his arms. The sheer friendliness of people in Yumeng was terrifying!

Then again, it wasn’t just that it was Yunmeng. After the “great sleep” — as the common folk had started calling it — all sects suffered. The Great Sects were left without their leaders, and the minor sects were too reliant on the larger ones to function normally. That was why Wei Wuxian’s quick return to action was so monumental. People of all professions had flocked to Yunmeng, and continued to do so even after the other great sects recovered. If Wen Ning hadn’t wanted to be accosted by the citizens, he shouldn’t have mentioned Wei Wuxian’s name.

“I’m back,” Wen Ning greeted shyly, stepping into Wei Wuxian’s labspace.

Immediately, two shadows darted forward.

“Wen-gongzi, Wen-gongzi, what’s all that?” A-Yue, Wei Wuxian’s helper, asked. Her brother looked up at the pile of toys with excitement shining in his eyes.

“Er — we can look through it later?” Wen Ning tried. “Not all of this is for you-”

“But we can help sort them, right?” A-Lu asked. “I wanna see.”

“It-it depends on what Wei-gongzi says?”

“I’ll go ask!” A-Yue volunteered, slipping past Wen Ning to run out the door.

“Wait, he’s not in his lab?” Wen Ning inquired.

“No, he said he was going to try something in the back field,” A-Lu reported.

Wen Ning froze.

“Wait!” he called out with uncharacteristic volume. “Wait, don’t. I’ll go. Didn’t he tell you not to go there while he’s working?”

A-Yue finally stopped, turning back to pout, “But we need to ask.”

“I’ll ask,” Wen Ning instantly volunteered, putting down the watermelons and presents. “Guard these for me?”

““We won’t let anyone touch them!”” the two preteens declared, saluting Wen Ning. Once he was sure they were serious about staying, Wen Ning sprinted towards the field.

When Wen Ning had first met Wei Wuxian, he had been apprehensive. No matter how nice the other boy seemed, it was impossible to forget that Wei Wuxian was the *only one* who had been able to wake someone up from the great sleep. When Wen Xu sent Wen Ning to Yunmeng Jiang, he had been terrified.

What kind of person could *the* Wei Wuxian be?

It took him less than a day to realize that the answer to his question was a young, inventive, desperate genius. One who was more than willing to sacrifice hours of sleep for his experiments.

Once he’d realized that, Wen Ning had tried to help. He had offered assistance, and soon the hidden reservations Wei Wuxian seemed to have about the politics of his new job went away. Wei Wuxian’s smiles became more genuine, and his stress faded.

(It also helped that he had just learned that the Jiangs weren’t technically dead. Yet.)

Wen Ning had slowly begun coaxing Wei Wuxian into getting more sleep and food, tempting him with precut fruit so that he could keep working while he ate. And that had helped.

Somewhat.

Yes, everyone inside the simulation claimed to be fine, but there was no way for them to know whether the watchers would experience any physical consequences for staying inside longer.

(Wen Ning wished his sister was here. Wen Qing would know what to do.)

(From what Wei Wuxian had said, he missed his Shijie just as much.)

Two days ago, Wen Ning and Wei Wuxian had been talking to each other about their next steps. Neither of them completely trusted Mo Xuanyu, so Wei Wuxian was desperate to know more about the simulation.

'How would we do that?' Wen Ning had asked. 'He's the one who made it.'

'I know, but… I think I'm starting to understand the basic principles of it. I just need to start trying to recreate it so I have something to test on. If I just knew more about manipulating resentful energy….'

'But… but Young Master Wei, I-I know what you're doing now is fine — I mean we have to do it — but any more than this is — I mean — this is resentful energy!'

'I know.'

They both knew that. However, as more time went by, their imaginations had run wild with the ways the great sleep could go horribly, horribly wrong.

'Could cause health issues,' Wei Wuxian had said a few hours after the resentful energy conversation.

And half an hour after that, Wen Ning had wondered aloud, 'I wonder if staying in there longer will make it harder for them to get out.'

And the next morning, 'M-maybe we should do another check on Wen-gongzi. Just to see if the simulation's left any lingering effects on him. If anything happens to his son, His Excellency will….'

And an hour after that, 'What if their bodies decay?'

'What if they get sick?'

'What if Mo Xuanyu was lying-'

'What if it wasn't really them-'

'What if they don't wake up?'

As soon as that thought entered their minds, it had become hard to think of anything else.

Then, last night, Wei Wuxian had met up with Wen Ning.

‘I need more information. I’m… going to try to manipulate resentful energy.’

‘Haven't we already been doing that?’

‘Yeah, but only in controlled situations with Mo Xuanyu’s instruction. If I want to actually understand it, I need to find some natural resentment and control that.’

‘But-but Wei-gongzi, that’s… any more than what we’ve done will be demonic cultivation!’

‘I know. But if I don’t act now-’

‘No, please. Mo Xuanyu said-’

‘And I’m just supposed to trust him?! If the Jiangs die because I was… if they… it won’t happen. I won’t let it.’

‘But-’

‘My lab is too small. I guess I could go to the field out back. Maybe-’

‘No, please!’ Wen Ning had begged. ‘It’s too risky.’

After that, Wei Wuxian had dropped the subject.

But he hadn’t agreed.

And now, he was at the field, having told everyone else to avoid going there.

Wen Ning slipped through the disciples in the crowded training grounds and back into a hallway, apologizing profusely as he went. Soon, he reached a deserted stretch of land between the training grounds and an abandoned field. The second he swung open the gate between them, he saw Wei Wuxian.

Collapsed on the ground.

“Young Master Wei!” Wen Ning shouted, running over. “Young Master Wei!”

He checked for a pulse.

It was there, but it was far too fast.

Was he breathing? Yes, but weakly.

Wei Wuxian was shaking. Why? Wen Ning didn’t know.

Wei Wuxian’s veins were bulging. How? Wen Ning didn’t know.

Then, Wen Ning looked over, and saw a decapitated fierce corpse lying on the ground.

Its lingering resentful energy surged into Wei Wuxian.

(Why wasn't his sister here?!)

"Wen Ning?" a quiet voice croaked out.

"*Wei-gongzi!*"

"Hi. Please don't shout."

"Sorry. Sorry. I know. I know. I shouldn't have left. I know, I'm sor-"

"Hey, no need for apologies. Aren't you supposed to be a valiant hero rescuing a pitiful beauty? The hero isn't supposed to panic once he's done," Wei Wuxian laughed, slurring his words together in his exhaustion.

"I'm sorry-"

He cut off as he felt Wei Wuxian shake, coughing out a clump of blood. Wen Ning immediately looked around for anything he could use to help.

"No need for that, I'm fine," Wei Wuxian assured him unconvincingly, eyes fluttering shut in his exhaustion. "I was just… stupid."

"What… what happened?"

"Turns out the arrays controlling Mo Xuanyu's simulation helped a lot more than we thought. I tried manipulating the resentful energy in a fierce corpse, but that ended up being a bit harder than I expected. Our experiments have brought us into contact with higher concentrations of resentful energy than it had, but it was always… *tame,* I guess. This was wild. Mo Xuanyu said he's the one who figured out how to manipulate resentful energy originally, right?"

"Right."

"God, he must be absolutely insane."

Wen Ning was inclined to agree. If *Wei Wuxian* was struggling with demonic cultivation, then he couldn't imagine the kind of person Mo Xuanyu was.

"You… you're okay, though?" Wen Ning asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, fine. I wasn't expecting that much recoil, but I'd brought Suibian so it wasn't too hard to destroy the corpse when things started going south. Sadly, that didn't stop the backlash," he laughed. "Backlash. Lash back. Like Madam Yu. She'll definitely whip me half to death when she finds out I'm doing this. You'll save me, right, my valiant hero?"

Wen Ning frowned and moved to check if Wei Wuxian had a fever.

He did.

It wasn't a bad one, but the fact that someone as powerful as Wei Wuxian was showing a reaction concerned Wen Ning greatly.

"Hey, Wen Ning," Wei Wuxian sat up, then tilted over as nausea settled in.

"Wei-gongzi, you-"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Hey, could you grab me another corpse? I think I'd be able to do a lot better this time if-"

"No."

That single word was so stern that Wei Wuxian jumped slightly in surprise. He blinked up, wondering if a third person was present because surely that unflinching voice couldn't have been *Wen Ning's.*

"I-"

"No."

This time, having seen Wen Ning's mouth move, Wei Wuxian had no doubts as to who said it.

"What do you mean, 'no?'"

"Wei-gongzi! You can't do that again!"

"I *can't?*" he repeated, making Wen Ning back off slightly. "And what? You think this will just fix itself?"

"Of course not!" Wen Ning shook his head.

"Then-"

"No!" he shouted, and this time Wei Wuxian was the one to back off at the exclamation. "I know it's not going to fix itself, but you still can't do this! It's not worth it!"

"Not worth it?" Wei Wuxian growled. "Uncle Jiang could be *dying!* Shijie and Jiang Cheng aren't here, and Madam Yu and-and I will *not* stand by and *let them*-"

"And what will happen if you get yourself killed?" Wen Ning shouted, trying to force his eyes to not well up in tears. He was non confrontational; he didn't like arguing like this.

But if he didn't-

"I had it under control," Wei Wuxian responded.

"No," Wen Ning shook his head. "No you didn't. We don't know anything about this-"

"And that won't change unless-"

“You can’t! I-I’m worried too!” Wen Ning hurriedly wiped his tears. “I want my sister back! She’s all I’ve got! But if you get yourself killed trying to figure this out — or even just what happened now-”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re injured. Right now, the whole cultivation world will fall apart if something happens to you! Who are you expecting to run Yunmeng Jiang if you’re out of commission? I-what do you think will happen to the people in Yunmeng if you’re not here? They need you! Please, just *stop!*”

Wei Wuxian frowned and moved to speak, but faltered when Wen Ning glared right back. For a moment, Wei Wuxian honestly didn’t recognize the uncompromising boy in front of him.

(Wen Ning, channeling his sister as much as he could, tried to stop his hands from trembling as he continued to stare Wei Wuxian down. If there was ever a time to be like Wen Qing, it was now.)

“The Jiangs will need a place to come back to. Please… please don’t.”

At long last, Wei Wuxian broke eye contact.

“...Okay,” he agreed. “Okay, I won’t do it again. I promise.”

At those words, all the tension left Wen Ning’s body. He felt himself tip over and laid down on the ground. A moment later, Wei Wuxian joined him.

The pair breathed in unison, staring up at the passing clouds. When a vaguely triangle shaped one passed by, Wen Ning remembered what he had left for.

“W-Wei-gongzi, there’s some watermelon in your lab. Do you-I mean... I can bring it out for you?”

“Nah, we can eat it together later,” Wei Wuxian smiled, easily covering up his lingering bitterness at how much Wen Ning had sounded like Jiang Yanli in that moment.

(If it meant making sure the clan leaders were safe, Wei Wuxian would gladly endanger himself a hundred times over. Wen Ning had a point regarding Wei Wuxian’s current method, but Wei Wuxian was far from done with this.)

The longer the break went on, the tenser the watchers got. They knew Wei Wuxian would come out of the Burial Mounds even stronger than he was before, but the serious air remained.

Yes, the simulated Wei Wuxian was surviving, but no one could view it as a victory.

(However, they weren’t viewing it as a monstrous crime either. It was desperation, pure and simple. No one could truly blame him for that.)

(And no one would relax until they saw the future Wei Wuxian finally enter a place where he could close his eyes for *two seconds* without being pulled off a cliff.)

Then, finally, a *pop* crackled, and the world switched to a battleground.

With a melancholy voice, Sizhui narrated, "When the Sunshot Campaign started, the Qinghe Nie Clan, the Lanling Jin Clan, the Gusu Lan Clan, and the Yunmeng Jiang Clan led 8,000 cultivators to war."

Wen Chao scowled at the mention of the war. It simply didn't make sense that his sect would lose! Yes, he had seen Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation in the future segments, but that didn't seem too bad.

If Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen really thought their puny clans could stand up against the Wen, they would soon be taught their places.

As if aware of what Wen Chao thought, Sizhui continued, "When the campaign first began, no one took them seriously. Sect Leader Wen spoke up, saying that the Lanling Jin Clan was on the fence. It wanted to take part as well, but if they suffered more defeats than victories, they would soon back off and likely return to hugging the Wen Sect's legs and getting back in their good graces."

As each word progressed, an embarrassed flush spread across Jin Zixuan's face like wildfire, turning his pale skin scarlet. He looked down, not seeing the pitying looks Lan Wangji, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang shot him.

Jin Guangshan just laughed nervously, not making eye contact with any leaders.

"Next, there was the Qinghe Nie Clan's leader, who Wen Ruohan claimed was so stiff that he'd easily snap in half."

The glare Nie Mingjue sent the Wens' way left Wen Chao shaking in his seat, but Wen Ruohan merely acknowledged it with a raised eyebrow. He was inclined to believe what his other self had said, but, from the way that Sizhui boy was phrasing it, it appeared that his initial assessment was wrong.

Curious.

"The GusuLan Sect had been burnt to ruins," Sizhui continued. "Although Lan Xichen had inherited the position of Sect Leader, Wen Ruohan felt that, as he was only a junior, he wouldn't be able to do much."

The Lans acknowledged the statement with the utmost indifference.

Finally, "The most laughable one was the Yunmeng Jiang Sect, the people of which had either been killed or scattered, leaving only Jiang Cheng. Even younger than Lan Xichen, Wen Ruohan considered him no more than a child born yesterday."

This time, even though the Jiangs joined Nie Mingjue in glaring, Wen Chao couldn't hold back a small smirk at the reminder of what he had been able to do to their head disciple.

“Jiang Cheng had no one in his hands, yet he still dared to call himself sect leader, holding up the flag of rebellion as he recruited new disciples.”

On the side, Nie Huaisang hummed to himself and wished he had his fan to hide behind as he worked through his thoughts.

‘*I’m sure it being a war made it easier to gain new members, but it’s still surprising that they managed to become a Great Sect again,*’ Nie Huaisang tilted his head. ‘*Jiang-xiong supposedly led the attack on Wei-xiong, didn’t he? That’s only a few years from now. How did he regain that much money?*’

As much as he wanted to credit the new Sect Leader Jiang with that accomplishment, he couldn’t help but wonder how the necromancer on his side had contributed.

(Still, Wei Wuxian was only one person. How much of an impact could he have on the war?)

“Nevertheless,” Sizhui continued. “Everyone who stood on the Wen side took the Sunshot Campaign as a joke. The Qishan Wen Sect was so powerful. It would be almost impossible to overthrow the Nevernight. Wen Ruohan called the rebellion nothing to be feared.”

The battle scenery faltered, and switched to show Lan Xichen fighting back to back with another man whose physical features were scarily reminiscent of Jin Zixuan.

‘*It’s a coincidence,*’ Madam Jin thought. ‘*I’m just seeing things.*’

But the boy’s eyes were the *exact same shade* as her son’s.

(And her husband’s.)

Anger surged within her at the realization. She didn’t know for sure, but, knowing Jin Guangshan, it was more likely than not. She growled, ready to curse him and his bastard child to the ends of the Earth.

However, a moment later, Wei Wuxian’s terrified face staring up at Madam Yu flashed into her mind, and she felt her anger do a strange flip in her stomach.

A moment later, Sizhui’s voice continued, “In Langya, Qilu, the Lanling Jin Clan began losing ground.”

The Jin-looking boy frowned deeper as he surveyed the war around him.

Jin Zixuan internally cursed.

“And the Yunmeng Jiang Clan had already been destroyed.”

The scene changed to show Jiang Cheng bowing before incense. The determination in his eyes was the opposite of helplessness.

Jiang Yanli moved closer to Jiang Cheng, sharing a smile with him.

“Fortunately, the situation in Jianghuai was somewhat stable. Lan Wangji lead cultivators to Jingchu to reinforce, and, in Hejian, the Qinghe Nie clan won the battle!”

Satisfaction radiated off Nie Mingjue’s smug grin.

(Why didn’t they stand up earlier? Fight back sooner? Stop the Wens before it got to this point?)

“In Yunmeng and Hejian, several outposts had been taken over by the Qinghe Nie and Gusu Lan Sects. Then, one month after the start of the Sunshot Campaign, Nie Mingjue scored a crucial victory. He cut the head off Wen Ruohan’s eldest son, Wen Xu, hung it on the front line, and sneered at the Wen Clan’s weakness.”

For the first time, Wen Ruohan did a double take.

Yes, Wen Xu wasn’t anywhere near as powerful as Wen Zhuliu or Wen Ruohan himself (and Wen Ruohan was confident he could win the war even without his eldest), but-

His heir had died. Clearly, he had underestimated Nie Mingjue.

His gaze fell on Sect Leader Nie, calm and assessing.

Although Wen Ruohan would never be considered an especially affectionate father, he did care (for his own legacy, if nothing else). To have lost the main piece of that-

If he’d had demonic cultivation on his side — something powerful enough to demolish a goddess which *dozens* of cultivators had been ineffectual against — then that would *never* have happened. If he’d had demonic cultivation — an additional powerhouse which would allow *both* young masters Wens to be guarded by a game changer — then nothing would touch his heirs.

(If Wei Wuxian had been a Wen, Wen Ruohan would have won the war.)

(Instead, the boy had *cut out* his future for *no reason.*)

“Outrageous!” Wen Qing’s voice proclaimed, slamming a message against the table. Around the watchers, the world shifted into the Yiling supervisory office.

Wen Ning watched his sister worriedly.

At the sight of Wen Ning’s unharmed body, Jiang Yanli lit up and turned to Wen Qing, excitedly and silently pointing that out. He wasn’t the Ghost General yet!

Wen Qing rolled her eyes slightly, but smiled as well.

(She doubted there would be much more cause for happiness once the simulation returned to Wei Wuxian.)

“...Jie, what did the letter say?”

“Wen Ruohan has ordered all offshoots and subdivisions of the Qishan Wen clan to join the fight. Any who defy this order will be punished.”

‘*Getting frustrated, it seems,*’ Nie Mingjue’s smirk widened.

Silently, Nie Huaisang worriedly looked back and forth between Nie Mingjue and Wen Ruohan, praying desperately that nothing would happen.

On the other hand, Wen Ruohan remained confident. His son was an enormous loss — one that would *not* happen to the real one — but it could be worked around. Yunmeng had fallen in large part due to Wen Zhuliu’s existence. So long as he and Wen Zhuliu were still alive, there would be a way to turn the war around.

Terrified and distraught, Wen Ning asked, “So… we’re going?”

“No.”

Wen Qing stood up, looking forward with a determined gaze.

“Our family name may be Wen, but we’ve always devoted ourselves to medicine. That means we *don’t* kill people. Remember, we’re doctors. We save lives. Even if we must go to war, we will not harm others.”

After a moment’s pause, Wen Ning nodded and said, “Alright. I understand.”

At that moment, Nie Mingjue’s smirk faltered. When Wen Ruohan had ordered them to go to war, Nie Mingjue had pitied them. It was pressing circumstances — he could see that now — and what else could they do?

Refuse to kill anyone, apparently.

For Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin to have the guts to defy Wen Ruohan as openly as they could-

(Hadn’t he promised to kill *every* Wen just a few days ago? Could he really take something like that back?)

(Then again, Lan Qiren had also sworn that Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation meant the boy was irredeemable, so maybe he wasn’t the only one who regretted speaking too soon.)

However, even after agreeing, Wen Ning grew nervous again.

“But Wen… Wen Chao….”

The disdain in Wen Qing’s expression seemed to triple, “Wen Chao? I don’t think he has time to come and bother us.”

And, with those ominous words, the world faded to black.

Huffing in indignation, Wen Chao glared, “Well, you can be sure that *I’ll* have time to check on you this time around!”

It was almost amusing how he assumed that Wen Qing would be allowed to live in the Wen Sect at all.

The world changed again, this time switching to a different base of operations in the Wen Clan’s territory.

“Yunmeng Jiang Clan? Lotus Cove?” a drunk voice mumbled. “I joined Wen-er-gongzi and devastated them all!”

The growl Madam Yu gave sent shivers up Nie Huaisang’s spine.

“That poor bastard Jiang Cheng. His golden core was crushed by Wen Zhuliu! Disciple of a gentry family? What a joke!”

His drunken fellow soldiers laughed with him.

“It’s fine, A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli whispered to her glaring brother. “A-Xian returned your core, remember?”

Her words were meant to be reassuring, but only served to remind the both of them of what was happening to Wei Wuxian.

(Why hadn’t the simulation shown him yet? Where was he?)

“He was a piece of junk after all!”

The disgracefulness and crudeness of the scene before them — tied with the words themselves — left the three Lans present stepping back slightly in disgust. Even Lan Xichen’s ever present smile seemed to falter.

More alcohol was chugged down, until one of the Wen soldiers stepped forward and inquired, “Boss, boss, what about that one… what about that arrogant young master? What was his name again?”

If they couldn’t recall the name of Yunmeng Jiang’s head disciple, then they were well and truly *wasted.* Wen Qing breathed out sharply through her nose, infuriated by what she saw.

Slurring through his sips, another soldier suggested, “Wei… Wei Wuxian?”

Exclamations of agreement rang out.

“Yeah, I remember his name!”

“Wei Wuxian!”

“Yes, that’s it,” they laughed.

“Gongzi? That’s too big of a title for him! He was just the son of a servant!”

How many times had Madam Yu shouted those very same words? And yet, somehow, it seemed almost laughable to hear them now, knowing what the Yiling Patriarch would be.

As the conversation continued, Lan Wangji felt his carefully-maintained composure dip into rage.

“You know-you know I was there when we found him! We beat him up!”

Lan Wangji’s gaze turned dark.

“Like he was a sandbag!”

His teeth grit together.

“Too bad you weren’t there!” the first Wen declared. “You didn’t see the look on his face when he was thrown down!”

At the reminder of what had happened, Lan Wangji’s breathing stopped.

“He’ll never get to stand up so arrogantly ever again! Our boss is the best, he-”

Just then, someone stepped onto the platform the Wens were discussing on. As wind swept by, the man’s pure white clothes fluttered in the wind, and the forehead ribbon on his head danced gracefully.

He frowned deeper.

A wave of spiritual energy shot out of his hand, sending the drunk soldiers flying back. Two crashed onto the ground, and the rest scrambled for their swords. Before they could act, however, chords struck out and pinned them to the floor by their necks, leaving them either dead or incapacitated in less than a second.

Lan Qiren nodded at his nephew in approval.

Jiang Cheng flew down to join them, looking back and forth between the soldiers and Lan Wangji with confusion. A few seconds later, two dozen Lan disciples finally ran up around the two, quickly securing the platform and outpost.

‘*My soldiers were unhealthily overconfident,*’ Wen Ruohan realized. ‘*I’ll fix that when we get out.*’

Slowly, one of the knocked-down Wens began struggling up.

“*Kneel*,” Lan Wangji commanded.

The ones who could move fell to their knees.

“Getting revenge for what they said about your husband?” Nie Huaisang asked with a mischievous grin. To his great surprise, Lan Wangji merely turned a blank, unimpressed stare on him, not reacting with the abject embarrassment Nie Huaisang had been hoping for.

(Lan Wangji would never forgive his adult self for dragging Wei Wuxian back to the Cloud Recesses, but the feelings of his 18 year old self were now *undeniable*.)

Both Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng stared down at the Wen soldiers with the utmost disdain. In Jiang Cheng’s clenched fists, Zidian sparked dangerously.

Forcing himself to remain composed, Lan Wangji looked down at the kneeling Wen soldiers and asked, “Where is Wei Ying?”

The soldiers remained silent. They knew all too well that the true answer would most likely result in their deaths by Zidian’s whip.

Jiang Cheng didn’t bother to hide his curse.

Soon after, the Lan disciples marched in formation, bringing the new prisoners of war back to camp. All the while, Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng stood on the sidelines, overlooking the operation.

Then, ten Lan disciples walked briskly toward them.

“Lan-er-gongzi!” the frontmost one greeted, holding out his arms to display what he was carrying.

It was Bichen.

Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan breathed out sighs of relief, seeing their swords among those brought over. Even Nie Huaisang, who never used his sword, felt comforted by the idea that his other-self would get his returned.

(If nothing else, it would probably help Nie Mingjue stop panicking every time he left Huaisang alone.)

Cautiously — almost disbelievingly — Sect Leader Jiang Cheng reached out and picked up Sandu.

“Lan-er-gongzi…” another sword was held up. “This one belongs to Wei-gongzi.”

The stern expression on Lan Wangji’s face faltered for a moment as he looked down at Suibian. As more time passed without confirmation regarding Wei Wuxian’s whereabouts, the chances of his survival diminished considerably.

Finally, Lan Wangji reached forward and took the offered blade, staring down at it as if he was silently begging it to answer his questions.

The real Lan Wangji understood his other-self’s feelings completely.

‘*Where’s Wei Ying?*’ he mentally asked. ‘*If he’s still in the Burial Mounds, why isn’t the simulation going back to him? What’s happening? Is he still okay?*’

As soon as he thought that, he frowned at his own stupidity.

(No, of course Wei Wuxian wasn’t okay. Lan Wangji knew what he was going through. *No one* could come out of that unchanged.)

Then, the virtual Lan Wangji moved. Reaching forward, he grabbed onto the other end of Suibian and tried opening it.

Nothing happened.

“What?” Lan Qiren asked, making his younger nephew look up.

Lan Wangji tried again, but it remained stuck.

“It sealed itself,” Wen Ruohan realized, eyes widening in shock.

“That’s impossible,” Lan Qiren instantly refuted.

“The evidence is right there-”

“He’s a *teenager*,” Lan Qiren countered. “Not even twenty yet! His sword can’t have-that’s just not….”

“Not realistic?” Nie Huaisang suggested with a grin. “On the contrary, I think this should be expected of the to-be Yiling Patriarch~”

Lan Qiren opened his mouth to disagree, only to close it again and rub his eyes tiredly, sitting back down. Although he would never admit it, he had no counter to that.

However, Huaisang’s words also filled the people present with a sinking sensation of dread. How much longer would they still be able to say *to-be* Yiling Patriarch?

How different would Wei Wuxian be once he got out?

Those same thoughts were running through the simulated Lan Wangji as well.

‘*Wei Ying,*’ his mind whispered. ‘*Where are you?*’

“He’ll be okay,” Lan Xichen whispered, leaning close to his distressed younger brother. “He’ll get out.”

“I know,” Lan Wangji responded. “But who knows what’s happening to him now.”

This time, it was Ouyang Zizhen’s all-too cheerful voice that explained, “Two months later.”

Absolute silence followed.

Night fell, and the scene changed to a large town.

"...What did he just say?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

"Months?"

"*Two?* No, Wen Xu's death was already a month later. So-"

"Even if Wei Wuxian's escaped by now… he's spent three months in those conditions-"

Nie Huaisang couldn't finish.

After all, it seemed fairly clear that what Wen Chao had done to Wei Wuxian was far worse than even tortured prisoners of war would experience. Humans simply weren't physically capable of doing what those spirits had done.

Three months. Alone. Attacked on all sides at all times in every imaginable way — without food or water or shelter or blankets or heat or allies-

How was Wei Wuxian supposed to rejoin society after *that?*

"Shongling, this time!" Ouyang Zizhen explained. A lush forest shifted into existence.

In the shade of one of the thickest trees, Jiang Cheng stood, waiting for someone. The sound of footsteps came from his left, and he turned to see Lan Wangji approaching.

Many people glanced back and forth between the boys' real counterparts, wondering why they were meeting up. They had been seen together earlier, but no one would have suspected that they were regularly doing missions together.

"Lan-er-gongzi," Jiang Cheng greeted coldly.

Lan Wangji solemnly nodded and responded, "Sect Leader Jiang."

Then, without another word, the two took off on their swords, a group of cultivators following behind them. They flew through the air for a while before Lan Wangji's gaze drifted to the additional sword at Jiang Wanyin's hip.

Suibian had been transferred back into Jiang Cheng's hold, it seemed.

After a moment, Lan Wangji forced himself to look forward again and asked, "Has Wei Ying been found yet?"

Jiang Cheng turned to him, surprise painted across his face.

The real Jiang Cheng supposed that his other-self must still be under the impression that Lan Wangji hated Wei Wuxian. He wondered how long it would take the simulated Jiang Cheng to learn the truth.

Finally, Jiang Cheng looked down and responded, "No."

Despite having expected the answer, it was still crushing to hear.

After another pause, Jiang Cheng added, "The people on my side haven't gotten news of him yet, but, when he returns, I know he'll come to find me. After he appears, I'll return his sword."

At those words, Jin Zixuan couldn't help but remember the way the 13 years later adult versions had reunited. Zixuan was sure they were misunderstanding something — there was simply no way Jiang Cheng could *actually* want to torture his shixiong — but the irony was still there.

The future Wei Wuxian had quite clearly not wanted to find the future's Sect Leader Jiang, after all.

(When he glanced over and noticed the Jiang siblings realizing the same, Jin Zixuan silently moved to sit even closer to them.)

Accompanied by a group of Lan and new Jiang disciples, Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng arrived at a supervisory office. They split up, Lan Wangji taking a single Lan disciple with them to infiltrate and Jiang Cheng circling around the back.

The two Lans leapt over the outermost wall and looked down.

Below was a *sea* of corpses.

Jiang Yanli flinched back, felt her knees grow weak, and collapsed into her chair.

(She recognized this pressure. It was nothing compared to the Burial Mounds, but there was undeniably resentful energy there.)

(And that could only be the work of one person.)

"What happened?" the Lan disciple accompanying Lan Wangji asked. His question was more than justified.

Even at a quick glance, the carnage was clear. One Wen disciple had been impaled by a flagpost; another stabbed in the eye; another had his limbs ripped out; another was beaten until he *wanted* to die. And those were the cleanest deaths on display.

All dead; all different ways.

Not to mention the *ocean* of resentful energy spilling out of the place.

'*It would be one thing if that was a town of civilians,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*But this is a Wen outpost. Those are soldiers lying there. How on earth could someone have killed each one in different ways without letting any escape?*'

Despite it being his cultivators there, Wen Ruohan had to admit he was impressed.

(And, given the cause, he was fairly certain he knew who had done it.)

While the two Lans were still staring in shock, Jiang Cheng, who had entered from the other side, stepped forward and kicked a propped-up Wen to the ground.

'*Desecration of the dead,*' Lan Qiren thought. '*I guess Wei Wuxian isn't the only one who's past the point of caring about that.*'

Jiang Cheng laughed, "I guess tonight's mission has already been done for us."

"Sect Leader," his partner greeted. "All of the Wen Clan's cultivators are dead. They've all died in different ways. But it's… strange."

Lan Wangji glanced over.

"Most of them were scared to death."

Everyone did a double take.

"Did… what?"

Now that they took a closer look at the bodies, it was clear that the disciple was correct. Somehow, at least half of the disciples had died of fright.

This was a power unlike anything they had experienced before.

Jin Guangshan laughed half in disbelief and half in fascination. His excitement only grew.

"...What do you mean they were 'scared to death?'" Jiang Cheng demanded. "Who did this?"

The watchers had a sneaking suspicion they knew the answer to that.

The very first thing they had been shown was the Yiling Patriarch, using Chenqing to take on an entire squadron by himself. But, to have fallen so low as to torture?

That didn't seem like Wei Wuxian, but after what had happened in the Burial Mounds, no one could say they were surprised.

"Sect Leader, we haven't found anything," someone else reported. As Jiang Cheng continued to converse with them, Lan Wangji stood on the side, staring at a paper talisman he had found on the walls.

He narrowed his eyes.

Several people stepped forward, observing the protective talismans which had been peeled off the wall.

They were still intact.

And yet the resentful energy here was impossible to ignore.

Just as the watchers realized that, Jiang Cheng gave a smug chuckle, "It's okay. They killed Wen Chao's men. They must be on our side."

Right as Jiang Cheng was about to turn and leave, he noticed Lan Wangji's distraction. Approaching, he also looked down at the red painted talisman on yellow paper. Although the talisman seemed normal at first glance, after taking a closer look at it, Jiang Cheng realized that there were certain things wrong with it.

Lan Qiren frowned, finding it strangely familiar but not sure why.

"Too many," Lan Wangji observed.

With that, it finally clicked.

"Wait, then that's-"

"A spirit attraction flag!"

As the two simulated cultivators turned to each other in equal confusion, the watchers stepped back in shock.

"It's only been three months," Lan Xichen breathed out. "He's already made them?"

"I mean… I guess he already had the idea…. But still…."

Madam Jin shook her head in disbelief, "They do say desperation is the mother of invention."

And Wei Wuxian had been very, *very* desperate.

"Sect Leader!" someone else shouted, running into the room. "Someone spotted the Wen Clan's army just south of us! It's headed this way!"

"Burn the grain and supplies," Jiang Cheng ordered. "Then everyone evacuate!"

"Yes!"

Three simultaneous proud smiles were directed Jiang Cheng's way, and he felt himself flush in embarrassment under his family's silent praise. When both Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji nodded to him (with Nie Huaisang even giving a silent cheer), Jiang Cheng felt his bones disappear and his body turned into an embarrassed pile of goop on the floor.

Luckily for Jiang Cheng, immediately after this, the scene changed again.

"Fort Shayang," Zizhen explained.

Nie Mingjue felt himself tense in anticipation as the scene formed before them.

Outside a moonlit building, crickets sang ominously into the night.

"Have you heard? Everyone in the supervisory office in Jiangling was killed!"

“What?”

“Jiangling, Mianyang, Shongling. They were cursed. The offices of the Wen Clan are cursed by demons!”

“Three offices?” Lan Xichen gasped out.

“I see,” Wen Ruohan hummed. “So he can do that as many times as he wants to. He’s practically a sect all on his own.”

Wen Chao paled, remembering who made it possible for Wei Wuxian to become so powerful.

After a pause, the second person said, “I heard someone say that Lan Wangji did that. That they were trying to disrupt our moral-”

“Bullshit! You’ve seen the bodies at the outpost in Mianyang. Was that something a human could do?”

For a moment, Jiang Cheng wanted to laugh at their ignorance. They were so horribly wrong; Wei Wuxian was a human who could do anything!

But he shouldn’t have *had* to do that.

(Besides, after the Burial Mounds, who knew how much of Wei Wuxian’s humanity was left. He knew his shixiong; Wei Wuxian would *never* kill Jiang Yanli. However, the Yiling patriarch — the demon who crawled out of the Burial Mounds in search of revenge — might.)

The two brought their voices even lower.

“Anyway, we can’t stay in the Wen Clan anymore. I don’t want to die.”

If that was the impact Wei Wuxian left after just three battles….

Once Wei Wuxian officially joined the Sunshot Campaign, soldiers must have defected in droves to avoid an encounter with the Mo Dao Zu Shi.

(If he’d been on the Wen Clan’s side, it would be the Sunshot Campaign’s forces running away.)

Just then, the two soldiers turned a corner.

“Stop!” they ordered, seeing a Wen robed figure in the distance. The figure didn’t reply, but, soon after, it was followed by another. Then two more. Then three.

The two Wen patrollers began backing up nervously.

“We… we-”

A sword stabbed through his chest, impaling him from behind.

His partner's screams were silenced a moment later.

Jiang Yanli flinched, then unconsciously stepped closer to Jin Zixuan.

He glared as the simulated attacker revealed himself.

"How dare they try to desert us!" Wen Chao demanded, his expression overflowing with rage. "Anyone who spreads rumors, disobeys orders, or runs away will be killed just like them!"

'*If Wei Wuxian had been on our side from the beginning, this wouldn't be happening,*' Wen Chao thought, determination growing.

Behind him, Wang Lingjiao looked down at their bodies, hesitation flashing across her face. It wasn't guilt or remorse or sympathy, but rather a selfish, animalistic *terror*.

His other-self didn't notice, but the real Wen Chao did. After seeing her for so long, he had to admit he was starting to grow tired of her. Maybe he wouldn't go out of his way to find her once he got out.

(He would probably have his hands full training Wei Wuxian anyways.)

Next, Wen Chao turned an annoyed glare on his intimidated third in command and asked, "Any sign of the rebel base?"

"Wen-er-gongzi, we haven't found it yet-"

"Well, hurry up and find it!"

"But-but His Excellency ordered us to go to the main battlefield in Qinghe-"

Wen Chao smacked him to the floor.

"Chao-er," Wen Ruohan's voice reverberated across the room.

"Y-yes, Father?"

"I'm the one who gives orders around here!" Wen Chao's simulated-self shouted.

"This will not be tolerated. Am I understood?"

"Yes… yes, Father."

"Get a move on!" he continued. "If you can't find it, don't you dare come back!"

"Yes!" the man scampered off. Rather than her usual smug sadism, Wang Lingjiao was looking away from the scene with a concerned expression.

'*What*?' Madam Yu thought scathingly. '*You don't have the guts to face the consequences of your own actions?*'

“She better not try and run away,” Jiang Cheng growled. “I’m not through with her yet.”

“And what can you do?” Madam Yu snapped back. “Even with your core back, the Yunmeng Jiang Sect barely has anyone. What? Do you expect to be able to launch an attack on the second young master of the Wens by yourself? Don’t be a fool!”

Jiang Cheng looked down at the floor, gritting his teeth.

“San-niang,” Jiang Fengmian whispered warningly. He knew she was worried — after watching Jiang Cheng lose his core, how could she not be? — but this wasn’t helping.

She glared back at him, but didn’t continue the argument either.

“Those Sunshot Campaign bastards,” Wen Chao cursed. “All they’re capable of is sneaking up on people. I’m gonna destroy their base. They’ll stop playing their tricks then!”

Behind him, Wang Lingjiao shook in fear, and a crow gazed down.

“All we’re capable of is sneaking up on people?” Nie Mingjue repeated with a mocking laugh. “Would you like to put that to the test, Wen-gongzi?”

In response, Wen Chao straightened his posture and tried to intimidate Nie Mingjue into backing off, but only succeeded in amusing the other man. The longer Sect Leader Nie’s patronizing gaze remained on him, the angrier Wen Chao got.

He huffed, finally looking away with a muttered “Fight Wen Zhuliu if you’re so confident.”

From there, the red Wen encampment faded away, and was replaced by the purple of Yunmeng Jiang.

“Look!” Jiang Yanli declared. “A-Cheng, that’s-”

Twenty arrows were released at once, hitting the target perfectly. It was clear that these men had far more than three months of training, especially since they were all adults, far past the age of starting cultivation.

Lan Qiren glanced over, “These are?”

“My disciples,” Jiang Fengmian nodded. “They must have been away on night hunts or other trips when the Wens attacked. And A-Cheng brought them back together again.”

Archery, talisman mastery, sword practice, and more took place over the entirety of the field, running as smoothly as it ever had.

Being faced with proud smiles for the second time in less than an hour made Jiang Cheng certain he would soon waste away into an embarrassed puddle on the floor.

(And yet, some part of him couldn’t help but preen. *’Look: I can do it. Here’s actual proof that I can be sect leader*.’)

On the balcony of the fortresses' inner building, the simulated Jiang Cheng looked down at the battling disciples. To make up for the Jiangs' now-lacking numbers, there were some Lan and Nie disciples holding down the fort as well. He could hear the repetitive, even, *strong* sounds of training occurring below, and watched it with calm eyes.

"Clan leader," someone greeted, bowing behind him.

He glanced back.

"In recent days, Wen Chao has increased the number of people he's sent to search for us."

Jiang Cheng frowned, "Have any been found here in Chongyang?"

"Nothing suspicious yet, but…."

A foreboding sensation fell over the watchers.

(With the exception of Wen Chao, who sat up straighter and shook in giddy anticipation.)

The man looked down to the right, where the new Jiang disciples were training. The optimal ages to start cultivation were from nine to about thirteen, but it would be luticious to expect children to go to war. The new cultivators were all at least fifteen years old.

And, by starting late on top of only having three months to train, would be no better than lambs waiting for the slaughter.

The messenger coughed and explained, "We have new cultivators. If the Wen Clan attacks, I'm afraid we won't last long."

And he was right. It would be idiotic to defend such an important fort with only new recruits, but the advanced disciples from the Lan, Nie, and Jiang sect were a relatively small portion of the people present.

If the Wen attacked, it would be a massacre.

When Madam Jin saw her son give the trembling Jiang Yanli a soft look of reassurance, she felt her determination grow. If there was a way to destroy the Wen Sect before it got this far, she would take it.

(No matter what her husband said.)

As Jiang Cheng considered his aid's words, Lan Wangji stepped up the stairs to join Sect Leader Jiang on the wall. In his hands, he held a single talisman written on cheap, yellow paper.

It was another spirit attraction flag.

As he observed it, Wen Ruohan couldn't help humming in appreciation. With just a handful of strokes, Wei Wuxian had written on top of the evil-repelling talismans and reversed their function.

Subtle; simple; easy to pull off. Something like that could completely change the course of a war.

(And it was just *one* of the dozens of inventions Wei Wuxian was responsible for.)

"Is this one of the ones that was inside Shongling?" Jiang Cheng asked. "There are additional strokes."

Lan Wangji nodded, "Four additional strokes, drawn in human blood."

"Human blood?"

'*Is it more effective that way?*' Jin Guangshan wondered. '*Or does Wei Wuxian just have no other resources?*'

If the boy joined the Jin sect, he would have access to all the resources money could buy. Jin Guangshan wondered what he'd be able to create in those conditions.

After a pause, Jiang Cheng glanced over, "This talisman is usually painted with cinnabar. I've never heard of one being painted with human blood before."

'*We'd never heard of spirit attraction flags or compasses of evil either,*' Nie Huaisang mentally pointed out. '*Wei-xiong is just full of surprises.*'

"It's a sinister way to write a talisman. I'm afraid this charm isn't written for exorcisations," Jiang Cheng concluded.

"Exactly," Lan Wangji agreed, his impassive face turning slightly stern. "This charm has the opposite effect."

"The opposite effect? What do you mean?"

"Ordinary talismans drive out evil spirits. This one attracts them."

Despite having already known, the verbal confirmation caused many faces to fall.

"It really is a spirit attraction flag then," Jiang Fengmian sighed. He was glad that Wei Wuxian had apparently made it out of the Burial Mounds, but the realization that the flags had indeed been intended to cause destruction was disheartening.

(But, after what he had seen of Lotus Pier and the Burial Mounds, he couldn't say he didn't understand.)

"It… attracts evil spirits? I've never heard of such a thing."

"I haven't either, but I've tested it out. It does have the power to summon specters."

Recalling how the baby Lans had used it in their nighthunt, Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue made eye contact, wordlessly agreeing to test it once they got out.

"So then," Jiang Cheng looked over. "The strange things occurring with the Wen Clan's Supervisory Offices are due to this?"

"It's been used at all three locations that I went to. The strokes written on the talismans were all done by the same person."

"Wait," Jiang Cheng held a hand up. "He's already out?"

"Presumably."

"But-but why isn't he coming to find me?" Jiang Cheng asked. "My other-self, I mean."

"Only a few brushstrokes were added, and the entire function of the talisman was reversed? Who could this person possibly be?"

"This talisman is evil," Lan Wangji glared. "You should not have heard about it."

"I see. Wei Wuxian must be worried about the stigma against demonic cultivation," Jin Guangshan observed. There were sounds of agreement all around.

Lan Qiren flinched.

He didn't want to excuse demonic cultivation — it went against everything he and their culture valued — but he had seen the Burial Mounds. He knew why it was happening.

Wei Wuxian should have switched back to spiritual cultivation once he escaped the Burial Mounds, but-

But Lan Qiren had spent years teaching a zero-tolerance policy for demonic cultivation. If that had contributed (if that was *why* Wei Wuxian felt like he would receive no help), then wasn't Lan Qiren at least partially responsible for this?

Silently, Wen Qing wondered if Wei Wuxian's now-intentional absence had more to do with Jiang Cheng's mysteriously returning core than anything else.

After a pause, Lan Wangji summarized, "I've never heard of such an evil technique from any righteous clan."

Jiang Cheng couldn't help but laugh at that.

Lan Xichen tensed.

"Evil?" Jiang Cheng repeated. "What could possibly be more evil than those Wen dogs?!"

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes at the words.

“A-Cheng, I-”

“As long as he continues killing people from the Wen Clan, I don’t care if he’s a monster or a demon. I’ll welcome him myself once we find him!”

Wen Qing flinched. Despite her best efforts, she couldn’t stop a visible shiver from traveling up her body.

(Yes, A-Ning had saved Wei Wuxian, but perhaps it was naive to think that would change anything. Jiang Cheng certainly didn’t care. Maybe Wen Ning would be turned into a weapon regardless.)

(After everything that had happened, she couldn’t even entirely say she blamed Wei Wuxian for it.)

She looked down.

“Wait, Wen-guniang!” Jiang Yanli rushed to say, having seen Wen Qing’s reaction. “N-not you.”

Wen Qing raised an eyebrow.

“A-Jie’s right!” Jiang Cheng added, seeing a pleading gaze from his sister. “Not you. Or your brother. I don’t mean you two.”

Apprehensive, Wen Qing turned to glance at Nie Mingjue. He looked away.

That wasn’t agreement, but, just a few hours ago, he would have been the first person to disagree.

Jiang Yanli sent Wen Qing a blinding smile, and she felt her fear momentarily disperse.

“Lan-er-gongzi, Sect Leader Jiang,” one of the Lan disciples greeted. “Jiang-guniang has been escorted here from Shuchuan.”

“A-Li,” Jiang Fengmian breathed out in relief.

“A-Jie?” Jiang Cheng demanded. “Where is she?”

He took off running.

As Jin Zixuan saw once again how the Lans had saved Jiang Yanli, he felt his stomach do an odd tumble. Yes, their other-selves’ engagement had been broken off, but-

Was his father providing *any* assistance to the Sunshot Campaign?

He clenched his fists, promising himself that, if it occurred in the real world, the Jin would not stand idly by.

In a tranquil and blissfully private cove, Jiang Yanli waited patiently. Despite the serenity of the atmosphere, her clothes were pure white with mourning, and her face was tense with worry.

“A-Li,” Jin Zixuan whispered, concerned.

Slowly, the simulated Jiang Cheng’s running came to a halt, and he stared disbelievingly at his sister’s turned-away figure. Then, eyes wide in shock, he began to stumble forward.

Relieved tears began to glimmer in his eyes.

“I’m here, A-Cheng.”

“I know, I know!” the real Jiang Cheng hissed, blushing heavily and pretending his eyes hadn’t just started to water. He knew she was fine, but the mere idea of not knowing his sister’s fate for months left him speechless.

And, equally speechless, the simulated Jiang Cheng began a slow walk forward. Turned away, Jiang Yanli didn’t notice his approach until he reached out and touched her hand.

“A-Jie.”

Her eyes widened.

“A-Cheng?”

Jiang Cheng pulled her into a hug. A moment later, Jiang Yanli’s wide eyes relaxed, and tears began to fall.

Leaves fluttered by in the wind, and the siblings’ choked-off sobs swept by.

Smiling through her tears, Jiang Yanli wrapped her hand around Jiang Cheng’s head and whispered, “It’s okay. Everything’s alright now. Everything will be alright.”

The hopeful promise wrapped around the pair like a loving embrace.

Jiang Yanli felt her heart burst at the scene. They shouldn’t have been separated at all, but-

They were together now. They had found each other again.

(Now, all they needed to do was reunite with Wei Wuxian.)

Finally, Jiang Cheng forced himself to separate from her, drying his tears. They made eye contact, and Jiang Cheng reached inside his robes to pull out a package.

Jiang Yanli flinched back as if slapped.

Her eyes snapped shut.

Madam Yu’s bell and Jiang Fengmian’s headpiece were held out to her.

“Thank you,” Jiang Yanli whispered, glancing at Wen Qing. “Truly, honestly, thank you.”

After a pause, Wen Qing looked away, “No need. It hasn’t happened yet, and won’t need to happen.”

“Still.”

Madam Yu, Jiang Cheng, and Jiang Fengmian made eye contact. The Wen siblings had betrayed their sect, but it wasn’t just to save lives. They had also risked themselves to make sure the Jiangs’ bodies could be buried properly.

The Jiangs owed the Wen siblings quite a bit, it seemed.

As Jiang Yanli reached out to touch the objects, every centimeter of distance she covered seemed like a battle on its own. She felt along them, a war between denial and acceptance transpiring in her eyes.

Then, at long last, despairing tears began to fall.

The glares directed Wen Ruohan’s way couldn’t be described as anything but *scathing*.

“Lotus Cove…” Jiang Cheng growled. “I’ll definitely get it back. I’ll avenge A-Die and A-Niang. I’ll make those damn Wen-dogs pay for this!”

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli whispered, reaching out to cup his cheek. “You’ve grown up…. If A-Die and A-Niang could see you, they would be very happy.”

Apprehensively, Jiang Cheng glanced over.

His father nodded back in warm agreement, and Jiang Cheng felt his fears finally settle.

“Is there… any news about A-Xian?”

Jiang Cheng flinched back, then looked down, unable to meet her eyes.

A memory — Jiang Cheng’s memory — formed. After regaining a golden core, he had returned to the agreed upon location, looking around for his brother.

There was no one there.

Jiang Cheng’s voice overlaid on the scene explained, “I went down the mountain, but there was no sign of him. I spent days searching for any trace. I even went to the Yiling Supervisory Office in case he had been caught, but I didn’t find anything.

‘*Of course not,*’ Nie Mingjue scowled grimly. ‘*No one would ever think to check in the Burial Mounds. The cruelty it would take to throw a living person there-*’

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji breathed out, closing his eyes in grief as the possibilities swarmed his mind.

Clenching his fists together, Jiang Cheng whispered, "He might have-"

He cut off, feeling Jiang Yanli wrap her hands around his.

"Don't make wild guesses," she requested. "A-Xian is… going to be okay."

Her voice broke as she spoke the last words, fear sinking in. She glanced down at where Suibian hung on Jiang Cheng's waist, then closed her eyes and turned away.

"Well," Lan Xichen tried for a reassuring smile. "I'm sure he'll be somewhat different after that, but we do know he survives this. He escapes stronger than ever."

Jiang Yanli smiled back, appreciating the attempt.

Then, the watchers were moved farther back until they were nearly hidden behind the bushes. The simulated Jiang siblings could still be heard, but the watchers were covered.

And they weren't alone.

Nie Huaisang glanced down, and saw the Wen uniform on the spy's back.

"Oh," he whispered. "Oh, no, no, no-"

'*Ha. We've searched everywhere else. The only place left is Chongyang,*' he thought. '*I need to tell Wen-er-gongzi that-*"

He ducked, narrowly dodging an arrow.

"Jiu-shidi!" Jiang Cheng realized.

The Jiang disciple leapt forward and attacked.

"A-Die, look! Jiu-shidi survived!" Jiang Yanli smiled. He was one of the newer students, but he would be much more advanced than children with only three months to their name.

The commotion made noise, and soon a pair of Lan disciples were also on the case. All three Sunshot Campaign warriors moved to hunt down the Wen as quickly as possible.

Then, another Jiang cut him off.

The Wen was impaled.

"*Yes!*" Jin Zixuan cheered, and Nie Mingjue's grin turned terrifying.

"You won't be able to tip him off now," the Jiang disciple who had cut him off smirked, watching the body fall to the ground. However, a moment later, he noticed a trail of smoke rising from the man's hand.

The flare had already been lit.

“No!”

It went off, and the Wen symbol bursted into the air, marking the location.

Lan Wangji gritted his teeth, furious at his own powerlessness. He had run forward to try and stop the flare, only to belatedly remember that there was nothing he could do.

He couldn’t stop the flare, and he couldn’t help Wei Ying.

‘*Useless,*’ he cursed at himself.

The simulation cut to Lan Wangji, who was still observing the talisman apprehensively. A moment later, however, a red light flashed into his eyes. He turned towards it, and saw the Wen’s sun shining in the sky.

Another cut to where Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli stood, staring at that same red light.

“No,” Jiang Yanli whispered.

“A-Li,” Jin Zixuan knelt beside her.

“No, this can’t happen again. A-Xuan, I-I *can’t* watch this happen again!”

Her parents were struck silent. With the situation as it was, it seemed likely that this would end up being the Massacre of Lotus Pier all over again.

(Because they had hesitated to act against the Wen Sect, their children had to go through this.)

(What could they say except, “I’m sorry?”)

Then, crows cawed in the distance, and the scene changed to a run down fort.

Wen Chao plopped down in a seat, scoffing, “You still haven’t found the rest of the rebels after all this time? Wen Xu was also useless, getting his head chopped off by Nie Mingjue. It’s a disgrace to the Qishan Wen Clan!”

Wen Ruohan’s frown deepened.

On the side, the tea he was being poured began to overflow. Hearing the liquid pour out, Wen Chao glanced back, then screeched at the offence.

“Hey, hey, hey!” he said. “You stupid woman! What’s gotten into you lately?”

At that, the frozen Wang Lingjiao startled, jumping back and spilling even more tea.

“Witch! What are you doing?!”

She ran forward and grabbed onto his sleeve.

“Er-gongzi, do you think-do you think all the strange things happening at the supervisory offices lately, and-and all those dead bodies were… Wei Wuxian’s doing?”

“...I mean, yes, but-”

“He… he’s come to seek revenge!”

The watchers knew it was Wei Wuxian because the Yiling Patriarch was the only person who could invent the spirit attraction flags, but Wang Lingjiao had no reason to feel that way.

Which meant his threat had scared her so much that she spent months thinking about it even after throwing him into the Burial Mounds. Based on the dark circles under her eyes, this was far from the first time.

Nie Mingjue gave a long, impressed whistle.

“How could that be possible?!” Wen Chao growled. “How many cultivators has our sect sent to try and clean the Burial Mounds up? Did a single one of them come back alive? By now, he’s probably already rotten away!”

The reminder of the sheer impossibility of what Wei Wuxian had accomplished left the watchers struck silent.

“It’s scary even if he’s dead!” Wang Lingjiao responded. “If he really comes back as a ferocious ghost to haunt us….”

A memory appeared. Even whipped, beaten up, and stabbed, Wei Wuxian was able to smirk at them.

“After I die, I’ll return as a fierce ghost! I’ll haunt you until you’re forced to join me!”

Both Wen Chao and Wang Lingjiao shivered involuntarily.

In a way, it wasn’t surprising that this threat had stayed with them for so long. They had been threatened numerous times before, but, every time, the Wen Clan’s power had been able to make that person back off in fear. Lan Xichen had been forced to run. Madam Yu had been killed. Jiang Cheng’s core had been destroyed.

And yet, no matter what the Wen Clan did, Wei Wuxian had remained fearless. Of course they didn’t know how to face someone like that.

Wen Chao huffed and turned away, “Even if he’s died, his spirit will be trapped there for all eternity. He’ll never get out!”

The words did nothing to change the terrified eyes of Wang Lingjiao.

“But… but-”

“Don’t scare yourself, can’t you see that I’m annoyed?!” he crumpled up the letter on the table. “What Sunshot Campaign. You want to shoot down the sun? Dream on!”

Seeing his annoyance, Wang Lingjiao's expression switched to one of flattery.

Madam Yu and Madam Jin both rolled their eyes.

"O-of course Young Master Wen. Those few sects won't be able to keep this up for long. Sect Leader Wen will definitely-"

"Shut up! What do you know? Get lost! Stop annoying me!"

With a slap, Wang Lingjiao was thrown to the ground.

"You're making me angry."

Although Wen Qing couldn't bring herself to feel bad for Wang Lingjiao, her opinion of Wen Chao dropped nonetheless.

However, at that moment, they were pulled inside Wen Chao's thoughts.

'*No one can escape the Burial Mounds,*' he reminded himself, then- '*No one was supposed to be able to kill the Xuanwu either.*'

"Attempt the impossible," Jin Zixuan acknowledged with a chuckle.

Just as Wen Chao was about to leave, a voice called from outside.

"Wen-gongzi, we've found the rebels!"

Nie Mingjue clicked his tongue, and Lan Xichen's placid expression faltered.

"Where are they?" Wen Chao shouted. "Kill them now! I want every single one of them dead!"

'*Not again*,' Jiang Yanli prayed. '*Please, don't become another Lotus Pier. Please.*'

Her prayers echoed throughout the minds of all of the Sunshot Campaign's watchers.

Back at the Chongyang base, the Lan, Nie, and Jiang disciples prepared for the coming conflict. They raced up the stairs in droves, arming themselves and evacuating civilians.

"Pass the word!" someone shouted to the droves of soldiers. "All women and children should evacuate to the back hill!"

Jiang Cheng stood on the wall, facing the direction of the coming conflict.

For the first time, the real Jiang Cheng looked at his older self, and saw the Jiang Sect Leader standing there.

A leader who refused to allow his sect to be destroyed again.

"Clan leader," someone greeted, stepping up. "We've found a sword formation of the Wen Clan northwest of here!"

“Damn, they came fast,” Jiang Cheng turned to face the coming army.

And, just as he’d cursed that, the first line of Wens began to descend.

Now, Wen Chao was practically jumping in his seat from the excitement. Yes, the Sunshot Campaign had survived longer than his father had expected — had killed his brother, in fact — but that didn’t matter. So long as he had Wen Zhuliu on his side, there was no way this collection of clans would stand a chance against his army!

At the forehead of the defense, Lan Wangji looked over the field of Wens without fear.

“Thank you,” Jiang Fengmian nodded once. With the simulated Lan Wangji also having sent people for Jiang Yanli, the ‘thank you’s the Jiangs had to give him seemed endless.

‘*Good job, Wangji-xiong!*’ Nie Huaisang gave a mental cheer. ‘*Winning your in-laws over flawlessly!*’

However, a moment later, Nie Huaisang’s smile faltered. Luckily, there hadn’t been much focus on the Nie sect yet. That didn’t change the fact that he *knew* some of the people there.

Although he didn’t phase inside, he moved closer to his brother’s reassuring form.

The Wens paused outside the base and observed the defensive formation. The two sides stared each other down, tension growing. Then, the highest ranking Wen present lifted his hand.

“Fire arrows!”

A storm of flaming arrows fell.

Jiang Yanli looked away.

‘*Not again!*’ she begged.

However, instead of falling like rain and massacring the people present, the arrows were thrown back by a *tidal wave* of blue spiritual energy.

The strings on Lan Wangji’s guqin thrummed. Unlike at Lotus Pier, the soldiers present were *prepared* for an attack.

“Get in formation!” Lan Wangji ordered.

At once, the Lan and Jiang disciples worked together to set up dozens of individual arrays in the sky. The defensive barrier was thinner than the one Lotus Pier had once had, but was also more secure due to how many people were working on it. Unlike last time, an inside attack by Wen Zhuliu wouldn’t instantly destroy it.

They’d learned from their mistakes.

The blue arrays of the sunshot campaign floated proudly, even as the Wen Clan built up their golden arrays for an attack. For a moment, everything paused as the two sides faced each other.

Then, the arrays slammed together.

The resulting shockwaves tore trees off the ground.

The watchers stood up, alert.

On the wall, Jiang Cheng twisted the ring of Zidian, then released it. The whip of purple lighting expanded out at once, burning the air around it.

He looked up at the Wen army.

"Attack!" he shouted.

The Sunshot Campaign's warriors surged forward.

A grin crept onto Nie MIngjue's face.

The world faded to black.

With a pout, Nie Huaisang sat down and whined, "I hate these cliffhangers."

""""Agreed,"""" Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Mingjue said simultaneously.

When the world reformed, it was to a cloudy, moonlit sky. Within the barracks of the fort, a woman sat shivering in her bed. At the slightest creak, she jumped in fear, clutching her pillow tightly.

If Wang Lingjiao hadn't begged Wen Chao to melt Wei Wuxian's core and chop off his hand, Jiang Yanli might have pitied her.

On the walls of her room, every square foot was covered with spirit repelling talismans. A quick glance around showed that the whole *building* was covered by those very same charms.

They had figured out what Wei Wuxian was doing, but they didn't know how to counter it.

Wen Ruohan breathed out an amused half-laugh.

Then, Wang Lingjiao buried herself deeper into her pillow to hide.

"W-Wei Wuxian," she whispered, glancing around rapidly. "Wei Ying."

"Good," Jiang Cheng whispered. "You *should* fear him."

"Wen Chao pushed you down there. It wasn't me. It wasn't me!"

"That *traitorous*-"

"No less than you deserve!" Nie Mingjue snapped, cutting Wen Chao off.

Wen Chao had never spent longer than 6 months with a woman. By now, it was clear that regardless of her initial hopes, she was no different. If she stayed in the Wen Sect, the only thing waiting for her would be death.

After a moment of thought, she forced her trembling body to get out of bed. Underneath her bed was a small, lightly decorated chest meant for storing valuables.

'*I spent the last six months hoarding this,*' she thought. '*There should be enough. It's time to go.*'

'*She's running away?*' Wen Chao realized, huffing haughtily.

She dug a miniscule key out of her belt and put it in the lock.

"What a scum of a man," she muttered. "A greasy thing like you will die sooner or later."

Now, there was absolutely no way he would want anything to do with that woman once he got out of the simulation.

Maybe he'd send Wei Wuxian to exterminate her clan. Could be fun.

"Honestly, I should be grateful now that I don't have to serve you anymo- *Ah!*"

She jumped back and collapsed to the ground.

Frowning, the watchers hurried forward to inspect the chest.

Rather than treasure or weapons, the chest contained a curled up infant!

Jiang Yanli went pale.

"What?" Nie Mingjue breathed out, scanning around.

What was going on?

Having dropped the chest, Wang Lingjiao was forced to stare directly at the child. However, after several seconds with nothing happening, the rush of adrenaline coursing through her began to ease.

'*How is a child in there?* she looked all around, terror written across her face. '*I'm the only one with a key, no one else should've been able to get inside!*'

She wanted to approach it and take another look, but quickly rejected the notion. Her cultivation was extremely weak; if it ended up truly being a ghost-

‘I’ll haunt you until you’re forced to join me!’ Wei Wuxian shouted, laughing fearlessly even then.

“Psychological,” Wen Ruohan muttered, making Jin Guangshan nod. They had wondered what kind of revenge Wei Wuxian would enact if given the chance. 'Terrify them until they start hallucinating' required much more patience than they had expected him to have.

It appeared he had a much larger variety in tactics than anyone could have guessed.

As if realizing the same, Wang Lingjiao stood up.

She knew she needed to escape.

Like a frightened rat, she ran to the walls of her room, peeling talismans off them to stick onto her body for protection. Once they littered her chest and limbs, she was finally able to relax slightly.

She turned back to the chest.

The baby was gone; her treasure had returned.

“Oh, I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all,” Nie Huaisang murmured, terror sinking in. Although they understood the fearful sentiment, no one else could bring themselves to agree.

(Wang Lingjiao *deserved this*, after all.)

Shaking her head as if assuming she had just imagined the baby, Wang Lingjiao returned to her treasures and began to count them. However, right as she was reaching the double digits, her attention was attracted by a bright glow.

Under her bed, two, identical white lights were shining.

Eyes.

A shiver ran up Wen Chao’s back.

Then, the wind picked up. The few candles she had were instantly extinguished. Her hands shook in fear, and she looked around wildly for any trace of an attack.

A hand grabbed her.

Her scream made Nie Huaisang flinch.

“Help! Somebody help!” she shouted, breaking off into a sprint. The watchers couldn’t see much in the darkness, but they could vaguely make out the being holding on.

It was the dead child she had found in the chest.

“What the fuck is *that?!*”

“Get me out of here!” she screamed. “I’m not staying here! Get me out of here!”

She slammed open the door and turned to the guards waiting outside.

“Why are you just standing there? Get me the hell out of here!”

She grabbed onto one’s shoulder, trying to shake him into compliance.

He tipped over and crashed on the ground.

“*What the-*”

“He’s dead?” Wen Qing breathed out, kneeling down to examine the body.

Terror multiplying at the sight, Wang Lingjiao backed up carefully. She looked over at the other guard, whose slouched posture now showed him to be another corpse.

“My god,” Jiang Fengmian breathed out.

(This was exactly the kind of cruel, evil demonic cultivation they had imagined when they first heard the term.)

(And yet not a single one of them could say they didn’t understand.)

Then, a chilling, *terrifying* noise cut through the night.

“A flute?” Lan Wangji breathed out, and the first scene’s presentation of the Yiling Patriarch flashed into his mind. “It’s… Chenqing?”

“Where’s that sound coming from?” Wang Lingjiao frantically cried out.

The flute continued, its high notes piercing the listener’s flesh, and its melody crawling within their bones. Clouds covered the moon again, and the terrifyingly beautiful sound scratched through their souls.

Then, movement.

Lan Qiren’s pale face had become the same color as his ribbon.

The corpses of the two Wen guards jolted, shifted, then rose with a *crack* of their bones.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji whispered.

The two corpses turned to face her. Then, they stepped.

Jiang Yanli fell back.

They stepped closer and closer, swaying in accordance with the demonic music. The looming figures were hungry for flesh.

“N-no!” Wang Lingjiao cried. “Don’t come any closer!”

They saw no reason to listen.

Outside her window, a murder of crows sped by as if they were resentful beings, summoned by the music just as much as the corpses were. Every warding talisman in the base began to glow a deep, demonic red.

The watchers stepped back.

The window slammed open, and the useless talismans flew out. The updraft they rode on shook the whole room, sending the fabric of Wang Lingjiao's dress fluttering wildly.

The corpses moved closer.

It almost seemed like Wei Wuxian had brought the Burial Mounds — no, *remade* the Burial Mounds — inside the base.

Through the fear, a few satisfied smiles appeared on the watchers.

'*Good. She deserves far worse than a mere fraction of what happened to Wei Wuxian,*' Jiang Cheng thought, grinning in the darkness. Spurred on by the power Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation imbued the memories with, he moved closer to enjoy the show.

'*Wei Ying,*' Lan Wangji turned away to stand by the window. '*Where are you?*'

The corpses stepped closer, and Wang Lingjiao remained frozen in fear. The drunken, disorderly steps the corpses took didn't slow them at all, and soon they were only a few feet away.

One looked up.

Wang Lingjiao saw her life flash before her eyes.

"No," she whispered. "No!"

She ran, tearing through the hallway and tripping over the furniture, uncaring of the scratches and scars she got as she went.

"Wei Ying, I didn't push you down there!" she shouted. "If-if you want your revenge, go find Wen Chao!"

"Oh, we'll get to him," Jiang Cheng promised.

"Don't come after me!" she begged. The displaced talismans slammed into her, covering her face and eyes and blocking her movement as a tornado arose in her room. They layered themselves on top of the talismans she had placed in an effort to protect herself, turning the defense into a poison. Then, one landed on her neck.

She jerked back, clawing at it and gagging as it squeezed tightly.

When Jiang Yanli remembered the way her brother had choked on a corpse's teeth wrapping around his neck, she felt any pity she might have had incinerate.

More and more talismans wrapped around, bringing Wang Lingjiao to the floor. She struggled against them, but her non-cultivating body seemed incapable of fighting back.

The two corpses moved closer.

"No!" she screamed. "No! *No!* Get back! Get away from me!"

"Get lost!" Wei Wuxian had shouted, but no one could help him then.

And no one would help her now.

They lumbered forward.

"No! No!"

They *pounced.*

She screamed.

A truly malicious grin formed on Madam Yu's face.

Three ribbons of blood were scratched into her leg. A hand squeezed at her neck. A moment later, her arm was crushed into a fine paste against the floor.

Her screams were made silent by the pressure on her throat, but the torture was far from over. Her voiceless body fought back as hard as it could, but found itself helpless against the rage of the damned. She slammed her weak limbs against them, and they snapped her fingers in response.

The longer it went on, the more impressed Wen Ruohan felt.

A broken-off chair leg was lifted into the air.

She shook her head, tears running down her face as she silently begged them to stop.

A *snap*, and the light in Wang Lingjiao's eyes finally went out. The chair leg had been stuffed down her throat.

The simulation then moved outside of the room onto the nearest wall of the base. Standing on it was a nearly unrecognizable figure in pitch black robes.

Tied into ebony hair, a scarlet ribbon fluttered in the wind.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli whispered.

The world faded back to black.

"He made it out," Madam JIn muttered.

Smirks spread across the watchers.

‘*And he’s only gotten stronger.*’

When the world returned, the watchers were following an entourage of Wens. In the center was a high ranking official’s carriage.

Wen Zhuliu’s presence made it clear who the passenger was.

Even, steady steps echod as the Wens moved at an unhurried pace, unaware of the demon following after them.

Wen Ruohan’s lips quirked up into a smirk. He couldn’t even blame his son’s incompetence this time — *no one* should have been able to come out of the Burial Mounds stronger than they’d gone in.

It seemed Wei Wuxian had been born to surpass expectations.

~~Even without his core.~~

With just the clothes on his back and a flute he himself had crafted, Wei Wuxian had entered a base alone and *created* his army out of the people already there.

(If he’d been on the Wens’ side, he could have been sent to negotiate with Lotus Pier alone.)

(Unlike the mere *army* Wen Ruohan had sent, Wei Wuxian wouldn’t have let a single Jiang survive.)

Just then, the curtain inside the carriage swung open.

“How’s it going?” Wen Chao impatiently asked.

Wen Zhuliu didn’t even glance his way as he answered, “The gates are broken. The rebels are surrounded.”

Madam Yu cursed.

Wen Chao laughed at the response and hummed a pleased, “Great,” before allowing the curtain to fall down again. Through this reaction, it became clear that Wen Chao wouldn’t rest until he’d exterminated all the “rebels” in Chongyang.

Lan Qiren gritted his teeth.

When the simulation changed again, they were back at the Chongyang fort. Purple light flew in every direction as Jiang Cheng continued to wield ZIdian with frightening speed. Although Sandu was back in his hands, he, like Madam Yu before him, was significantly more effective in large battles while wielding the whip.

And wield it he did.

Madam Yu’s satisfied smile turned *vicious*.

However, the battle was taking its toll. Like Lotus Pier and the Cloud Recesses before it, the Chongyang fort was now bathed in flames. Although Jiang Cheng was still fighting back, he was clearly exhausted now.

Fatigue was sinking in, but he fought on.

Slowly, it dawned on the Jiang family that Jiang Cheng seemed even *stronger* now than before. Based on what happened during the destruction of Lotus Pier, Jiang Cheng shouldn't have been able to continue fighting for so long against so many people.

Had the desperation of war changed him?

(For the first time, they were starting to get the feeling that Wei Wuxian's offer had been too good to be true.)

(They refused to think too deeply into that.)

Unfortunately, pure desperation could only fuel Jiang Cheng for so long. More and more Wen soldiers piled up on him, closing in now that most of the Jiangs' new recruits were no longer able to offer support. Surrounded and lacking an escape route in the narrow alley, Jiang Cheng had no choice but to start using shorter and shorter ranged attacks.

Eventually, the range Zidian offered him would prove to be a hindrance instead of an advantage. Right as it seemed like he needed to switch to Sandu, five Wens attacked simultaneously.

Four were knocked to the ground, but one blade cut through Jiang Cheng's back.

"A-Cheng!"

Jiang Cheng fell to his knees and, in the next instant, three swords shot forward to wait threateningly under his neck, keeping him in place.

When Wen Chao began to laugh, the collective hate sent his way was strong enough to incinerate a million Xuanwus by itself.

In a farther part of the fort, Lan Wangji continued his battle. Like Sandu, Bichen was extremely useful for one on one battles, but less applicable when it was one against a hundred. Instead, Lan Wangji's guqin worked tirelessly to fight back against the army. He and the Lan disciples who had been present defended an area of the fort without rest.

But the tips of Lan Wangji's fingers were worn down. Now, they dripped blood onto the guqin's strings. The dark circles under Lan Wangji's eyes had grown into black holes of fatigue.

The desperation on his face was starting to be overpowered by the exhaustion.

He wouldn't last forever.

Lan Xichen clasped his trembling hands together, forcing himself to not look away. His conflicting desires of being unable to watch his brother get hurt and being unable to forgive himself if he didn't see left him shaking in his seat.

"Xichen," Nie Mingjue leaned over to whisper. "It's fine, remember? We've seen the future-"

"Did the future keep *Wei Wuxian* safe?"

Nie Mingjue flinched back.

Everyone knew the answer to that.

No one was willing to say it.

Another wave of Wen soldiers attacked, and Lan Wangji forced himself to move again. With a powerful strum of energy, he ran his hand across the strings and sent out waves which knocked *dozens* of Wens off their feet at once.

The strings snapped from overuse.

Lan Wangji nearly fell, barely catching himself on his upright guqin. It was now only useful as a cane.

Xichen's shaking was joined by his uncle's.

Lan Wangji's normally pristine clothes were covered in dirt. The fluctuations and unevenness in his breathing spoke of the struggle it took to stand; the scratches adorning his face did the same. With his guqin now thoroughly destroyed, he forced himself to draw Bichen.

It went flying, knocked out of his hands by a stream of red power.

Obnoxious laughter spread out across the field.

They knew they had promised to not punish for things that hadn't yet occurred.

However, if given the chance to do so, those on the Sunshot Campaign's side would end Wen Chao without remorse.

Next to Wen Chao stood Wen Zhuliu, his hand still outstretched from the attack he had just given to Bichen. Overly confident while being defended by the Wen Clans' strongest guard dog, Wen Chao gleefully presented the captive Jiang Cheng to the world.

If Madam Yu had her way, every bone in Wen Chao's fingers was going to be broken and then stuffed down his throat.

"**Lan Zhan, I suggest you stop struggling!" the despicable Wen heir laughed. "Wei Ying has been waiting for you for a long time!"**

Lan Wangji stood, turning his terrifying glare on Wen Chao once more.

"You *dare?!*" he asked.

"When you die, you'll finally be able to join him!"

All the simulated Wen Chao knew about Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian's relationship was that they had destroyed the Xuanwu together. To him, it was a standard taunt.

To anyone who *knew* what they felt, it was a knife twisting deeper and deeper until it broke through to the other side.

"What do you mean?!" Jiang Cheng demanded.

Wen Chao's laughter began to pick up in volume, "What do I mean? I heard you two have been going around looking for him. Don't waste your time, you're not going to find him."

Jiang Yanli was going to *tear* that grin off his face.

Breathing out, Lan Wangji forced himself to stand up again.

"Where… is… Wei Ying?" he forced himself to ask.

Finally, Wen Chao gave him the answer.

"I threw Wei Wuxian into the Burial Mounds long ago. By now, there won't even be a corpse left!"

Just like the simulated Lan Wangji, the watchers couldn't help but flinch at those words.

(If they needed demonic cultivation to kill this man, then they would welcome it with open arms.)

Wen Chao laughed and laughed and laughed, so completely assured of his power in this situation that he didn't even bother to watch his enemies. Lan Wangji fury boiled over.

With a shout, he leapt forward, abandoning all reason in favor of one final attack. Wen Zhuliu intercepted it.

And Lan Wangji was thrown back.

"Wangji!" Lan Xichen shouted, copying what his brother had done with Wei Wuxian and trying to catch him, only for the simulation to phase through his distraught body.

Lan Qiren's eyes went wide in horror.

(He didn't care about how his nephew had lost composure upon hearing of Wei Wuxian's fate. He hadn't expected anything else. If the simulated Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji decided

to get engaged the second they reunited, Lan Qiren, while not *pleased,* would be satisfied with that outcome.)

(If it made the two of them happy, it would make him happy. He was tired of watching them suffer endlessly.)

Although Lan Wangji managed to land, his now-abolished guqin was thrown out of reach. Forced to kneel in exhaustion, Lan Wangji could only watch as Wen Chao stepped closer and closer.

"If you so much as *think* about doing this again," Madam Jin hissed. "You'll find out why the Wens lost the Sunshot Campaign first hand."

Over the course of the simulation, Madam Jin had watched Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian interact with each other. Slowly, she had begun to emotionally invest herself in their relationship.

And now, Wen Chao had thrown one into the Burial Mounds, and forced the other down on his knees.

Some of the watchers had never seen the pair before entering the simulation.

(However, *no one* could remain uninvested after all this.)

Unable to hear her words, the simulated Wen Chao continued to step closer.

"Alright," he laughed. "Let's kill them now."

Jiang Cheng was thrown to the ground next to Lan Wangji. Even drained, the two of them might be able to take on Wen Chao and his entourage if they worked together.

However, with the Core Melting Hand standing against them, they knew they had no chance.

Jiang Yanli collapsed to her knees.

"No," she whispered, and Lan Xichen's fractured breaths agreed. She had already been forced to watch her parent's bodies — Lan Xichen had already been forced to hear about his father's death — but this?

If they were forced to *watch* as their younger siblings got-

They didn't know if they would be able to continue after that.

Then, a crow flew by.

Then another.

Then another.

Wen Zhuliu scrunched his brows, then glanced to the left.

The sky was painted black by a *countless* number of crows flocking toward them.

"What?" Jiang Yanli breathed out, barely able to speak through her tears.

More and more crows joined the flood. They were too far away to be properly distinguished. Instead of birds, what looked to be a cloud of darkness surged forward like a tsunami of resentful energy. The symphony of caws grated at the ears and cowed all other animals into hiding.

A wave of fear spread across all living beings in the area.

Finally, the Wens began to react. Muttering broke out, and even Wen Chao's smile finally disappeared.

"What?" he asked. "What's going on?"

A piercing note cut through the world.

Wen Chao flinched, going pale.

He had seen what had happened to Wang Lingjiao.

(But he had Wen Zhuliu. He would be fine! But-)

The flute music seemed to slice through the nerves of anyone who listened. As the high pitched, scream-like sound got louder and louder, the orange fire the Wens had spread turned an unhealthy green.

"He's here," Madam Yu whispered. For the first time in her life, that realization brought her nothing but glee. "Wei Wuxian."

The Jiang Sect's guardian demon had come for their revenge.

And, with a rush of adrenaline passing through the watchers from the demonic cultivation's rallying command, no one could deny it.

Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji stared in shock. Even the Wens had no idea what was happening. Trembling in terror, they began to group closer together, Wen Chao moving to stand directly behind Wen Zhuliu for safety.

As the music continued, the real Wen Chao began to shake.

Wen Zhuliu would protect him. He *had to*. He wouldn't let Wei Wuxian do anything to him.

(Wen Zhuliu was effective against humans. Would he be able to do anything against a genuine demon?)

The murder of crows circled overhead like vultures waiting for the kill.

A shiver ran up Wen Chao's spine.

The flute notes continued — fast, aggressive, *haunting* — and the green fire filling the base turned the night sky a sickly cyan. Lan Wangji forced himself to look up.

"That flute," he whispered, then cut off when he heard movement.

The corpses which had been cut down in battle rose again.

All the blood left Wen Chao's face.

Now, rather than a few dozen Wen surrounding Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng, it was *thousands* of corpses surrounding the few Wen. There would be no escape for them.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji whispered. Everyone followed his eyes.

Atop a distant roof was a figure: the source of the terrifying melody.

The man's music beckoned the crows, the corpses, and the endless emerald fire to his will. His fingers flew across the flute at breakneck speed, and the melody seemed to gaze over the listeners like a harbinger of death.

Crimson eyes glared down.

Wen Chao's heart stopped.

Wei Wuxian had found them.

No, not Wei Wuxian.

***This* was the Yiling Patriarch.**

The world faded to black.

For a long, long time, the watchers simply sat and stared at where the simulated Wei Wuxian had been.

Then, a question.

"...What?"

"...I think it's over."

The world returned to the white of the in-between phase.

"*...What?!*"

"No, wait — they can't stop it there!"

"Hey!"

“Why does it keep doing this?” Nie Huaisang sunk down into his chair, watching his brother rub his eyes tiredly.

“I hate the person who made this,” Jiang Cheng decided. His nephew was part of that group, but no one disagreed with him. An unhappy pause settled over the grounds.

The watchers all glanced around, hoping someone would find a way to begin the conversation.

(After that, what were they supposed to say?)

“That was quite exciting,” Jin Guangshan commented. “I never would have expected the boy to be capable of such cruelty.”

“*Guangshan!*” Madam Jin snapped. “After… after everything that happened, it’s more than understandable.”

“Of course, of course,” he placated. “I was just admiring his ingenuity and effectiveness. Especially in the way he went about disposing of that maid.”

As the gruesome memory flashed through their minds, some watchers flinched back, while some smirked in agreement.

(Jin Zixuan once again battled with his temptation to speak out against his father.)

“...Wei-xiong’s hair seemed different. I was wondering when he made that change,” Nie Huaisang mumbled. Several people nodded, blank looks on their faces. Right now, the watchers were so overwhelmed that the change in appearance was the only thing they could currently bring themselves to accept.

(And Jin Guangshan was very, *very* accepting of this particular change.)

“He…” Wen Ruohan’s usually-controlled expression turned disbelieving. “How many corpses were there?”

Jiang Fengmian’s lips pressed into a thin line. They all knew the answer — they had all *seen* the answer for themselves.

Hundreds if not *thousands* of corpses had been under Wei Wuxian’s command. It had been a massacre on both sides, and every fallen soldier had been turned into Wei Wuxain’s puppet.

(Given those numbers, one thing was clear: Wei Wuxian, by himself, was equal to a great sect.)

“Well,” Madam Yu laughed. “It’s good that the boy finally showed up. That maid got what was coming to her.”

Not even the Lans objected to her words.

“And I guess it’ll be your turn next, huh?” Jiang Cheng asked, glancing at Wen Chao. An ecstatic smile crossed his lips as the memory of Wen Chao standing over his parents corpses flashed through his mind.

Swallowing down his nervousness, Wen Chao merely scoffed, “Don’t be ridiculous. I admit that Wei Wuxian would be fun to have, but there’s nothing that low-born brat can do against me while Wen Zhuliu is there!”

“Are you sure about that?” Wen Qing snapped. “We saw what he did to your woman.”

“Of-of course.”

Wen Ruohan merely hummed once in response.

He could see the fear in his son’s expression.

He didn’t care.

(In terms of the impact Wen Ruohan could leave on the world, his hopelessly disappointing son — and the spare, at that — was far less useful to him than the Yiling Patriarch. No matter what this future Wei Wuxian did to Wen Chao, he wouldn’t mind.)

“What?” Wen Chao continued, seeing the disbelief still on Wen Qing’s face. “You can’t honestly think killing a simple maid is equal to killing an heir, do you? And Wen Xu might have died, but *he* didn’t have Wen Zhuliu.”

Once again, Madam Yu laughed, “You really think your dog can do anything now? Once he comes up against *ours*, he’ll pay for what he did to A-Cheng.”

It took a second for Jiang Yanli to realize what her mother had just implied about Wei Wuxian.

And when she did, a horrible sinking feeling spread throughout her body.

She turned to speak, only to be interrupted when her father stepped forward and whispered, “San-niang.”

Madam Yu glanced back — one eyebrow raised — but, after several seconds of a staring contest, she eventually accepted the silent request and moved to join him. The Jiang family was soon far enough away from the rest to have at least the illusion of privacy.

“What is it?” Madam Yu demanded. “Did I say something wrong?”

“I…” he pursed his lips. “I’ve been doing some thinking recently. About how we act now, and how we should.”

“And?”

“Please…” he forced himself to make eye contact with her. “Don’t talk about A-Xian that way.”

“What? You-”

“I know. My other self said almost the same thing during the massacre of Lotus Pier, but… I don’t think ‘master and servant’ is what I want our relationship with him to be.”

Madam Yu froze.

Yes, she had been slowly warming up to the boy. For a while, she had almost wondered what it would be like to accept him as a nephew of sorts. However, she had quickly rejected that idea.

The things she had done to him would always be an uncrossable barrier between them.

He had never been part of the family. Both she and Jiang Fengmian knew their new regret couldn’t automatically force him to fit there.

And yet he still dared to request that?

“What?” Madam Yu hissed. “Is it wrong to want A-Cheng to be safe?”

“No — *no,* that isn’t what I’m saying.”

And she *knew* that wasn’t what he meant, but that didn’t change the fact that he had the audacity to value *Cangse’s* son over hers and-

‘A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him.’

Her jaw snapped shut. Seeing that, Jiang Fengmian stepped closer as if to continue, only to halt when a mocking laugh escaped her lips.

“Or is the problem that A-Cheng had to be saved at all? If it had been *Cangse’s* son in that situation, the Wens wouldn’t have stood a chance. Is that what you’re saying?”

Jiang Cheng flinched.

“San-niang-” Jiang Fengmian cut off, worried that continued discussion would just upset Madam Yu further. And yet-

‘He’s not strict with me, he just doesn’t like me,” Jiang Cheng had explained.

Wasn’t the problem his *hesitance* to speak?

“San-niang, please. All I’m asking is for you to not refer to A-Xian like that.”

“You-”

“A-Niang,” Jiang Yanli whispered, standing next to her now-trembling brother. “Please.”

The problems in their family wouldn’t be fixed overnight — they all knew that.

(But, if Madam Yu had a chance to help, shouldn’t she take it?)

(Her other-self hadn't, but her other-self had also died without ever seeing the hairpin Jiang Fengmian had fixed for her.)

"...Okay," she acknowledged.

While that was happening, Lan Wangji sat on his knees next to where his simulated self had been a few minutes before. Various murmurings were occurring around him, but he paid them no mind.

Instead, he kept his eyes focused on where Wei Wuxian had been.

The person up there had nearly been unrecognizable. Instead of Wei Wuxian's easy smile, open charisma, and kind silver eyes, there were cold, crimson orbs staring down at the Wens like a hunter looking down at prey.

But it was still Wei Wuxian.

And he had been hurt so, so much.

'*It will not happen with us,*' Lan Wangji told himself. '*I won't let it happen to him.*'

And wasn't that what the calm Lan boy — Sizhui — had told them? That the information had been sent over so that they could ensure their Wei Wuxian didn't experience the same suffering? That he would be treated as he deserved to be? That he wouldn't be torn to pieces and reformed into a monster against his will?

'*It will not happen,*' he repeated, his determination condensing into a force powerful enough to crush diamond.

"Wangji-xiong," came a voice from his right. Lan Wangji glanced over, and saw Nie Huaisang sit down beside him. A moment later, Jin Zixuan joined them. Apparently, they had seen the look on Wangji's face and decided he could use some companionship. A show of support, and a silent promise to help him.

(He didn't need it.)

(But he also wouldn't object.)

"...Jiujiu, can we talk?"

Jiang Cheng froze mid-step.

When Jin Ling had sent a letter asking him to come to Koi Tower, he had assumed that the Jins were causing trouble for him again. With Zidian in hand ~~and Wei Wuxian's core in his chest~~ he had prepared for a confrontation.

But the hesitance in Jin Ling's voice lacked the embarrassment his requests for help always had. Instad, he sounded…

Scared.

He had just left The Cloud Recesses after a visit to Wei Wuxian, hadn't he? What had that man done this time?

~~Why didn't Jiang Cheng ever know anything?~~

"...What do you want to talk about?" Jiang Cheng finally asked.

"I don't, I just-" he cut himself off. "Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun suggested it, so here I am."

Jiang Cheng was getting more confused by the second.

With a long sigh, he rubbed his temples and mentally prepared himself for whatever was to come.

"Alright, what is it?"

"Er-well…" he glanced down.

'*I saw A-Niang,*' he wanted to say.

But, given what had come next, he had trouble being too happy about that.

"Jin Ling?"

"I-it's just… how much do you know about what happened while Wei Wuxian was inventing demonic cultivation?"

"...*This* is what he wants you to ask me about?"

When Jin Ling guiltily avoided eye contact, Jiang Cheng gave another sigh. Whatever this was, it was so devastating that his nephew felt like he had to dance around the issue.

"...Jiujiu?"

"I don't know," he ran a hand through his hair. "He started working on it after vanishing for three months after-"

'*After giving me his golden core.*'

"...*After.* I guess he probably holed himself up in a library or something and worked it out. After that, he figured out some more stuff while in the Burial Mounds."

At 'the Burial Mounds,' Jin Ling froze. He turned and stared at the large field of bamboo on the right, eyes wide and haunted. Growing up, his Jiujiu had always felt a little cold and dark to him. If the Jin Ling of a year ago had a choice about who to talk to about this, he would have picked his other Uncle, Jin Guangyao.

But, the second Jin Ling had learned the truth, that resource had been cut off. Even before Jin Guangyao's death, the man's position in Jin Ling's life had been destroyed.

(But did Jin Ling really need to talk about this with someone?)

The bamboo he was staring at swayed slightly in the wind.

Chenqing was made out of bamboo from the Burial Mounds, wasn't it? Had Wei Wuxian chosen to make the demonic flute, or had he been left with no other options?

~~Because Wei Wuxian had been backed up into a cliff and attacked and he fell and fell and fell.~~

"Jiujiu…" Jin Ling forced himself to swallow. "What… what would you say if, during those three months, he was learning while in the Burial Mounds?"

"Oh, was he?" Jiang Cheng scrunched his brows. "I guess I remember Wen Chao saying something like that."

"And you weren't worried?"

"He came back immediately after, so I didn't have much time to think about it. Besides, I went to the Burial Mounds while he was living there and it seemed manageable. Don't you remember it? During the second siege?"

"Yeah, but… Wei Wuxian had already purified it then, hadn't he?"

Jiang Cheng frowned and growled, "Will you stop dancing around the subject and just say what you want to say?"

"Is Wei Wuxian alright?!" Jin Ling blurted out, a flush rising up his face from his outburst.

"...You literally just saw him. Why are you asking *me* that?"

"Well Jingyi messed up a few days ago and we sent back things — I mean it was technically my idea I guess but it's still his fault — and now Wen Ruohan's seeing the future and we wanted to check on it and Wei Wuxian called it a learning experience so we went in and we saw him in the Burial Mounds and it looked like it really hurt and I was *going* to talk to him but he wasn't okay so I left and Hanguang-jun said we should talk about it with an adult and I don't *need* to but I figured it couldn't hurt so here I am," he concluded in a single breath.

Throughout the whole long paragraph, the only thing Jiang Cheng was able to understand was "future."

"...You used Wei Wuxian's time travel device?"

"He's started calling it the Píngxíng Gateway."

"*Jin Ling*."

“I mean… I guess?”

“Okay, and what was the problem again?”

“Ah. We sent over memories of the future so that they can prevent the Sunshot Campaign and things, but we… kinda included Wen Ruohan in the watchers.”

“...Right. And then?”

“Well, we wanted to make sure Wen Ruohan was actually there before doing anything drastic, so we popped in. At that time, the simulation was showing Wei Wuxian… in the Burial Mounds.”

A sudden chill zipped through Jiang Cheng which he attributed to the fact that a thick cloud had just shadowed the sun.

(He almost didn’t want to keep asking.)

(But if Wei Wuxian thought Jin Ling needed this, then he supposed it was the least he could do.)

“What did you see?”

“It-he…” Jin Ling paused. “I’d-I’d always thought demonic cultivation was *evil.*”

Knowing that he was in no small part responsible for that belief, Jiang Cheng remained silent. With a raised eyebrow, he waited for Jin Ling to continue.

Just then, the frantic, terrified edge that had been lurking under Jin Ling’s words throughout the entire conversation grew until it encompassed the boy’s entire being.

“Jin Ling-”

A shaking hand grabbed onto his robes.

“I…” Jin Ling pulled away and turned around so Jiang Cheng couldn’t see his watering eyes. “I just — I don’t *understand*. He seems so happy, but — and the ghosts and the corpses — how does he joke around with them? He never takes them seriously! He plays with them — he likes Wen Ning — he-it’s like he’s never been scared of them at all! It’s like — I just… how can he stay so *happy?*”

Unlike Jiang Yanli and Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng had never been good at comforting people. As a result, he could do little more than flounder helplessly as his nephew began to tremble and shout in grief.

“I spent *so many years* hating everything about demonic cultivation! I called anyone who mentioned it a heretic — I thought it was an evil thing created by a power hungry monster! And I knew that wasn’t it already — I’d met Wei Wuxian. I knew he wasn’t evil, but-but everything still seemed like a *joke* to him, so I thought-I think….”

Even after getting to know Wei Wuxian, he had never really thought about why the man invented demonic cultivation. He had grown up knowing about it; it just seemed like the way the world worked.

"...I feel so *stupid*," Jin Ling cursed, stomping his foot on the ground as his anger boiled over.

After a pause, Jiang Cheng hesitantly muttered, "...Yeah. Wei Wuxian has a way with making people feel that way."

A broken chuckle escaped Jin Ling's lips, and he hurriedly wiped his tears.

He took a deep breath in.

He had to admit, he felt a lot lighter now.

It seemed Lan Wangji was right: getting it all out in the open really helped.

Jin Ling pursed his lips together, then huffed out a sigh and turned around.

"...Jiujiu?"

"Yeah?"

"I… why didn't I see it before? Why doesn't he ever seem affected? I mean, he's clearly affected, but… why didn't I notice?"

After everything that had happened between them, Jiang Cheng felt like he was the last person who should be asked questions about Wei Wuxian. Nevertheless, he forced himself to answer.

"...I wouldn't say he's unaffected. It's just… who he is."

Even Jiang Cheng knew that was a terrible explanation.

"What I'm trying to say is…. Your mother had this thing she used to say."

"She did?"

"Yeah. She told Wei Wuxian he was born with a smiling face. No matter what happened to him or how bad the situation got, he would always be happy. He feels things like anyone else, but, when there's nothing he can do about it, he's able to just… move past it. He doesn't like letting his history control him, I guess. He rarely holds grudges for too long."

'*Unlike me,*' Jiang Cheng mentally added.

"Then… what am I supposed to do?"

"About what?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"I want to help him!" Jin Ling explained, his face becoming as red as an apple. "Zizhen and Jingyi were talking, and they thought maybe they'd get him a stupid book as an apology. I

can do something better than that!”

Jiang Cheng still had no idea what was going on, but Jin Ling seemed to be feeling better now, so he counted that as a win.

“Just get him some emperor’s smile or something,” Jiang Cheng suggested. “He loves that stuff.”

“I can’t do *that!*” Jin Ling’s pitch doubled until it was a piercing squeak. “Then everyone will say I put no thought into it and I just used my money to win him over! Jingyi would never let me live that down! It has to be something better!”

“Like what?”

Jin Ling groaned and rolled his eyes, “You’re absolutely no help, Jiujiu.”

Chapter End Notes

Me: The Yiling Laozu is a tragic character. He goes through so much pain, and suffering, and trauma, and his eventual fall feels both inevitable and like his own flaws were the cause! His character arc is an amazing, emotionally gripping piece of writing that I will forever be in awe of MXTX for.

Also me: YLLZ WWX is so hot!! OMG I LOVE HIM! aAlo3iha76d5a74$*(@g#iu7yw :)

Wei Wuxian: The Cruelest Temptation

Chapter Notes

> Warning! This chapter is a little gross (and not just because Jin Guangshan is even more weird than usual)! Some violence/gore and JGS gets into the realm of non-con here! If there bothers you, please tread carefully!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A sharp, mocking laugh sent shivers down Wen Ning's spine.

"W-Wei-gongzi?" he asked.

His friend was lying on the ground, just having woken up after a message from Mo Xuanyu.

"Well, that's *very* believable," the Yunmeng disciple muttered, sitting up.

"Is everything alright?" Wen Ning leaned closer.

In response, Wei Wuxian shrugged:

"Depends on how much we trust Mo Xuanyu."

Wei Wuxian's brow dipped into deep consideration as he began to pace.

"The message was a warning," he explained. "Since the simulation was experimental to begin with, Mo Xuanyu said he's still figuring it out. Apparently, he recently discovered that spending an extended amount of time in the simulation could be dangerous for the watchers."

Wen Ning paled. It was exactly as they had feared.

"We should go force them out then," Wen Ning instantly suggested, standing up. It was unfortunate that they discovered this right as the last steps of the concealment zone were being finalized, but they obviously couldn't leave their families in the simulation *now*. They would need to be forced out. By the end of the day, the watchers would have been inside the simulation for a full week.

Wen Ning was half way out the door when he realized that Wei Wuxian hadn't followed.

"Wei-gongzi?" Wen Ning prompted.

"...I'm not sure we should," Wei Wuxian admitted.

"But-but that's exactly what we've been worried about!"

“No, *I’ve* been worried that Mo Xuanyu doesn’t have our best interests in mind. For all we know, there’s something about the amount of time they’ve spent in there that will cause releasing them now to be dangerous. Or maybe the forceful release works differently than the voluntary one. It-”

“Wait, then… then what do we do?”

“I… I don’t know,” Wei Wuxian admitted, running a hand through his hair. “Mo Xuanyu’s explanation has some logic to it, but it… it doesn’t seem to be true. And it doesn’t help that everyone inside the simulation has been keeping things from us.”

“...They have?”

At that, Wei Wuxian paused in his pacing and glanced over with an amused smile.

“Really?” he asked skeptically. “You don’t think they’ve been acting just a little weird?”

As soon as those words were spoken, Wen Ning was forced to remember the way the watchers had flipped between being absolutely distraught and uncharacteristically ecstatic between segments. How they had *chosen* to stay inside the simulation — as confirmed by Wen Xu himself. How, the few times he had listened in while Wei Wuxian contacted them, they always seemed to be cutting themselves off before saying too much.

“So, my valiant hero, what do you think this means?” Wei Wuxian asked, tilting his head teasingly and sending a bright red flush through Wen Ning’s cheeks.

“I-um… they… know more than they’re saying?”

“And we already figured out that Mo Xuanyu’s keeping things from us.”

“I guess?”

“*And* I’m pretty sure those secrets are related.”

“Eh?” Wen Ning tilted his head. “Why would you say that, Wei-gongzi?”

“The people inside the simulation keep reacting oddly. Lan Qiren asked me to describe Mo Xuanyu in detail. When I did, they all made sounds of understanding or agreement. When I mentioned how Mo Xuanyu had been helping me with demonic cultivation, I heard Sect Leader Nie mutter ‘that explains it.’ All I’ve told them is that Mo Xuanyu said he created the simulation; they know something about this that we don’t.”

“But-but then what do we do?”

Here, Wei Wuxian fell silent again, sinking into deep thought. All the while, Wen Ning patiently waited for his friend to come to a decision.

“They’re… they’re still at a break,” Wei Wuxian lit up, spinning toward the room which housed the Jiangs. “It’s in between the segments right now, we can talk to them!”

He broke into a run, and Wen Ning rushed to follow behind.

Lan Wangji, Nie Huaisang, and Jin Zixuan were all seated together, staring at where the simulated Wei Wuxian had last been. Despite the slight murmerings occurring all around, the watchers as a whole were muted.

Their shock had still not faded.

(And how could it, after what had just happened?)

The Yiling Patriarch had arrived in all his glory. Everything they had expected when they first heard the words "The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation" had come true. He was cruel, vengeful, and vicious. He was terrifying. He tortured spiritual cultivators and left no one standing.

And not a single one of them could blame him.

(There was so much they hadn't understood. If they were able to go back in time and smack their younger, naive selves over the head for their assumptions, they would. They hadn't thought there would be anything that could change their minds about the evil that was demonic cultivation.)

(Clearly, they had been very, very wrong.)

'*I'll make it up to him,*' Lan Wangji mentally promised himself. '*I won't let the real Wei Ying go through that.*'

But there was still so much they didn't know.

"Question," someone said.

"Yes?" Lan Qiren inquired reflexively, glancing around to see who had spoken.

"Can you guys think of any reason why Mo Xuanyu wouldn't want us all to stay in the simulation?"

"'Mo Xuanyu?'" Jiang Cheng repeated. "Oh, do you mean Wei-"

"*WAIT!*" Nie Huaisang screeched, cutting off Jiang Cheng's 'do you mean Wei Wuxian's older self?'

"Huaisang?" Nie Mingjue frowned. "What's wrong?"

Huaisang looked around, and shrunk back a bit when he saw everyone staring at him blankly.

"I just… I mean…" he surveyed the room again. "Is that voice… Wei-xiong?"

Jiang Cheng's heart stopped mid-beat.

“Yup,” a sly, mischievous voice responded. “Go on, Jiang Cheng. What were you going to say?”

Absolute silence greeted his question.

He was here. Wei Wuxian — the real Wei Wuxian — was talking to them.

And they had almost told him everything,

But they couldn’t bring themselves to care about that. All they could pay attention to was the teasing, cheerful tone of Wei Wuxian’s voice. The joy was somewhat fake, but it was also somewhat real.

And it made him sound so *young*.

(He was young and kind and warm and *stunning* in his every present joy.)

(And Wen Chao had destroyed that.)

“E-everything’s fine, A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian lied. “What are you… it seems a little late to check in on us. The next segment will be starting any second now.”

“I know, my bad,” Wei Wuxian laughed. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to do another check to make extra sure you are who you sound like. Uncle Jiang?”

After thinking it over for a moment, Jiang Fengmian responded, “Your father and I snuck out once under disguise when we were just a little older than you. We went to the market and won every single game there, and we ended up needing to call for some help because there were too many prizes for us to carry home in one trip. You can ask the older townspeople; they’ll remember. It was for my sixteenth birthday.”

And, since Wei Wuxian didn’t know about that, it was impossible for them to be illusions created by a mind reading demon.

“Great, thanks,” Wei Wuxian laughed. “Wen Ning, can you go check up on that real quick?”

“O-okay,” a meek voice responded. “D-don’t do-I mean… be careful.”

“I will.”

Footsteps became quieter and quieter as a figure walked away.

The more Wei Wuxian spoke, the more it seemed to Lan Wangji that there was a distinct wariness to his tone that didn’t belong there. Had something happened to him?

Sensing the same, Jiang Yanli frowned and asked, “A-Xian, are you alright?”

“Yup. Wen Ning and I are just here to tell you that the Concealment Zone is almost done. We’ll be installing after the next segment if that’s okay.”

“Oh, uh, sure!” Jin Zixuan coughed awkwardly. “Great idea.”

“Mmhm. So, my darling A-Cheng, what was it that you were saying? What does Mo Xuanyu have to do with my family? We may dress similarly, but, if anything, he looks more like a Jin to me, not that you would know that.”

All the blood rushed out of Jiang Cheng’s face.

“I…” he cut himself off. “Yeah, I was just… I was just saying ‘do you mean the guy who dresses like Wei Wuxian.’ Only someone like you could be ridiculous enough to wear such a bright red ribbon in their hair.”

At this point, there was no way they could explain the truth. They wouldn’t be believed.

(No, it was even worse than that. If Wei Wuxian saw too many inconsistencies from what he was expecting them to sound like, he might think they were spirits pretending to be the Clan Leaders and force them out.)

And besides, how could they explain this? They knew better than anyone how misleading the raw facts could be. Yes, Wei Wuxian had invented demonic cultivation, but unless someone *saw* what had led up to it, they would inevitably demonize the boy.

(Just like *they* had when they’d first heard about it.)

They *could not* let this information reach the outside world.

“W-well, thank you for updating us on the Concealment Zone, A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli said, nervously brushing some hair behind her ear. “We’ll see you after the next segment then.”

“You sure?”

Jiang Yanli made a sound of agreement.

In the silence that followed, Wen Ruohan could almost hear Wei Wuxian’s betrayed ‘*even you, Shijie?*’

However, even before this, it was clear that something had changed for Wei Wuxian. There was something that had motivated him to abruptly contact them, and something that had increased his wariness.

“Did you get any new information?” Wen Ruohan asked.

“...Somewhat, Your Excellency,” Wei Wuxian responded. “Mo Xuanyu sent over a message that told me staying in here too long would lead you to get corrupted by resentful energy.”

“What?” Madam Yu gasped.

“Do you want me to let you all out? He gave me instructions on how to force that if the exit circle isn’t working. He also said I had to put you all in different rooms for the

forced exit, but that shouldn't take too long, so I can get you out now if you need me to."

"Wait-"

"Hold on."

"Don't do anything yet!"

The watchers looked at each other.

If anyone would be able to figure out about the possible danger involved, it would be the future Wei Wuxian. And, given how he had acted in the future segments, the watchers were sure he wouldn't want them to be hurt.

(But the Wens were there, and he might want *them* to be hurt.)

(No, more importantly, he wouldn't want them to know the future.)

"You're hesitating," Wei Wuxian observed. "Something wrong?"

"I could ask you the same," Wen Ruohan answered. "Is there a reason why you decided to ask us instead of just taking us out forcefully?"

There was a long pause as Wei Wuxian considered how to answer.

"...I was trying something yesterday, and I… got in a little over my head."

He paused again.

"I was trying to figure out a little more about the simulation and manipulating resentful energy, but it turns out manipulating raw resentful energy is just a bit harder than just manipulating the simulation."

"What?" Jiang Yanli stood-

"It's fine, Shjiie. Nothing to worry about."

"But-"

"Really, I'm fine."

But everyone here had *seen* Wei Wuxian getting corrupted while saving the bunny and while inside the Burial Mounds. It was far from "nothing."

"Be careful," Lan Qiren advised. "We're fine. Don't force yourself to do more demonic cultivation than necessary."

He knew, now, that Wei Wuxian would only use demonic cultivation if he felt like he had no other choice. It was time to nip his unnecessary desperation at the bud.

“Alright. But really, don’t worry about it. I got a Lan to flush it out of my system. I’m good now.”

“And your point is?” Wen Ruohan asked.

“Well, now I… have a pretty good idea of what resentful energy corruption is like, and I just… can’t find any traces of that in your bodies. It should be pretty obvious, and I felt something sorta similar from Sect Leader Nie, but other than that….”

Concerned gazes turned Nie Mingjue’s way, but he simply shook his head.

‘*It’s not something to be concerned about.*’

He didn’t bother to explain, but several people couldn’t help but wonder if that would be something the simulation was going to go over. They had a lot left to cover, after all.

“But you’re the ones inside the simulation, so it’s your choice.”

If the future Wei Wuxian had only recently discovered that they were staying inside the simulation or that Wen Ruohan was here, he would want them to leave. Yes, there was a chance that the future Wei Wuxian’s warnings were true, but if the older Wei Wuxian had been suspicious enough that the younger chose to ask them about it....

(Even as a teenager, Wei Wuxian had always been observant.)

And the more the watchers thought about it, the more reasons they could come up with for why the future Wei Wuxian would want them gone.

“Wait, *no*-” a panicked voice cried out. There was a click.

“A-Xian?”

The white void around them switched to darkness.

The segment had started. Wei Wuxian wouldn’t be able to contact them until it was over.

And now, the Wei Wuxian they would be seeing would be the Yiling Patriarch, not Wei Ying.

An ear-piercing *screech* of a high note filled all nearby spirits with a single command.

There — them — *kill them!*

Power rushed into the watchers like a shot of adrenaline, and the song began to dangle even more energy before them like bait. They swayed on their feet or sank to their knees, unprepared for the sudden jump in resentful energy.

(Its power was intoxicating.)

The whispers of revenge rose in volume. The sounds Chenqing produced were intentionally grating — unquestionably *sinister* — and perfectly conveyed the message

Wei Wuxian wanted to send.

‘*Help me,*’ the song sang. ‘*I’ll give you more power — more energy — more life. Rip them to pieces and I’ll give you everything.*’

Lan Xichen swallowed, stunned to find saliva pooling in his mouth.

(But he could *taste* the power it offered and-)

'*What do you want us to do?*' Jin Guangshan thought, swaying on his feet. Even knowing it wasn't real, the call was nearly impossible to ignore. The memories were from a spirit, so the watchers were experiencing what Wei Wuxian's army felt.

It was breathtaking.

And the song freely offered them more of this feeling; in exchange, the spirits and corpses and other resentful beings would only have to find the Wens. Find them — hunt them down — rip them — *tear them to pieces* for what they’d done and-

The watchers forced themselves to take deep breaths, trying desperately to resist the urge to pounce on Wen Chao and tear his skin off his body. They knew it was only a spirit’s memory.

(They wouldn’t be able to touch him; there was no point.)

But everyone’s eyes sharpened like a predator’s regardless.

“What?” a Wen soldier asked. “What’s going on?”

His only answer was a menacing flute and the starved growls of corpses.

Nie Huaisang swallowed, trying to shake himself out of the effects of the demonic cultivation. Somehow, that only succeeded in making him *hungrier.*

Swaying on their feet, the corpses clumsily stepped closer. The music continued its beckoning orders.

‘*You’ve found them,*’ it said. ‘*You know what to do.*’

Even Lan Xichen began unconsciously stepping closer. And closer. And closer.

The Wens were there. And hadn’t he seen what they’d done? Didn’t he *know* they deserved this?

Revenge. For the Cloud Recesses. For Lotus Pier. For Wei Wuxian.

‘*Yes!*’ the music sang, filling their minds with even greater desire. ‘*Yes. Yes. Yes.*’

Suddenly, Jin Guangshan’s stomach felt more empty than it had ever been in his life.

If he plucked out a Wens’ eye, he would have something he could eat.

Right as drool began to form in the watcher's mouths, the simulated Wen Chao looked up to where Wei Wuxian stood.

His eyes widened in terror.

"Sorcery…" he accused. "Sorcery!"

'You're a Wen,' the song made Wen Chao acknowledge. '*You're* the *Wen. Go on. Look down at your hands. You're so hungry. Won't you feel better if you take a bite?*'

"No," the real Wen Chao whimpered, shaking in his seat, drool falling out of his mouth. "No. No. No. No-"

The flute picked up speed into a single command.

'*Go!*'

And the spirits who had followed it along — the corpses who could feel the *emptiness* in their stomachs for the first time in centuries — obeyed.

At once, every corpse broke into a run. Like starving animals, they tore into the Wens. Flesh was ripped off; teeth were pulled out; bones were crunched and crunched and crunched and the blood of those their master disliked was spread across the ground.

"Yes!" Nie Mingjue shouted, for his personal grudge just as much as for the music. And it went just as he'd always hoped it would. It was a *massacre.*

As more and more corpses came, Wen disciples were thrown to the ground and eaten alive. Their necks were crushed under powerful jaws.

(Just like the corpses had tried to do to Wei Wuxian.)

Hands clawed at their chests and the blood that trailed down only attracted more.

(Just like Wei Wuxian.)

Their limbs were yanked out of their sockets and their bones were crushed to dust.

(Just like-)

It was justified. It was paying them back equally.

(It was wonderful.)

(And it wasn't indiscriminate.)

The few Jiang and Lan disciples left all had their swords unsheathed and ready, but no corpses approached them. Instead, the demonic beings ran straight past, only interested in the Wens their master had set as targets.

"Come on!" Wen Chao shouted. "*Stop them!*"

Wen Zhuliu ran forward, knocking corpse after corpse aside. But, no matter how many times one was sent flying back, there were ten more to take its place. Wen Zhuliu knocked away as many as he could.

But he couldn't stop them all.

More and more got by him, sinking their teeth into the Wens they reached.

A vicious grin formed on Jiang Cheng's face.

The corpses devoured the Wens, and left everyone else alone.

The simulated Jiang Cheng looked around in shock, "They're only… killing the Wens."

Lan Wangji frowned up at the distant figure of Wei Wuxian.

"He is a man with evil methods…."

Like he'd been slapped, those words shocked Lan Wangji out of the song's effects. Yes, he knew why his other self was against such evil cultivation. It was wrong — he knew that.

But the Burial Mounds hadn't given Wei Wuxian a choice.

'*If you had seen it,*' he thought. '*If you had felt it, you wouldn't be saying that.*'

"But…" Lan Wangji continued. "He seems to be a friend, not an enemy."

'*Yes,*' Wen Qing thought, glaring fiercely. '*Which makes it that much harder for us to resist his orders.*'

As the demonic cultivator's song reached another crescendo, Jin Guangshan greedily sucked in a desperate breath of resentment-filled air.

A laugh.

"I don't care how he does it," Jiang Cheng declared. "If he kills those Wen dogs, he's my ally!"

'*Yes,*' the song agreed. '*Your ally. Your master. Kill them. Kill them. Kill them!*'

Just like Wei Wuxian, the simulated Jiang Cheng had been completely altered by the war.

He didn't care what he had to do to get revenge.

Watching what her brothers had been turned into, Jiang Yanli felt her adrenaline from the song transition into frustrated hopelessness.

The simulated Wen Chao began to back up in fear. Rather than any sort of resistance, his soldiers could only function as *food* for the approaching army.

"Help me!" he yelled, turning to run. "Help me!"

A hand snatched his ankle, pulling him to the ground. He looked back, and saw Wang Lingjiao's mangled corpse crawling over him.

"No," Wen Chao begged, feeling the world blur around him as the song pierced through his skull and wormed its way inside his mind.

'*Yes!*' the song continued. '*Good. The Wens. That Wen. Get him. Get him. Get him. Get him!*'

"No-"

'*Yes. Tear through their skulls!*'

"No. No. No-"

'Rip off their flesh!'

"No-"

'*Break his bones!*'

"No-"

'*Eat. Eat. Eat.*'

Pain shot up Wen Chao's arm and he flinched back. He was inside the simulation; nothing should be able to hurt him.

But, when his eyes traveled lower, he saw teeth marks implanted into his now bleeding hand. Something had broken through skin trying to bite his finger off.

Under the influence of the Yiling Patriarch's cultivation, something had been ordered to eat his flesh. Something had *wanted* to eat him.

A few seconds passed, and realization began to creep in. It was him. He had wanted to bite his finger off. He had wanted to eat *himself*.

(And then he'd tried.)

'*Good!*' the music sang again.

Wen Chao's blood dripped onto the floor.

He *screamed.*

And the simulated Wen Chao screamed with him, trying to kick off Wang Lingjiao as she bit into his arm.

"Get off me!" he shouted. She was thrown back, and Wen Chao began to crawl away.

She followed after him, the flute beckoning her forward.

Loud laughter shook the room as Jiang Cheng's joy joined Wei Wuxian's song.

This was exactly what Wen Chao deserved.

"Get back!" he ordered. "Get back!"

Because of Wen Chao, Wei Wuxian had been forced to shout the very same thing when he had been thrown into the Burial Mounds.

They hadn't been able to help Wei Wuxian; they wouldn't bother trying to help Wen Chao.

"Wen Zhuliu, save me!"

Right as Wang Lingjiao pounced forward, she was knocked aside by the Wen dog. However, there was no core for him to destroy, nor life in her to end.

She landed on her stomach and skidded across the ground, only to look back, cracking the bones in her neck until her head was facing 180° away from where it should be.

Wang Lingjiao's corpse stood up.

At the sight, the real Wen Chao's screams became silent. His mouth opened, but no sound came out.

In his head, only one thought remained.

'*Wen Zhuliu will save me. Wen Zhuliu will save me. Wen Zhuliu will save me!*'

Blood continued to pour from his hand onto the ground.

Then, at long last, the song ended.

The army summoned by Wei Wuxian had dealt with all the Wens but Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu.

(And those two were *personal.*)

"A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked, her head finally clearing now that the flute was gone.

Rather than the brother she knew, a figure draped in shadow stepped forward. Black energy circled around him, and the green fire in the surroundings parted in his presence.

He walked to the edge of the roof, and then, surrounded on all sides by the caws of crows, he began to glide through the air. The resentful energy was holding him up.

It was nowhere near as fast as a cultivator's sword — useless for long distance travel — but, if he truly no longer had his core….

Wen Ruohan shook his head disbelievingly, speechless before the boy in front of him.

Wei Wuxian's figure glided to the ground, descending like a panther who had already caught its prey. As he landed, his long, flowing, elegant robes drifted down around him.

***Not* the robes of Yunmeng Jiang.**

Because this wasn't Wei Wuxian, their head disciple. This was the Yiling Patriarch: the demon who had conquered the Burial Mounds.

When they heard the tavern guests speak in the first segment, they thought the people in the future had gone crazy. The Burial Mounds? An "ally" of the four clans? Killing thousands of cultivators at once?

Ludicrous.

Or so they'd thought.

But now, before them, was a man *bathed* in resentful energy. A man who the army of corpses bowed to in subservience. A man whose cruel smile could silence even the arrogant, idiotic Wen-er-gongzi.

A tragedy.

Wei Wuxian continued walking forward.

As the footsteps began to near him, all the excess blood drained from Wen Chao's face. Trembling, he moved his outer robe to cover himself, as though blocking his eyes would somehow protect him from demon before them.

Step by step, Wei Wuxian moved closer.

Tears began to fall out of Wen Chao's eyes, which Wen Ruohan acknowledged apathetically.

It would be wrong to say he didn't care at all; an heir was vital if Wen Ruohan wanted to leave his mark on the world. Wen Ruohan would keep his son fed, protected, and enabled, because any stain on Wen Chao was a stain on *him.*

None of that changed the fact that Wen Chao was his *spare*.

On the other hand, there was the Yiling Patriarch. Wen Ruohan might not care for Wei Wuxian on a personal level, but he valued talent, determination, hard work, ingenuity, and loyalty. He had adopted Wen Zhuliu as a member of his clan. Before her betrayal was revealed, he had favored Wen Qing regardless of her distant relation.

~~In another world, he would have moved Meng Yao up in his ranks without a second thought for the boy's scandalous origins.~~

With the Yiling Patriarch standing before him, why would he care for his talentless disgrace of a son? Between the two of them, *Wei Wuxian* was the one who invented talismans people continued to talk about for decades after his death.

(Between the two of them, Wei Wuxian was the one who would ensure Wen Ruohan's legacy.)

And the Yiling Patriarch's march continued:

Step.

Step.

Step.

Wen Chao looked faint.

"What kind of monster could do such a thing?" the simulated Wen Chao demanded from behind Wen Zhuliu.

Wei Wuxian didn't bother to answer him. Chenqing held by his waist, he continued to approach the pair.

He paid no attention to Jiang Cheng or Lan Wangji, who stared from the side in open-mouthed shock. On their faces, their thoughts could clearly be read.

It was Wei Wuxian.

And it also wasn't.

Aside from his face, the man before them looked nothing like Wei Wuxian. The cold grin couldn't have been further from Wei Wuxian's easy smile. He was handsome, yet pale.

His aura was eerie.

Remembering how they had felt seeing the Yiling Patriarch in the first segment, the watchers were sympathetic to the boys' shock.

(But, after what Wei Wuxian had gone through, nothing about him could be the same.)

Finally, Wei Wuxian came to a stop.

Wen Chao was frozen before him.

"We meet again, Wen Chao," Wei Wuxian greeted. His voice was even, malicious, and cold.

Nothing at all like it should be.

"You — who are you?!" Wen Chao demanded.

"Stop," the real Wen Chao whispered, clutching his bleeding hand tightly.

Instead of answering, Wei Wuxian smirked deeper.

“Core Melting Hand,” Wei Wuxian greeted mockingly.

“Be careful A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli whispered, terrified that what had happened to Jiang Cheng might happen to her other brother. “Remember, he’s still the Core Melting Hand.”

Demonic cultivation or not, there was no defense from that.

‘*Unless he doesn’t have a core,*’ Wen Ruohan thought. Wen Qing’s face became increasingly grim.

After making eye contact for several seconds, Wei Wuxian tilted his head inquisitively, “Do you really think you can protect him from me?”

“It’s better to die trying.”

“Look out!”

Wen Zhuliu *attacked*.

Ruby red eyes gazed down at the man. Then, with a simple wave of his hand, Wei Wuxian sent Wen Zhuliu flying back.

The watchers were knocked off their feet.

Black energy had burst out of Wei Wuxian’s body, overpowering the Core Melting Hand just like Wen Zhuliu had overpowered Lan Wangji just a few minutes ago. However, instead of skidding to the ground, Wen Zhuliu remained suspended in the air. Black energy seeped out of the surrounding corpses, fueling the binds trapping Wen Zhuliu in place.

Then Wei Wuxian raised the hand carrying Chenqing, and *played*.

Wen Zhuliu’s bones *cracked* under the strain. His gasping mouth couldn’t even scream due to the pressure contracting his chest, and his struggling arms began to bend until they heard them *shatter*.

‘*What?*’ Wen Chao stared.

The spirits making up the black resentment binding him began to laugh at Wen Zhuliu’s futile struggle.

“What a loyal dog,” Wei Wuxian commented.

“I…” Wen Zhuliu couldn’t breathe. “I must repay… His Excellency’s kindness.”

“Repay his kindness?” Wei Wuxian growled.

Resentful energy exploded out in an avalanche of darkness, increasing until the only things visible were two glowing eyes.

They could *taste* Wei Wuxian's fury.

"Why is it that the debt you owe has to be paid at the expense of others?!" he demanded.

More energy rushed out, building on itself to greater and greater heights.

Nie Huaisang fell to the ground.

(The pressure Wei Wuxian exuded nearly equalled that of the Burial Mounds.)

The power circled around the Yiling Patriarch like a tornado.

Then, it swept inside.

(Resentful energy would poison a human's body. Wei Wuxian knew that better than anyone. And yet, now, it seemed to *fuel* him.)

"The Core Melting Hand," Wei Wuxian muttered.

He made a fist, and the spirits around Wen Zhuliu *twisted*. His arms were turned until his shoulder broke and his legs did the same and his bones crumbled under the strain-

In the last segment, people had claimed that no human would be able to do the torture Wei Wuxian was enacting.

In a way, they were right.

(Wei Wuxian only knew how to do all this because the spirits had done it to *him* first.)

Wen Zhuliu would receive no pity from them.

With a groan, Wen Zhuliu was forced to his knees. The bones in his arms shattered as they were moved, and his blood dripped onto the ground.

The blood on Wen Chao's hand did the same.

(It would be fine. It had to be. Wen Zhuliu would find a way out of this. Wen Zhuliu would protect him!)

Wei Wuxian stepped directly in front of the kneeling Core Meling Hand. Resentful energy swept around him, making his robes move like shadows.

He didn't even look human anymore.

(Was he still human?)

The bright red eyes looking down at the Wen seemed to say 'no.'

"...A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked, hoping the word would help her find her brother somewhere in the being before her.

Wei Wuxian lifted a hand forward, and the resentful energy commanded by it pulled Wen Zhuliu back into the air.

'*Wen Zhuliu will be fine,*' Wen Chao thought. '*He'll get out and save me and-*'

Red light flashed through the darkness, and Wei Wuxian was behind the Wen. As Wen Zhuliu gasped in agony, the Yiling Patriarch's eyes turned an even brighter crimson than before.

Blood rushed out of Wen Zhuliu's coughing mouth.

When Wei Wuxian turned back, he was holding a golden orb between his thumb and forefinger.

"That's…" Wen Ruohan couldn't finish.

No one could.

That *couldn't be-*

Wei Wuxian turned the orb, observing its form, and then, in a shockwave of resentful energy, *shattered it.*

Even if they knew what to say, no one would be able to speak a word.

Wen Ruohan stepped back and sat down, unable to believe what he had just seen.

Had Wei Wuxian removed Wen Zhuliu's *core?* That was impossible. It *couldn't* have happened. But if it had-

"Who…" Wen Chao shook. "Who are you?"

Wei Wuxian walked by the feared Core Melting Hands' body without care.

If it had happened — if Wei Wuxian had actually *ripped out a core* — then that was the final proof he needed, wasn't it? All this time, Wen Ruohan and Wen Qing had been trying to find something to disprove their theory on how Jiang Wanyin had regained his core. After all, a core transfer was absurd.

Wei Wuxian continued to walk forward, unharmed despite Wen Zhuliu's best efforts.

No, Wen Ruohan was being silly. Perhaps Wei Wuxian's time in the Burial Mounds had given him an opportunity to expand his understanding of his own core. Maybe he had learned so much about cores while on his own that he'd figured out how to extract them, even though he had no outside resources. Maybe he had found an ancient text in the Burial Mounds with instructions.

(Or, maybe, he'd spent *days* feeling each and every cut it took to remove a core from a cultivator's body.)

Wen Qing would never have suggested the operation, so Wei Wuxian must have read through her notes on the subject. If he knew that — if he'd survived the excruciating pain of getting it removed one piece at a time-

It would be no surprise if Wei Wuxian's knowledge of core extraction exceeded even *Wen Zhuliu's*.

(And a transfer was when it was meant to be intact. If Wei Wuxian didn't care about its condition… if he just wanted to rip it out….)

'*No,*' Wen Ruohan shook his head. '*I'm getting ahead of myself. He couldn't have done a transfer. Besides, if he could repeatedly rip out cores, everyone in the world would know about it. Someone would have mentioned it.*'

Then again, Wei Wuxian was doing this specifically for the irony of it. If he was aiming to simply kill everyone else he went up against (and using his army to do so), then why would he bother? Given how many corpses had to be present for him to restrain Wen Zhuliu in such a way, Wen Ruohan had no doubt it was extremely difficult to do.

(But to *give away* a core that, in less than a decade, had grown strong enough to *seal* his *sword?*)

That didn't make sense; Wen Ruohan couldn't understand how *anyone* would do that.

But he didn't need to. He could recognize patterns when he saw them, and this one was becoming clear as day.

Finally, Wei Wuxian came to a stop. He looked up, and the blood-red glow in his eyes sent shivers down the watchers' spines.

(Or maybe that was the smile on his face, so cruel and malicious that it couldn't even be recognized as Wei Wuxian's.)

Jiang Yanli looked away.

(And yet, after the Burial Mounds, no one could say they were surprised. Wei Wuxian still looking and acting remotely human was better than any of them could have hoped for.)

They had seen what Wei Wuxian had gone through. They knew why he had changed. Judging by the undisguised horror on his face, the simulated Lan Wangji wasn't so lucky.

"Wangji," Lan Xichen whispered sadly, watching both his simulated and real brothers' faces crumple in despair.

"Wei… Ying," the simulated second jade whispered.

The Yiling Patriarch didn't spare him a single glance. Instead, he turned his attention to the gasping Core Melting Hand, who was fruitlessly crawling across the ground, trying to stop him from killing Wen Chao.

Barely able to crawl on twisted arms, the now-coreless guard dog struggled to look up. All the power that had once been in his body was gone — *ripped out* — until he was less than a civilian. His limbs were mangled beyond recognition.

Nauseous, Nie Huaisang looked away.

"Wen Zhuliu," the Yiling Patriarch purred. "Did you want to protect him?"

"Wei Ying?!" Wen Chao gasped out, finally recognizing the monster before him. "No way! That's impossible!"

'*Attempt the impossible,*' Jiang Fengmian thought. However, this time, he couldn't bring himself to be proud of his head disciple's accomplishment.

(It shouldn't have had to happen.)

"You-"

Wei Wuxian's deepening smirk silenced Wen Chao's protests.

"Monster…. Monster!" he *ran.*

'*This isn't how it's supposed to be,*' Wen Chao thought. '*He's mine! He's not supposed to — he can't kill me. He can't! He-*'

With an amused hum, Wei Wuxian twirled Chenqing around his hand. A moment later, the fleeing Wen Chao was cut off. Wang Lingjiao's corpse stood before him.

"Wei Ying!" the cowering Wen Chao shouted, backing up. "If-if you dare touch me… my father will kill you!"

Wang Lingjiao's mouth crept open.

(Jiang Cheng's face switched to a bloodthirsty smirk.)

"No," Wen Chao whispered. "No! No-"

"I wonder," Wei Wuxian muttered. "Do you know what it feels like to eat human flesh?"

"...What?" Wen Chao whispered helplessly.

With a smirk, Wei Wuxian directed a hand forward, silently commanding Wang Lingjiao to move.

Connected to resentful energy as the watchers were, they instantly knew what Wei Wuxian's command had been.

A piercing scream cut through the night. The laughter of corpses joined it.

The jaws of a child snapped down, tearing out a chunk of Wen Chao's leg. Another ate his ear. Another ripped off his pinky. Wen Chao opened his mouth to scream-

The pinky was shoved down his throat.

Lan Qiren gagged.

The spirits clawed at Wen Chao's stomach — his calf — his ribs. Fingers, feet, neck, thigh, eyes-

They sunk their fingers *knuckle-deep* into his flesh. They played with his organs — they tore out muscle — they continued without rest, because the founder of demonic cultivation ordered them to.

'*Take,*' the resentment whispered.

And they wanted to.

Like starved wolves whose only sustenance was Wei Wuxian's approval, they wanted to.

'*Good. Do it! Do it! Peel it off! Make him eat! Break him! Tear him! Rip! Shatter!-*'

The commands of Wei Wuxian's cultivation were almost impossible to resist. Wen Chao felt his mouth start to water, and the flesh that covered his own bones began to draw his famished eyes.

(He was so, so hungry.)

No matter how much Wen Chao thrashed his legs in pain, there was no way for him to escape. A hand clawed at his thigh, carving out a strip with knife-like nails. Wen Chao's screams doubled.

So hungry.

Wen Chao thrashed widely, slamming his hands against the ground until the bones in them snapped in two.

So very hungry.

(No. No! He was not going to eat himself! He was not. He was not-)

Panic set in and Wen Chao stood up. He had to run. He had to leave-

But there was nowhere to go from here. He could do nothing but listen to his other-self's screams.

Seeing Wen Chao's broken hand, a male corpse ripped off a chunk of his forearm and stuffed it in the unwilling mouth. On its way out, the corpse's hand pulled off a tooth.

Wen Chao's screams became gurgles of blood.

Wen Chao *gagged*, coughing out bile and spit. He couldn't watch — he *couldn't*, but-

He couldn't look away.

(The laughter of the corpses rang in his ears.)

“Wei Ying! That’s enough!” Lan Wangji called out, running forward.

A wall of resentful energy bursted out of the ground, separating Wei Wuxian from Lan Wangji.

“Wei Ying!” he shouted.

But Wei Wuxian remained focused on the scene before him.

(Three of Wen Chao’s fingers were gone. About half his left thigh had been torn off. His right ear was in tatters, and his left was completely removed.)

(And all of it had been stuffed down his own throat.)

They might not *pity* Wen Chao (after what he had done, that was impossible), but, as Wei Wuxian’s revenge went on and on, more than one person was forced to look away.

While Wei Wuxian continued to observe the show, two spirits separated themselves from the shadows and took human form. One was a young woman, whose too-long fingers began lovingly combing through Wei Wuxian’s hair. The other was a pure white child, leaning against Wei Wuxian’s knee as it gnawed on another one of Wen Chao’s removed fingers.

Swallowing back bile, Nie Huaisang moved inside Nie Mingjue.

As Wen Chao’s toes were torn off, Wei Wuxian began affectionately patting the head of the ghost-child next to him.

Jin Guangshan licked his lips.

Looking at it like this, it was quickly becoming clear how much Wei Wuxian had changed. After the Burial Mounds, it wasn’t a surprise that he was more at home with ghosts than people.

And yet, the sheer *scale* of Wei Wuxian power left Jin Guangshan an equal mix of disbelieving and *ravenous*. If he hadn’t seen it for himself, he would never have believed it. Something like this couldn’t even count as a battle.

Wen Zhuliu had been *child’s play* for Wei Wuxian.

When the Wen Sect attacked Lotus Pier, the number of soldiers they had brought equalled the number who came for this battle. Yes, the Sunshot Campaign’s side had done better than Yunmeng alone had, but….

If, right now, the army that took down Yunmeng had to face off against Wei Wuxian, Jin Guangshan knew without a doubt they would lose. It wouldn't matter whether Wei Wuxian had any allies; he could take them all on by himself. He hadn't made the Stygian Tiger Seal or the Ghost General yet, but, even without his two strongest tools, no clan could stand a chance against him.

Before them was the Yiling Patriarch, the strongest weapon in the cultivation world.

Jin Guangshan stared at it and *hungered*.

(He wanted it. He wanted this being by his side, at his feet — controlled, suppressed, *submissive* — those beautiful silver eyes glowing *red* with hate but unable to do anything as Jin Guangshan approached.)

He glanced to the side, and saw Wen Ruohan finalizing his own plan on the matter.

(Well then, it seemed to be in his best interests to remain as close to the Chief Cultivator as possible.)

Blood gushed out of Wen Chao's body, soaking the ground in red liquid. His cheeks were stained in blood and tears, and any attempts to flee were crushed instantly. Another cut of arm was stuffed into Wen Chao's mouth.

He wouldn't survive much longer.

Both the real and virtual Wen Chao directed their eyes toward Wei Wuxian, searching desperately for a shred of mercy.

The cold, crimson eyes staring down at them had none.

'*I...I'm sorry,*' Wen Chao thought, too afraid to speak. '*I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't — it wasn't me. It was my father! He's the one who ordered me to do all this. You understand, right? You know that.*'

Tears and snot ran down his face.

'*You're Wei Wuxian,*' he thought to himself. '*You'll stop, right? You know it was my father. My father and that bitch of a maid. She tricked me! It was her idea! She sent the flare out! It wasn't my fault!*'

Wei Wuxian tilted his head, shaking off the female spirit who had been hanging on his shoulder.

'*Yes! You'll let me go! You know it wasn't my fault, right Wei Ying? You'll let me-*'

Wei Wuxian brought Chenqing up to his mouth, and sent a new order out.

"I-"

Energy *impaled* Wen Chao and Wang Lingjiao, making Wen Chao's agonized screams increase in volume. He swung his limbs wildly, unable to move as the stake through his chest kept him suspended in the air.

Wen Zhuliu crawled across the ground, trying to help, but halted when he saw shadows loom over him.

Dozens of corpses dived into the Core Melting Hand at once.

Wen Ruohan frowned minutely.

It was like he wasn't worth being killed by Wei Wuxian personally. Instead, with a careless flick of his wrist, he let the corpses tear Wen Zhuliu apart.

Nausea crept up Jiang Fengmian's throat.

Wen Chao continued to thrash, coughing out blood as more and more dripped down from where energy impaled his stomach. His gurgled, broken wails begged Wei Wuxian for mercy. Then, the Yiling Patriarch's song changed and energy surged.

Wen Chao's screams came to an abrupt halt.

Two bodies fell to the ground, their heads and limbs severed from the torso, along with various other bits and pieces Wei Wuxian's energy had ripped off. With so much of it having been torn off already, the flesh couldn't even be recognized as a human's anymore.

The world seemed to tip around Wen Chao, and he gagged out bile from where he was collapsed on the ground.

No one knew what to say.

Then, unnoticed by Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji began to approach.

"Wei Ying," he whispered.

The Yiling Patriarch glanced back. His eyes had returned to silver, and, without the red hate, looked even colder than before.

"Hm?" Wei Wuxian glared. "Lan Zhan."

There was a pause.

"No, I suppose I should call you 'Hanguang-jun' now."

All the warmth that had once been in his tone was gone.

The two stared at each other for several long, agonizing seconds.

As much as the watchers had all wanted revenge, what Wei Wuxian had done was far, far more severe than any of them could have predicted. What he had done was *inhuman*.

But Wen Chao was the one who had made him that way.

“Here!” Jiang Cheng shouted, tossing something into the air. “Your sword.”

Wei Wuxian caught it easily, then slowly allowed his arm to drop slackly. After gazing down at it for several seconds, he forced himself to speak.

“...Thank you.”

The words which had come so easily to the Wei Wuxian of just a few months ago now sounded stilted and awkward.

(He had communicated with the spirits and Wens through orders, music, and threats; how long had it been since he had last *spoken* with someone?)

Another awkward silence spread over the trio.

How long had it been since Wei Wuxian had last interacted with *anyone?* Even without the status of an heir, Wei Wuxian had been fourth highest on the list of desirable young masters. His charisma was known throughout the land.

And now he could barely speak to his *brother.*

Finally, Jiang Cheng walked over and struck him.

“You brat! Where have you been these past three months?” Jiang Cheng asked, voice overjoyed despite the harsh words.

But the fact that he had to ask meant he didn’t believe that Wei Wuxian could have been in the Burial Mounds. And why would he? It was supposed to be impossible to escape.

(Had Wei Wuxian escaped? It almost seemed like he had just brought the Burial Mounds with him.)

And, as they had expected, Wei Wuxian paused blankly, as if not registering that Jiang Cheng’s question had been directed at him.

(And why would he? These past three months, *everything* he had encountered was a threat. It was probably all he could do to not attack the two boys before him.)

“It’s a long story,” he finally responded. “It’s… a long story.”

Jiang Cheng collapsed in his seat, cursing angrily.

“Wen Chao said you’d been thrown into the Burial Mounds,” Jiang Cheng continued.

Wei Wuxian just gave a bitter laugh: "If I'd been thrown into the Burial Mounds, how could I be here now?"

"Liar," Madam Yu hissed. It wasn't technically a false statement, but it was an implied one and he-

Why would he feel like he needed to hide that?

~~Had *she* trained this behavior into him?~~

Jiang Cheng looked like he was about to continue, when Lan Wangji spoke up.

"Wei Ying," he stepped forward. "Are you the one who has been killing the Wen Sect's disciples?"

Having expected the question, Wei Wuxian just sighed and responded, "Of course."

"And those sinister talismans?"

"That was me."

Lan Wangji's frown deepened.

"Ah, Lan-xiong," Nie Huaisang shook his head. "What he needs right now isn't judgement-"

"I know," Lan Wangji whispered.

He knew. He had seen what happened. But his other-self hadn't.

Taking one step forward, Lan Wangji asked, "Wei Ying, what are you doing to control those dark creatures?"

Any approachability in Wei Wuxian's expression vanished at the question.

"Lan-er-gongzi, what are you trying to say?"

Lan Wangji's eyes were glued to Wei Wuxian.

"Answer me," he demanded.

This was not the reunion they had been hoping for. And yet no one could truly blame either side.

Frustration building, Lan Xichen began to clench his fists.

Behind the pair, the ghost woman and child Wei Wuxian had summoned began to stir. When Wei Wuxian sent a careless glance back at them, they backed off and sank into the darkness.

Having felt the *power* of the silent command, some watchers began to sway on their feet.

"...What will you do," Wei Wuxian wondered, "if I don't answer?"

He slid to the side, dodging Lan Wangji's sudden attack, and walked three steps back.

"Lan Zhan, we've just reunited after so long and you're already trying to catch me."

"Stop it!" Jiang Yanli protested. "This isn't how it's supposed to-"

"Wei Ying, there is always a price to pay for practicing evil. There has never been an exception."

A terrifying smile appeared on Wei Wuxian's lips.

"It doesn't matter. I can pay whatever price there is."

'*Arrogant,*' was their first instinct.

'*Desperate,*' was their second.

It was arrogant of him to assume he would be fine — to not realize that he would soon die, torn apart by his own corpses as he lost control. To believe that he would be the only one capable of more. That much confidence was dangerous, and he would pay dearly for it.

However, it was desperation that fueled it. Wei Wuxian had no other options while in the Burial Mounds, and, now, he wanted revenge more than anything else. He should have gone back to spiritual cultivation once he escaped, but his effectiveness now was unquestionable. It was still wrong, but, after what had happened, the watchers could understand *why* he was making this decision.

(None more than Wen Qing and Wen Ruohan, who realized just how few options Wei Wuxian had been left with.)

However, Lan Wangji hadn't seen what had forced him to develop it, nor did he have the full story of what caused Wei Wuxian's hate. He, as Hanguang-jun, continued.

"It's bad for your body and your mind."

"I know what I'm doing-"

"Some things are beyond your control!"

"*Everything* is within my control."

Yes, that was arrogance.

But if he hadn't been arrogant enough to believe he could single-handedly leave somewhere inescapable, he never would have made it out of the Burial Mounds.

Finally, Wei Wuxian turned around and asked, "As for any changes to my mind… what would a stranger know about that?"

Lan Wangji flinched back.

His other self snarled.

"*Wei Wuxian!*"

"Lan Wangji!"

Wei Wuxian didn't trust him.

As soon as that realization sunk in, a collage of memories flew past Lan Wangji's eyes.

'Get lost!' he shouted.

'Lan Wangji will hate you forever,' Jiang Cheng commented.

'Oh, wake up. Lan Wangji was constantly telling you to 'get lost,' wasn't he? Did you forget that?'

'Wei Ying, you really are… the kind of person I hate the most.'

Yes, Wei Wuxian had continued provoking him and trying to get a reaction, but, given what Lan Wangji had said in response, was a lack of trust really surprising? Especially after Wei Wuxian spent so much time alone.

'Why is he here?' the thirteen years later Wei Wuxian had thought. 'I need to get out of here.'

"Wei Ying," he whispered, praying that, somehow, his feelings would be understood.

Then, as if in direct contrast to his wishes, Wei Wuxian's anger seemed to grow.

"You — save your lectures! What could be more evil than the Wen Clan?"

A tidal wave of resentful energy bursted out of him and spread in all directions, pushing the watchers back and sending a shaking Wen Chao tumbling further away.

The air seemed to turn black under Wei Wuxian's rage. To the spirits in the area, it truly felt like the Burial Mounds had been released on the spot.

Wen Ruohan swallowed, unable to contain his awe at the sheer *intensity* of the cultivation on display before him.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji whispered. "Come back to Gusu with me."

"To Gusu?" Wei Wuxian asked, his eyes returning to a warm silver in his confusion.

"Yes," Jiang Yanli whispered. "He needs help."

Jiang Cheng nodded. He knew why Wei Wuxian was acting like this (understood it better than he would ever admit), but he was also able to see this logically. After all, *his* brother

wasn't a demonic cultivator. The real version of his brother was doing just fine outside. *His* parents weren't dead — were, in fact, right next to him.

So Jiang Cheng could see just as well as anyone that Wei Wuxian needed help.

However, a moment later, the red returned.

"I see," Wei Wuxian laughed. "After all, your uncle despises people who cultivate on the dark path! You're his most beloved disciple; of course you're the same as him!"

"Wei Ying-"

"Who do you think you are?" the Yiling Patriarch growled. "I'm not afraid of you or the Gusu Lan Clan!"

Energy exploded out of him again, and the drained corpses dropped to the ground.

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered helplessly. "Please. You're hurting. You need help."

"Lan-er-gongzi," Jiang Cheng stepped forward. "With all due respect, whether Wei Wuxian is right or wrong, he belongs to the Yunmeng Jiang Clan. What he has done is not up to the Lan Clan to judge."

"Oh no," Nie Huaisang whispered.

Yes, Wei Wuxian was (for now) part of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect, "belonging" to its leader. However, it seemed unlikely that the newly reformed sect would have the resources to give Wei Wuxian the help he needed.

And the other Jiang Cheng either didn't notice, or didn't care, too caught up in the possibilities of revenge Wei Wuxian offered to give that a second thought.

Scowling, Jiang Cheng walked forward and kicked his other-self's shin. It phased through, but it made him feel better regardless.

(Still, maybe it was all for the best. Wei Wuxian was a member of the Jiang Sect, after all. They needed to stay together.)

Confident in his choice, Jiang Cheng stood like a wall between them, while Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian stared down at the ground, refusing to make eye contact. Then, finally, Lan Wangji turned around.

With a heavy heart, he walked away.

The world faded to black.

"What?"

"You're *leaving?*"

“Lan-xiong, just explain that you want to help!”

Lan Wangji pursed his lips, conceding to the point. Yes, if he would just explain that it wasn’t for punishment — that it was an act done out of love-

‘And don’t worry, I’m not into men like that! I wasn’t planning on really taking advantage of you.’

He didn’t have to explain that it was out of love. He just needed to convince Wei Wuxian to go back-

‘No! I’m not going in!’ the future Wei Wuxian protested outside the gates of the Cloud Recesses.

Convince him to go somewhere he clearly didn’t want to go to?

No. He would *not* be his father. Wei Wuxian had made it quite clear he wasn’t interested in him as anything more than a friend — no matter what Nie Huaisang said. Lan Wangji would *not* force his feelings on him. Leaving was his best option.

(If he could just remove the pit rapidly expanding in his heart, he might be able to make himself believe that.)

Time passed by, but the room’s gray surroundings remained stagnant. Soon, it became clear that they were in another break.

“...Well,” Nie Huaisang laughed in false cheer. “That was… certainly exciting.”

“*Depressing* might be more accurate,” Madam Jin disagreed, a statement to which no one objected to.

Wei Wuxian was back.

But he was *different*.

(Of course he was. They’d known the Yiling Patriarch was the complete opposite of their Wei Wuxian, and they’d known no one could get out of the Burial Mounds unchanged. And yet, somehow, the sheer scale of the changes left everyone speechless.)

Finally, Madam Jin turned to the Jiangs and spoke again, reaffirming, “I am willing to not request punishment later.”

“What?” Jiang Cheng asked, wondering how it could be possible for them to *not* punish Wen Chao.

“In regards to Wei Wuxian,” Madam Jin clarified, joining him in glaring at the Wens.

“O-oh… right.”

The Wens were already planning on this. With Wei Wuxian….

Jiang Fengmian frowned, then turned to Lan Qiren, Nie Mingjue, Jin Guangshan and Wen Ruohan to ask, “Do we all agree that what… *happened* to Wei Wuxian makes his change understandable?”

He was answered by nods from all around.

“So the things he does later as a result of this change are not to be punished?” Madam Yu assumed.

Another round of nods.

“Wait, no,” a strangled voice gasped out.

Heads turned toward the sound, and the watchers saw Wen Chao, trembling on the ground.

“Problem?” Nie Mingjue growled out.

“Yes. Yes. No-I…” he shrunk down. “No… no, when we get out… we need to — it’s not a punishment, but we… we’ll need to stop him. You can’t — you won’t right? We need to-we — you need to kill that *monster*! You can’t let him turn into that! Nothing can stop him now, you need-”

“Chao-er,” Wen Ruohan growled, making his son flinch.

(The other watchers looked to be seriously considering whether or not it would be worth it to leave the simulation just to kill Wen Chao.)

“Father, please-*please*, we have to! We can’t — not him — We can’t let that thing live!”

“And yet, wasn’t it your attempt to kill him that turned him into this?” Wen Ruohan asked. “You even tried to ensure he couldn’t come back as a vengeful ghost. Instead, because of that, he turned into a demon. Why would trying to kill him as soon as you get out lead to a different conclusion?”

The little blood that had been left in Wen Chao’s body seemed to vanish at that question.

Withholding a sigh, Lan Xichen turned to the other watchers and confirmed, “So, are we all in agreement to not hold Wei Wuxian’s later actions against him, provided that they don’t seem like things he would have done normally?”

“We are,” Nie Mingjue confirmed.

No one disagreed.

Frowning, Madam Yu directed her eyes toward her daughter, who was making eye contact with her fiance. No one was willing to say it, but they all knew what was to come.

Someday, soon, the Yiling Patriarch would kill Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli, forcing Jiang Cheng to lead a siege against him. He would kill Wen Ning and turn the boy into a weapon.

He would create the Stygian Tiger Seal and use it to battle hundreds of people at a time, unjustly massacring them all.

But no one had ever escaped the Burial Mounds before. In all honesty, he could have turned out much, much worse.

(It was clear the normal Wei Wuxian would never do those things, so even Wen Qing was willing to look the other way when they happened. They couldn't blame him for going insane.)

A tense silence began to spread out over the watchers, and Lan Qiren forced himself to look away.

'I see,' Wei Wuxian laughed. 'After all, your uncle despises people who cultivate on the dark path! You're his most beloved disciple; of course you're the same as him!'

Was it his fault?

Demonic cultivation was wrong and amoral, Lan Qiren knew that better than anyone — had *taught that* better than anyone. And yet, for the first time in his life, Lan Qiren couldn't help but feel like the rigid, unwavering rules he had loved were wrong.

Inside the Burial Mounds, Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation had been more of a reflex than anything. It was his *only* option if he wanted to survive; there was literally nothing else he could have done. However, now, he could have returned to spiritual cultivation and sought help. And his nephew was offering assistance.

But Wei Wuxian didn't believe him because *Lan Qiren* would never compromise on the matter.

In the back of his mind, a voice that sounded a lot like Cangse Sanren tutted disapprovingly.

On the side, Wen Ruohan glanced over everyone present. Even without Wen Zhuliu, it wouldn't be easy for the Sunshot Campaign to win. The Wens had an enormous army, and, based on the descriptions Sizhui had given, Wen Ruohan was relatively certain that the war would last for a few more years.

However, Wei Wuxian was here now. The Sunshot Campaign had survived long enough for the Yiling Patriarch's return.

(Now, the Wen army would be chipped away bit by bit until they were wiped out.)

This was a failure on his other self's part.

It would *not* happen to him.

Then, at long last, light returned.

Jiang Yanli walked through a crowded pavilion, holding medicine in one hand and a cloth in the other. Her white mourning robes had been exchanged for more practical,

cheaper, darker ones.

All around her, medical professionals worked tirelessly to save injured soldiers.

Jin Zixuan clenched his fists, mentally preparing himself to defend his fiance if Wen Chao decided to foolishly mock her lack of battle participation. Given the work Jiang Yanli was obviously doing, it would be easy for him to verbally demolish any argument Wen Chao made.

However, nothing came.

“Endure for a moment,” a healer requested as an agonized scream broke out.

Wen Qing clicked her tongue, annoyed at the amateur work being done, but aware that the war left the Sunshot Campaign with few other options.

“Are you okay?”

“Ah!”

All around, what looked to be hundreds of cultivators scurried from one sickbed to another; the ground was covered by a carpet of bodies.

Jiang Yanli moved to kneel next to a patient, gently tilting his head up so he could take the medicine she offered.

And Wen Chao paid her no mind. He had far more important things to worry about.

(Every time he closed his eyes, he could see the demon’s red orbs staring down at him, glowing in the night. His father was a sect leader, and Wen Zhuliu had been his bodyguard; none of that had been enough to stop Him.)

“Slowly, slowly. Don’t hurry,” Jiang Yanli requested.

Why would Wen Chao care about *them*? It didn’t matter what those humans did or felt; all that mattered was ~~Wei Wuxian~~ the Yiling Patriarch.

‘*It can’t happen again,*’ Wen Chao thought. ‘*It can’t. Don’t let it happen. Don’t make it happen — why did it happen? Why? Why? Why? Why?*’

“Have some medicine,” another healer requested.

Then, the simulation switched focus so that the doors were the center of the watcher’s attention. After a moment, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng stepped through, instantly looking up to survey the room. Jiang Cheng’s terrifying grin had disappeared, but, even more obviously, the cloud of darkness (which had been as attached to Wei Wuxian as his shadow) was gone.

Some time had passed. Enough for Wei Wuxian to have calmed down and realized that bringing resentful energy into a hospital was a recipe for disaster.

(Had Wei Wuxian finally gotten food? Sleep? Shelter? Was he back to normal, or-)

After several long seconds of searching, Wei Wuxian found what he was looking for.

He approached a gasping patient, whose severed arm had already been treated. Having returned to a more normal state of being, he was able to walk through the crowd without issue.

(But to the watchers, who were receiving the memories from a spirit, the power within him was still a blazing firework, impossible to ignore.)

"Endure it," Jiang Yanli requested again, wiping away the injured Nie cultivator's sweat with her damp towel. Wei Wuxian paused before her, his expression apprehensive.

Just a short while ago, the simulation had shown them Wei Wuxian's return to Lotus Pier after leaving the Cloud Recesses. His overjoyed smiles and cheerful demeanor during that reunion with Yanli couldn't be further from the muted version before them.

Jiang Yanli glanced back at the shivering Wen Chao — the person who had *destroyed* the boy Wei Wuxian used to be — and felt her fury spread to every cell in her body.

"Come," Jiang Yanli continued, wiping the patient's neck.

"...Shijie," Wei Wuxian whispered.

Her hand froze.

The watchers frowned. Even after everything, the voice he spoke to her with was affectionate.

(So then why did he kill her?)

After a pause, Jiang Yanli slowly turned and looked back, making eye contact with her to-be murderer, her shidi, the Yiling Patriarch. Even with his new look, she could instantly recognize him.

"XianXian," she whispered.

For the first time, a smile that looked vaguely reminiscent of the old Wei Wuxian formed on the Yiling Patriarch's face.

At the sight of that, Lan Wangji felt his clenching fists finally relax.

In a private room of the fort, away from the crowd gathered outside, the three siblings all looked at each other. Then, slowly, Jiang Yanli reached forward, cupping his cheek with her hand and trailing it up and down disbelievingly.

"A-Xian," she smiled, overwhelmed by the experience. "You've gotten so thin."

Her words brought another non-malicious smile to Wei Wuxian's face-

Something that *shouldn't* be considered rare, but now was nonetheless.

He nodded once and added, "You too, Shijie."

She laughed, her head ducking down momentarily as if trying to hide the tears forming in her eyes. She sniffled, battling with her emotions to calm herself down.

'*It won't happen,*' Jiang Fengmian promised himself. He made eye contact with Madam Yu, and saw the same determination blazing in her eyes.

Wei Wuxian raised his hand, and, after a moment of hesitation, wiped away a tear from her face. Behind them, Jiang Cheng's expression similarly flashed into sorrow, before he shook it away and forced his usual scowl to return.

Like this, it almost seemed like everything was going to be alright.

A small smile formed on Lan Xichen's face, and he nodded once at Jiang Yanli in support. The warm glow she sent back was reassuring and uplifting to the highest degree.

But-

"A-Xian," she leaned forward. "Where have you been all this time?"

Just like that, the easy happiness which had begun to appear in Wei Wuxian vanished. He looked down.

"Wei Ying?"

The pause spread out.

Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue made eye contact, broadcasting their shared concerns to all who could see.

The longer Wei Wuxian neglected to respond, the further into despair Jiang Yanli's face fell. Just when it looked like she was considering retracting the question and apologizing, Wei Wuxian leaned forward and pulled her into a hug.

"W-well," Nie Huaisang coughed. "Earlier, he keep physically avoiding Jiang-xiong and Lan-xiong. Maybe this is progress?"

"Progress that won't be enough to save him," Nie Mingjue countered, frowning deeply. Right now, Wei Wuxian was faced with an inevitable, resentful energy fueled decline into insanity.

(So much like Nie Mingjue's own impending doom, that he couldn't help but sympathize.)

Then, finally, Wei Wuxian forced himself to speak.

"Shijie," he whispered. "Don't worry so much. I'm fine."

“Liar,” Jiang Cheng shook his head, forcing himself to calm down. Why was Wei Wuxian always blocking them out? Why was he always shutting them off? Never answering questions? He hadn’t even planned on coming back! Was Wei Wuxian just going to stay long enough for the Jiang Sect to become a great sect again, and then leave?

‘*I’ll follow your lead, just like my father followed your father,’ he had promised.*

Both Wei Changze and Wei Wuxian had abandoned the sect, only to die young. They’d set out on their own from the sect they’d helped make strong, and then, without resources or help, had died.

(No matter what, Jiang Cheng wouldn’t let that happen to Wei Wuxian.)

A smile returned to Jiang Yanli’s teary face, and Wei Wuxian reached forward to wipe her tears. Carefully, she reached out to cup his cheek again, as if unable to believe that he was really there. They smiled at each other, so overwhelmingly loving and tender that some of the watchers were forced to look away.

A throb tugged at Wen Qing’s heart, and she found herself wondering how her brother was.

“Wei-xiong!” a familiar voice cried out. “Wei-xiong!”

“Huaisang,” Nie Mingjue gasped out in relief, grateful for further confirmation that his brother was alive. At that, Lan Xichen, Jiang Yanli, and Wen Qing gave small laughs.

“Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang cheerfully exclaimed, entering the room and running over to where the three were.

“Wei-xiong, I heard you were back. It really is you!” he laughed, raising a teasing finger to wiggle it in mock disapproval.

There were smiles all around.

He walked around the table to sit next to a distracted Wei Wuxian, “You’re really-”

He jumped close.

Wei Wuxian *flinched*.

A body moving near him was all it took to make him jump back.

(After he spent three months surrounded by corpses constantly reaching out to grab a bite of the human who had fallen in, what else could be expected? Yes, things seemed to be going alright now, but they knew the Yiling Patriarch’s crimes had yet to be revealed.)

In the past few segments, the watchers had allowed naive hope to blind them from what was to come. ‘*He’ll escape. He won’t be thrown in. The Burial Mounds aren’t that bad*.’ Even now, the calm interactions had fooled them into believing Wei Wuxian was more recovered than in truth.

(Somehow forgetting about the 3,000 murders yet to come.)

They would not allow themselves to be blindsided again.

After Wei Wuxian had flinched back, an unmistakable aura of awkwardness spread across the Yunmeng siblings and Nie Huaisang. The Nie heir's hand remained still in the air, and the Jiang siblings' expressions were equally frozen.

Then, Wei Wuxian gave a nervous smile and pushed Nie Huaisang's hand down.

"Nie-xiong, long time no see," he greeted quietly.

Even if he wanted to, there was nothing a barely-functional cultivator like Nie Huaisang would be able to do to the Yiling Patriarch.

Literally no one except his birds had ever been scared of Nie Huaisang.

And yet-

Eager to disperse the awkwardness, Nie Huaisang began, "Wei-xiong, you've been missing for months. Everyone was desperately looking for you. Especially Lan-er-gonzi and Jiang-xiong and-"

"That's enough," Jiang Cheng interrupted, grabbing onto Nie Huaisang and pulling him up. "You're talking too much."

"Eh? I wasn't finished!"

Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang gave simultaneous snorts at the red spreading across Jiang Cheng's scowling face.

"But-"

"*Come on!*"

The door clicked shut, leaving Jiang Yanli and Wei Wuxian alone. After a moment, Jiang Yanli rested a comforting hand on Wei Wuxian's arm and stood up.

"A-Xian, I'll go prepare you some food. Rest for a while. We just got you back. Don't exhaust yourself."

Hearing her soft, sweet voice, Jin Zixuan felt her cheeks heat up to a dusty pink.

Once he had made sure Jiang Yanli had left the room, Wei Wuxian allowed his smile to disappear. He reached to his side to pick up Chenqing, lifting it into the air to give it a closer look. With light fingers, he ran his hand around the flute, re-familiarizing himself with its grooves.

And with what it represented.

Behind the wall to his left, the watchers were brought to see a soft-footed figure step forward. Lan Wangji moved to stand at a large crack in the wall, giving him a vantage point from which to look inside. When he laid eyes on Wei Wuxian — who was holding Chenqing, instead of Suibian, and wearing his hair down, instead of up — Lan Wangji's hand clenched dangerously around the hilt of his sword.

However, he didn't speak up.

Wei Ying clearly hadn't wanted to see him anymore. The real Lan Wangji was glad his other-self seemed to agree.

Then, the world shifted, and switched to a worn down but no-longer-burning pier.

"Yunmeng?" Jiang Yanli asked, looking around at the scarred wood around them.

"Following the victories at Jingchu and Chongyang, Jiang Wanyin and Wei Wuxian chased the Wens to the north of the Qin mountains, recovering all the lands lost from Jingchu. A mere month after Wei Wuxian's return, the Yunmeng Jiang Clan had reclaimed Lotus Pier."

A cheer erupted from Jin Zixuan, Nie Huaisang and Jiang Cheng, and even Lan Wangji smiled.

(But there was a bitter tint to it all the while. After all, this was only made possible by ~~Wei Wuxian~~ the Yiling Patriarch's demonic cultivation, something he shouldn't have had to invent.)

(And now that they had returned to Lotus Pier, it was easy to see just how much Wei Wuxian had changed.)

Soft footsteps echoed across the pier as the Yiling Patriarch walked forward. A gust of wind pulled his loose robes into a graceful dance, making the changes in his appearance even more obvious than before. His new, unfamiliar clothes; his changed hairstyle; his flute. None were insulting on their own, but….

(Such long, flowing robes would be annoying for an agile swordfighter. Loose hair would be dangerous in a close ranged fight. A flute should not be a cultivator's main weapon. All combined, it was obvious how much Wei Wuxian had changed.)

Then again, the changes themselves weren't inherently bad. Even if they didn't match Wei Wuxian's close ranged and agile fighting style, those features could suit the Lan one. Wei Wuxian's significantly cheaper robes lacked the ease of motion Lan Wangji's had, but perhaps he didn't have any spare Yunmeng ones. And while his youthful cheer had been replaced by a subdued melancholy, he was still breathtakingly beautiful. The alterations could almost be excused as a sudden jump in maturity.

(Almost.)

(It wasn't a natural progression; it was an engineered one. He hadn't *needed* to be that mature before.)

Silently, Wen Qing wondered how much of Wei Wuxian's aura could be attributed to the sudden loss of his core. When Jiang Cheng had lost his, he had seemingly withered away, losing all life and starving himself for days. While more extreme than most, it was hard to call that an a-typical reaction for people who had lost their cores.

(And none of them had been thrown into the Burial Mounds immediately after.)

The previous fight had shown that Wei Wuxian was still powerful, but, to a doctor's eye, there were many causes for concern.

'*He's so thin,*' Wen Qing thought. It wasn't obvious at first glance — especially with how his loose robes covered almost all of his body — but a close look at his hands showed signs of starvation. His jaw and cheekbones had become sharper, but it was difficult to tell how much of that was natural, and how much was from starvation.

It had been months since he had gotten out of the Burial Mounds, hadn't it? Why did he still look so bad?

'*A-Ning better be taking good care of him out there,*' Wen Qing mentally added. As if knowing what she was thinking based off her expression, Jiang Yanli glanced back at her and smiled.

Wei Wuxian looked to the left and watched as a new, undamaged flag of the Yunmeng Jiang Clan was raised into the air.

When Jiang Cheng glanced behind him, he saw his father watching him with a regretful but nonetheless *proud* expression. The man nodded at him.

'*Be more open with praise for your children,*' Jiang Fengmian reminded himself.

Given the way Jiang Cheng seemed to be struggling to avoid melting into a puddle of goo, Jiang Fengmian felt he had done acceptably with that interaction.

All around the pier, there was similar evidence of recovery. The wood was charred at the edges and the grass was nearly gone, but new saplings were beginning to grow in the cracks left behind. Large blemishes on the walls had been covered by new flags, and the faded Lotus symbols were looking brighter in the sunshine.

'*Wei Wuxian,*' a voice — a memory — called out.

'*Did you miss me?*' the past's Wei Wuxian teasingly responded.

The Yiling Patriarch looked down, unwilling to think too deeply into all of that.

As Madam Yu looked around, she couldn't help a nostalgic sensation that crept up in her. How long had it been since she'd last seen this?

‘I…’ Madam Yu had breathed out, unable to contain her anger. ‘You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!’

She froze.

(Were those really the last words she'd ever said to him?)

(Well, her simulated-self had, but she knew she would have done the same in that situation.)

Could Wei Wuxian even bear to stand in Yunmeng anymore? He couldn’t have believed the attack was his fault — surely he knew she was just saying that — but both her words and the physical attack Jiang Cheng had given him immediately after would stay with him. Did this place even feel like home anymore?

Why was she still thinking about this? She had already admitted her simulated-self was wrong! It was over.

(Was it? Or was she still acting the same?)

Wei Wuxian wasn’t a member of her family-

(But he could have been, if it wasn’t for her.)

He wouldn’t believe her apology anyways.

(And whose fault was that?)

Madam Yu cursed and turned away, unable to watch Wei Wuxian any longer.

Then, finally, Wei Wuxian began to move again. He stepped forward and journeyed to the stairs of the main building, tracing the wooden rail with his hand as he walked up. The delicate, calming touch wasn’t like the past Wei Wuxian at all.

But it did look human, rather than demonic.

(However, Wei Wuxian was going to kill Jiang Yanli. Any humanity they saw in him couldn’t be trusted too deeply.)

Wei Wuxian’s journey brought him back to the dining hall, where much more restoration had been done. The wooden floor was smooth, the furniture had been put back, and Yunmeng Jiang’s flags hung from every wall.

It looked just like it had before the Wens.

‘Where have you been?’ Wei Wuxian’s memory of Madam Yu had asked. ‘Jiang Cheng, how many times have I told you to focus on practicing? You never listen!’

Something in her was guiltily grateful that he remembered that instead of her last words to him.

'And you!' Madam Yu's voice continued. 'You should set a better example for your junior disciples!'

'San-niang,' the memory of Jiang Fengmian's voice responded. 'You don't need to push the children so much.'

'They're seventeen!' Madam Yu shouted. 'They're not children anymore!'

Jiang Fengmian's smile vanished.

At seventeen, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng *had* been children. And now, just a few months later, he wasn't sure he could say the same.

Wei Wuxian came to a stop before what had once been Jiang Fengmian's seat.

"A-Xian."

He flinched and turned around.

There was no one there.

"Oh, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered, taking a deep breath to collect herself. That had been her father's voice. There was no one to act for; the humanity they were seeing in Wei Wuxian was genuine.

And right now, the vulnerability in the Yiling Patriarch's eyes made him look like the teenager he was.

(But they couldn't let themselves forget that the Burial Mounds had changed him. Once something made him snap, Wei Wuxian would have no mercy for anyone.)

And yet, as Wei Wuxian stood alone in the silence of the now-empty pier, they had trouble making themselves believe that.

Slowly, Wei Wuxian allowed his face to fall, realizing that he had imagined the voice. From his right, Jiang Cheng entered the room and began walking forward.

"Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu's bodies…" Wei Wuxian began. "Were you able to find them?"

A nod.

At the reminder of how Wen Ning had stolen them — *saved them* — Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Yanli gave Wen Qing small bows of thanks. She shook her head to show how unnecessary it was, but the gentle smiles sent her way made her back down.

(They reminded her of Wen Ning.)

"The ancestral hall… have you set places for them in it?"

“I have,” Jiang Cheng responded.

As the conversation continued, the watchers were brought outside the room to where Jiang Yanli stood behind the wall.

At the concrete proof that she was still okay, Jin Zixuan allowed his tense hands to finally relax.

(Based on what had been shown, he was certain that his sect would be trying to stay out of the war under his father’s lead. His new friends in the Jiangs siblings, Nie Huaisang, and Lan Wangji were the only ones he had to worry about.)

In Jiang Yanli’s hands was a carefully-balanced tray carrying five bowls of soup. As she stood behind the wall, she seemed to battle with herself about whether to go in.

“Don’t worry,” Wei Wuxian hissed. “I’ll place Wen Ruohan’s head in front of your parent’s tomb soon enough.”

Upon hearing that, Jiang Yanli took a deep breath and forced a gentle smile on her face.

In the past few months, Jiang Yanli had lost her parents, her sect, and Wei Wuxian. She had gotten the latter two back, but something like that would shake even the strongest people. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had responded to the trials life threw their way by making themselves strong enough to stop it.

And yet Jiang Yanli’s strength — inner strength — was just as admirable.

‘*She’s so cool!*’ Jin Zixuan’s brain couldn’t resist shouting at him.

She stepped forward and walked through the door.

“The lotus and pork rib soup is ready,” she offered.

At those words, the terrifyingly determined gazes on Sect Leader Jiang and the Yiling Patriarch vanished, switching to mystified gratitude.

‘*She has quite a bit of influence on him,*’ Wen Ruohan noted calmly.

“Who wants some?”

“Me!”

“And me,” Wei Wuxian added instantly, finally relaxing.

“How could Wei Wuxian kill her now?” Lan Qiren wondered. It seemed impossible.

But so many things in the simulation had, and yet there had been an answer for all of them.

The soup was placed on the tables. One for Wei Wuxian; one for Jiang Cheng; one for Jiang Yanli.

And one for each of her parents.

'*Thank you, A-Li,*' Madam Yu thought, but didn't say.

Some part of her mind could acknowledge that maybe that was something that should have been spoken out loud. To her great disbelief, her husband seemed to be *trying* to do that, and the grateful smile he sent their daughter's way served its purpose. She probably didn't need to say anything.

But she could.

And she didn't.

'*You're not the right person for this,*' a voice in her subconscious whispered. '*Don't even try.*'

Once every bowl of soup was set down, conversation resumed.

Jiang Cheng took a bite out of a piece of root and commented, "Although we've reclaimed Jingchu, Wen Ruohan has tens of thousands of well-trained soldiers on the way. The four clans are all concerned; we haven't come up with a plan yet."

Of course not; they shouldn't have, but there was still a reason the Sunshot Campaign's members had hesitated for so long. Wen Ruohan was far from simple to defeat.

"Well," Wei Wuxian hummed. "I think I have an idea."

"Of course he does," Jiang Cheng muttered, then flinched when Lan Wangji glared.

"You do? What is it?" the simulated Jiang Cheng asked.

Lan Wangji's unimpressed gaze made his complaint perfectly clear.

(Right. It wouldn't do to fall into the 'Wei Wuxian can fix everything' trap again.)

"Let's hear it," Jiang Cheng ordered.

"Remember last year, when I told you about the black sword I found on Muxi Mountain?"

"Last year," Nie Huaisang muttered, amending his mental timeline of events. He might not be able to help his brother and friends with the fighting once they left the simulation, but this, at least, he could do.

"You mean… the one that sank into the lake?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"That's the one."

The world around the watchers instantly darkened into the cave where the Xuanwu had hidden for thousands of years. Then, a bright red glow filled the cavern.

Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan both leaned forward in interest.

Blasting out of the lake like an erupting geyser, the black sword was summoned by a command it had no choice but to obey. It was made to hover in the air, kept suspended by a force the watchers couldn't see. To the side, Wei Wuxian floated parallel to the blade, kept up by a mountain of resentful energy.

When Wen Chao's breathing stopped, it wasn't just because of the layers of energy weighing him down.

(Those red eyes were there again. And he would never escape.)

Wei Wuxian's arm was outstretched towards the sword, controlling its movement.

In a voice-over, Wei Wuxian continued his explanation:

"It's claimed countless lives, and absorbed the resentment of thousands more due to being buried under murdered corpses for two thousand years."

The watchers knew that better than anyone. When Wei Wuxian had picked up the sword while fighting the Xuanwu, they had felt the energy it contained. They had expected it and were, at the time, far more worried about Wei Wuxian than the sword, but its strength hadn't gone unnoticed by anyone.

Wei Wuxian frowned.

"If we can find it and use it to our advantage…."

He clenched his hand into a fist, and beams of red light shot through the sword's corroding rust. They condensed, and a shockwave of red light bursted out.

Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang yelped, knocked off their feet by the blast.

Wei Wuxian and the resentful energy battled for dominance, turning the lake below turbulent and vicious. Waves crashed against the rocks and leapt into the air, but Wei Wuxian paid them no mind.

His gaze was entirely focused on the sword which contained the energy of thousands in its metal. Anyone else would have been swallowed whole, just like what had nearly happened to Wei Wuxian in the cave a year ago.

But the Wei Wuxian battling it now had tamed the Burial Mounds.

This sword was nothing compared to that.

The next burst of energy made even Lan Xichen wobble where he stood, demolishing the stone in its path. Something this powerful seemed untamable.

And yet, after putting up one final attempt at resistance, the metal caved in and bent to the Yiling Patriarch's will.

With a smirk, Wei Wuxian reached forward and grabbed the newly-forged Stygian Tiger Seal.

Wen Ruohan couldn't help but grin-

Wei Wuxian gasped, waking up. All around him was the Cloud Recesses, and his body was no longer just his.

Mo Xuanyu's eyes stared up at the ceiling.

Two blinks.

"...What?"

Wei Wuxian sat up.

Again.

"*What?*"

Wei Wuxian looked around, observing the white bed and blue furniture that was located in the Jingshi.

"We're… back in the future, it seems," Lan Xichen observed.

'*Wei Ying's in my room,*' Lan Wangji realized. '*He's on my bed.*'

The second after he thought that, he cursed his mind and doubled his planned punishment.

(Wei Wuxian had made it clear he wasn't interested, Lan Wangji had no right to think of him that way. Just like he'd had no right to think of the Yiling Patriarch that way. How he'd had no right to turn what was the result of endless suffering on Wei Wuxian's part into something else, no matter how delicious the smirking tilt of his lips had looked.)

A fierce blush darkened Lan Wangji's ears, and he decided to triple his planned punishment instead.

(Wei Wuxian had said 'no' to returning with him. Any affection Lan Wangji might have thought was there was clearly a mistake. He needed to stop.)

The blue sky outside the window was just starting to become dim. Based on the position of the sun, it was most likely late afternoon on the same day Wei Wuxian had been brought back to the Cloud Recesses.

"He's been… sleeping?" Nie Mingjue wondered.

"Probably," Wen Qing nodded. "He's still not used to this new body, and he had experienced a lot the night before."

Jiang Cheng nodded in agreement, seeing the logic. Wei Wuxian had run from Lan Wangji, fought Jin Ling, gotten saved by Hanguang-jun, killed a terrifying goddess, ~~gotten whipped by Zidian~~, and been dragged to the Cloud Recesses. He had only been brought back to life a short while ago, it was no surprise that he had fallen asleep so deeply.

After a moment's hesitation, Nie Mingjue nodded to Wen Qing in thanks.

"Sixteen years later; the Cloud Recesses!" Jingyi nearly shouted, most likely overjoyed at returning to a point in the story that he was there for.

This time, when the Lans looked around and saw slight changes in the buildings of the sect, they knew the cause.

Wei Wuxian forced himself to sit up, bringing a hand to his head as if trying to rub away a headache. He sighed.

"Guess I'm an old man now, always dreaming about the past."

If you counted the time he had been dead, he was in his thirties; if you didn't, he was in his early twenties. Even if he hadn't been a cultivator, neither of those would classify as an old man.

The adults in the room wanted to sigh in amusement, but, remembering how quickly Wei Wuxian's innocence had been lost, felt any humor they might have had evaporate.

He looked around, cataloguing the room with a questioning gaze.

"Where's Lan Zhan?" he wondered.

His use of the second jade's birth name was overly-familiar and rude. Lan Qiren should disapprove of it — especially considering it was *Wei Wuxian* saying it.

And yet, after the Yiling Patriarch's arrival, he couldn't help but feel grateful for its use.

(Wei Wuxian seemed much calmer now than he had been as the Yiling Patriarch. Even after reconquering Lotus Pier (*months* after his return), there had been a notable tension in his body.

Then again, back then, he had been overflowing with resentful energy. Perhaps now he had gotten somewhat cleansed. Or maybe the resentful energy had nothing to do with it at all, and it was simply that some time alone allowed him to come to terms with everything he had been through.

(If only it hadn't taken *dying* to get there.)

The world faded away.

When the world shifted to return the watchers to the in-between area, Nie Mingjue felt himself scowl deeply. They had all known that Wei Wuxian would be changed by his time in

the Burial Mounds, but their predictions had differed.

Jin Guangshan, Wen Qing and Wen Ruohan had assumed it would be a seemingly instantaneous switch into an irredeemable monster, lacking both the morality and logic his human self had once possessed. Wen Qing had figured it would take a monster to turn her brother into a weapon, and had set her expectations accordingly. They had originally believed that they were correct, but the later scenes and the reminder of how he was in the future proved them wrong.

The Jiangs, Lans, and Jin Zixuan had hoped that there wouldn't be many changes. It was, in hindsight, foolish of them to think so, but the idea that someone they had gotten to know could change so much was staggering. Appearance wise, he still looked physically like an older version of himself.

And yet everything else — even the way he interacted with his Shijie — was wholly and completely *wrong*.

The Nies and Madam Jin had taken more realistic approaches. Madam Jin knew full well the effects her husband's actions could have on the less willing girls he targeted. Although Wei Wuxian hadn't been raped, she couldn't imagine nearly being eaten alive was much better. Similarly, Nie Mingjue understood better than anyone how mentally damaging resentful energy could be, and had a general idea of what that would change Wei Wuxian into. In comparison, Nie Huaisang had very little understanding of the corruption of resentful energy, but a much more accurate understanding of his friend. Wei Wuxian had lost so much, of course he changed. They were only somewhat surprised by the end result.

Still, it was far from ideal.

Lan Wangji sighed.

In synch, almost everyone else copied him.

"At least we know he does get better," Lan Xichen attempted, referring to the thirteen-years-later future. The Wei Wuxian of that time had been playful and teasing. Even when the Mo family's young master tried to grab him, he hadn't flinched away.

(And he had flinched from *Nie Huaisang* of all people.)

Huffing a bitter laugh, Nie Mingjue sarcastically muttered, "Of course, very helpful. If he ever gets that bad again, we'll be sure to do everything we can to kill him-"

"No!"

Ever since watching his own death, Wen Chao had become a muted, trembling figure in the corner of the room who ever watcher had started subconsciously tuning out. His sudden outburst was more than a little unexpected.

"What?" Jiang Cheng hissed. "*You* have a problem with him dying? Weren't you just advocating for that?"

“No. No, you were right. I’m sorry. He dies and he-he’ll become *that*. No, we need to-we have to keep him human-”

“He *is* human! You saw him speak to my A-Jie!”

“It’s just an act, we know he’s going to kill her!”

Everyone flinched back.

(They had all thought the same. That didn’t mean they wanted someone to say it.)

“...It’s not an act,” Jiang Cheng stubbornly bit out. However, having no basis for that claim, he had no choice but to back off.

“And besides, whose fault is it that he got that far?!” Madam Jin demanded. “When asked who’s responsible for my son’s death, I think a much more accurate answer would be *you*.”

“We don’t even know how that happened yet,” Wen Ruohan corrected.

Frowning at being forced to agree, Lan Qiren added, “Those at the beginning also said that Wei Wuxian was responsible for the destruction of Lotus Pier, and we all saw how that went.”

Madam Yu growled.

“But his future self never admitted to Lotus Pier,” Jin Guangshan pointed out. “He did, however, ask himself why he ‘of all people’ had mentioned her son’s lack of parentage. Given the slap that followed, I doubt it was a simple matter of him loving his Shijie.”

“And you would prefer that, wouldn’t you?” Jiang Fengmian couldn’t resist asking. “A weapon that lacks discourse of reason and mercy, instead of how A-Xian is supposed to be.”

“We can talk about ‘supposed to be’ all we want, but this is what *happened,*” Jin Guangshan responded. “And besides, if a proper clan backed him and helped remove the stigma against his powers, it might not be so bad. He seemed rational enough.”

“Please, Sect Leader Jin,” Jiang Yanli bowed. “I think we can all agree that the changes A-Xian has gone through were not good for anyone. Avoiding it is the least we can do.”

Jin Guangshan fell silent, but it was clear to everyone that he didn’t agree. And why would he? The Yiling Patriarch had *ripped out Wen Zhuliu’s core*. The mere threat of Wen Zhuliu had kept the heirs in line at the labor camp for weeks; any sect Wei Wuxian allied with would be unstoppable.

Unfortunately, it was now clear that his loyalty to the Jiang Sect was nearly impenetrable. Luring him away with honor wouldn’t work, as Wei Wuxian had already proven himself to be indifferent towards his reputation when he and Lan Wangji credited each other for taking down the Xuanwu. Putting pressure on him wouldn’t work, as the Massacre of Lotus Pier had already shown him to be extremely adaptable. Perhaps Jin Guangshan could send a woman over to seduce him?

(He did seem to enjoy flirting with them, but his instant interest in Lan Wangjij's righteousness, character, and strength made that avenue obsolete. Even if it worked, it would never last.)

Both Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan reviewed the moments of weakness they had seen in Wei Wuxian. Jiang Yanli seemed to be the strongest contender, but she and Lan Wangji had both seen the simulation, and would never agree to coercing Wei Wuxian to join them. They knew almost nothing about his martial siblings, and the friendships he had formed while in the Cloud Recesses were also undisclosed. And in the future….

Hadn't he gotten awfully protective of the juniors in a short amount of time? And given Jiang Yanli's comments about how he was as Yunmeng Jiang's head disciple, that protectiveness seemed to be true even now.

With a sigh, Jin Guangshan mumbled, "It's too bad. If he was a woman, we'd be able to force a child on him that would bind him to a sect. With the face he has, there'd be no shortage of volunteers."

Jin Zixuan froze.

Unfortunately for Jin Guangshan, as Wei Wuxian wasn't a woman, there would be no way for the mother to have more claim over the child and trap him in a sect.

For a moment, Jin Guangshan pictured the view the Yiling Patriarch would make if someone tried anyways. Swollen lips, disheveled hair, heavy breathing, and bite marks all along that smooth, delectable neck.

He hummed to himself.

"Maybe we should try anyway. If we chained it up somewhere, it could be quite a prize."

"...I'm sorry, I… I *beg your pardon?*" Lan Xichen asked, and all other conversation immediately halted. Given the volume Jin Guangshan had spoken at, only the people closest to him had heard him.

However, Lan Xichen's tone instantly alerted everyone that something was wrong.

Jin Guangshan blinked under the sudden attention and gave a nervous laugh, "Ah, nothing. I-"

"That was *not* nothing."

"I was merely brainstorming ways to keep him from falling so out of control."

"We won't *need to*!" Jiang Cheng shouted, glaring at Wen Chao. "So long as *that idiot* doesn't *throw him into the Burial Mounds*, he won't need to fall that far!"

"And if it does happen?" Wen Ruohan wondered. "Yes, those were extreme circumstances, but we all know them now. If someone else finds out about this, they could force it to happen."

“‘Someone else?’” Lan Qiren parotted.

“Hypothetically.”

“Of course,” Jiang Fengmian glared, knowing full well that the most dangerous candidate for that was the person who had suggested it.

“Well, it-it won’t happen,” Jiang Cheng declared.

“I just feel like a little insurance would be necessary,” Jin Guangshan disagreed. “Surely we can at least *consider* a plan.”

“But that’s not what you were thinking about.”

It took Jin Zixuan a moment to realize that *he* was the one who had spoken.

“Jin-xiong?” Nie Huaisang prompted, having not heard what Jin Guangshan originally said. As much as Jin Zixuan wanted to answer, the look Jin Guangshan gave him scared the truth into hiding in the back of Jin Zixuan’s mind.

‘*You’re a filial son,*’ he told himself. ‘*You can’t embarrass your father in front of the other four Great Sects.*’

His mother’s worried eyes connected with his.

‘*You care about your sect,*’ he thought. ‘*You don’t want to be associated with those words, do you? So long as you don’t say them — Lan Xichen isn’t saying anything, so he probably didn’t hear all of it, so-*’

Jiang Yanli’s concerned gaze fell on him, and all his protesting thoughts screeched to a halt.

“I just… I mean…” he looked down. “Sorry, A-Die. It… it just sounded like you wanted to take action *before* he gets that far, and I think, if we do make a plan, it should be reactionary. We promised to not punish him for things that haven’t happened yet, and I think we should stick to that here.”

In response to his suggestion, Jiang Yanli sent him a blindingly grateful smile that should have set his mind at ease.

Instead, guilt welled up within him.

(That was some of the truth, but not all of it. He’d hidden it. That was the time to say something, and he’d *hidden it.*)

“I see,” Lan Xichen nodded with a relieved huff, then bowed. “My apologies, Sect Leader Jin. It seems I overreacted slightly.”

‘*You didn’t,*’ Jin Zixuan wanted to say. ‘*You heard right, he-*’

But Jin Guangshan was his *father*. He couldn’t say that!

But he could have. Should have.

(And he didn't.)

Jiang Yanli scooted closer, her expression clearly displaying how thankful she was that he had spoken up against her father, and Jin Zixuan felt the regret growing within him devour him whole.

On the side, Madam Yu narrowed her eyes.

She could have sworn she heard something more, but, with Jin Zixuan giving his statement and Lan Xichen backing off, she had no idea if the bit she'd heard was true.

Part of her knew she should press for information.

(But why would she? Yes, she could acknowledge she had treated her head disciple somewhat improperly, but it wasn't her responsibility to monitor his every action.)

Except the rest of her family had been too far away to hear, so they had no reason to say anything.

(And why would she? It wasn't like the boy was part of their *family*.)

But he could be.

(No. After what she'd done to him, that would never be possible. The years she had spent hating him would never go away.)

But didn't she have a responsibility-

'*No,*' she thought, shaking her head. '*I didn't say anything, Jin Guangshan's the one who did. No matter what he said, it's none of my business. It's stupid for me to feel guilt over that.*'

Satisfied with that conclusion, she looked back to her children, who were speaking casually with the tense Jin heir.

Next to them, Nie Huaisang sat still. He hadn't heard what had been said, but, based on the expressions of everyone who *had* heard, he thought he had an idea.

Jin Guangshan might not be interested in men, but he and Nie Huaisang were both appreciators of art. Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji would probably kill him if he said it out loud, but he had to admit that he knew where Jin Guangshan was coming from. No one who had seen the man would be able to deny the allure of the Yiling Patriarch. With dramatically billowing robes contrasting against his glowing red eyes, it wouldn't surprise him if most people present had felt their thoughts drift in that direction.

However, no one could truly control their thoughts; what needed to be watched was actions.

(And Nie Huaisang was fairly certain that Jin Guangshan would not hesitate if he got a chance.)

Nie Huaisang sighed.

Worst of all, Jin Guangshan wasn't even the greatest cause for concern. Right now, a suspiciously silent Wen Ruohan was watching the Jiangs with an expression Nie Huaisang didn't like at all.

(Not that Nie Huaisang knew anything about this! Of course not! These sorts of politics were better left to his brother and Lan Xichen than him.)

As if having felt Nie Huaisang's eyes on him, Wen Ruohan glanced back. The two made eye contact for several seconds, Nie Huaisang rapidly blinking in confusion and Wen Ruohan giving him an appraising glance. After a moment, he turned to look at Nie Mingjue instead.

Nie Huaisang flinched and hurriedly pulled his eyes away.

Wen Ruohan smirked.

(The younger could be used to control the older, but the older was just as effective against the younger.)

Noticing the frightened aura his brother had gained, Nie Mingjue walked closer to him and was about to ask what was wrong when-

"Alright, I'm back," Wei Wuxian's voice greeted.

"Ah… A-Xian," Jiang Yanli smiled slightly. "Hello."

"Hi. Wen Ning's here too! Say 'hi' Wen Ning."

"Uh, hello A-Jie, Sect Leader… everyone."

"A-Ning," Wen Qing breathed out warmly.

(By now, it was clear that she didn't have to worry. The Wei Wuxian of now would never hurt Wen Ning.)

Still....

(Would any of them have been able to guess that he'd kill Jiang Yanli? Why would this be any different?)

Taking a deep breath, Wen Qing calmed her racing heartbeat and asked, "Is everything alright out there?"

"Ah-yes!" he squeaked. "I-I'm good."

His voice rapidly rose in pitch, allowing her to hear the glow of happiness encompassing his body.

Wen Qing smiled.

Wei Wuxian coughed, "Well, we've confirmed you are who you sound like. So, you got us an answer yet? I'd be happy to pull you out if you think Mo Xuanyu actually has your best interests in mind."

The watchers hesitated. They all knew what their answer would probably be, but they weren't sure they could convince Wei Wuxian of that without raising his suspicions.

"Er…" Nie Huaisang laughed awkwardly. "Before that, how's the thing you were working on going? Whether or not we leave, I wanna see it. Is it done?"

"...Alright, we'll start with that."

If Nie Huaisang's words made Wei Wuxian suspicious, he was hiding it too well for any of the watchers to hear it.

"Is everyone ready? Then I'm pleased to announce the great news: we've finished the Concealment Zone! It'll activate based off a voice command. You don't need to say anything specific; so long as the general sentiment is 'I don't want to watch this,' you won't have to! The parts that are boring you will no longer be a concern!"

"...Ah."

When Lan Xichen had originally requested it, it had been in the hopes of maintaining Lan Wangji's privacy. With everything that had been revealed, it almost felt obsolete now.

Not that Lan Xichen would tell him that.

"Thank you, Wei-gongzi," he said instead. "Do you need any help installing it?"

"Nope! Just give me a second."

A blinding red glow covered the floor, forcing the watchers to look away. When it vanished, there were no detectable differences in the appearance or feel of the room.

"...Are you sure you did that right?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

"I think so. I can check in at the end of the next segment if you want me to. Provided you decide to stay, of course."

"No need," Nie Mingjue decided. He doubted they would be using the Concealment Zone regardless. The information the simulation offered had long since proven itself to be indispensable.

"Whatever you say. Anyways, onto the thing that's about to make all the work I did on the Concealment Zone completely pointless!"

"Wait, Young Master Wei-"

"Oh, my bad. All the work *Wen Ning* and I did-"

“*Young Master Wei!*”

“Wait, are you just going to go ahead and-”

“Letting you out now!”

“““““*NO!*”””””

It was only after several people had spoken — and Nie Huaisang had subsequently sighed — that they realized Wei Wuxian was probably just bluffing to scare a genuine reaction out of them.

“No?” Wei Wuxian repeated. “You sound awfully sure about that. I would have thought you’d have more questions to ask before making a decision.”

‘*It seems he knows we’re hiding a few things,*’ Nie Huaisang observed. ‘*In that case, is there any point in denying it?*’

Feeling the same, Wen Ruohan stepped forward and explained, “We already have all the information we need to make our decision. There will be no need to let us out.”

No one disagreed.

“But-”

“We’re sure, A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian said.

“...Alright then.”

“Really, A-Jie?” Wen Ning asked.

“Yes,” Wen Qing unflinchingly declared. “Just… take care of each other.”

“Alright?” Wen Ning responded. The telling silence from Wei Wuxian perfectly expressed his confusion around the ‘each other’ clause.

Lan Xichen coughed, “Also… be careful with Mo Xuanyu.”

“You think he’s dangerous?”

“No.”

“He’s not.”

“He won’t hurt you.”

There was no uncertainty.

Yes, the Yiling Patriarch had been corrupted, but it seemed clear that the version inside Mo Xuanyu’s body was fairly similar in temperament to the fifteen year old one speaking to them. It wasn’t an issue.

“However,” Lan Qiren added. “He is… intelligent. He has very strong reasons to want us out of here, so treat anything you get from him with caution.”

“Understood,” Wei Wuxian instantly responded.

“Um,” Wen Ning coughed. “I-I thought I should mention what we’ll be doing. Only if you want to know of course, I just-”

“Go on,” Wen Ruohan commanded.

“Th-there’s going to be a conference soon. Between the sects. Um-Qishan is hosting. So we’ll be out of contact for a little while in a few days.”

“The Sects have gotten control of things again?” Madam Jin asked.

“Yes. It’s-it’s all going well!”

"Any other questions?" Wei Wuxian asked.

“Yes, actually. Wei Wuxian, would you-” Wen Qing abruptly bit her tongue, cutting herself off.

“..A-Jie?”

“No, it’s just….”

His core. Would he give up his core for Jiang Cheng if the Jiang heir lost his?

She shook her head at her own foolishness. When asked whether he’d resist being choked, he had responded that “of course” he’d fight back. Why would this be any different? There was no way he could understand this.

“It’s nothing,” she decided.

“...Well, if that’s all, I’m going to go,” Wei Wuxian decided. “I think I’ll send back a ‘thank you for the suggestion, but I’ll be leaving them inside’ to Mo Xuanyu. That should be fun. Wish me luck~”

“Good luck, Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang shouted.

‘*Stay safe, Wei Ying*’ Lan Wangji thought.

A moment later, his and Wen Ning’s voices vanished.

Left without someone to keep secrets from, Jiang Cheng breathed out a large sigh of relief. There probably wouldn’t be any direct consequences of making Wei Wuxian believe that Mo Xuanyu was his future self, but if he didn’t believe them — if he thought they were crazy or that resentful energy was corrupting their minds — then they would be pulled out without having finished the simulation.

(They had to be very, very careful when speaking to him.)

As most of the watchers considered that, Wen Ruohan resumed his thoughts from before. To his left was his son, Wen Chao, who had remained pale-faced and unnaturally silent throughout the entire time Wei Wuxian was speaking. Wen Chao had even slowed his breathing down, terrified that a too-loud exhale would attract the baby Yiling Patriarch's attention.

(How *useless*.)

(Wei Wuxian wouldn't cower in fear.)

The Wei Wuxian who had spoken to them was not the Yiling Patriarch, but, maybe, he didn't have to be. He was already learning the beginnings of demonic cultivation trying to understand the simulation, and he, unlike his other-self, would still have a golden core to protect him. Whatever Wen Ruohan needed to convince him of could come in time, there was no need to rush this.

So long as the Yunmeng Jiang Sect didn't ruin him first.

At that thought, Wen Ruohan's improved mood crumbled. Getting Wei Wuxian on his side could wait. Right now, the most important thing was keeping the young Patriarch safe.

He refused to allow the boy to destroy himself for no reason.

However, regardless of whether it came from genuine love, guilt, or conditioning, the fact remained that Wei Wuxian was loyal enough to the Yunmeng Jiang Sect to secretly give them his life's work. And, if that was true, then Wen Ruohan *couldn't* win the boy over. Nothing would break his loyalty.

(In some ways, he was surprised it had taken him so long give up on this. When the Jiang disciples had been shirtless on that hot day, Wei Wuxian had been singled out for punishment by Madam Yu, and Jiang Cheng hadn't been even remotely surprised. If Wei Wuxian was used to taking the fall, then then maybe Wen Ruohan should have expected this.)

By now, Wen Ruohan had become certain of one thing: Wei Wuxian would do anything for the Jiang Clan.

So then, why not take the greatest obstacle, and turn it into a tool?

Hypothetically, if the Jiangs were brutally murdered, and Wei Wuxian was made to believe the Lans or Nie had been the culprits, what would he do?

(If tensions continued to rise, and war broke out as soon as they left, wouldn't Wei Wuxian join the Wens, who would be opposing his family's murderers?)

And if Wen Ruohan, the Chief Cultivator, generously offered him a path for revenge, wouldn't he receive Wei Wuxian's utmost trust and gratitude?

Even if it was revealed the Wen soldiers had been involved in the Jiangs' murders, Wen Ruohan could pretend they had been bought off and he knew nothing about it. Wei Wuxian would believe him.

He had trusted in the Jiangs; unlike them, Wen Ruohan would actually *respect* Wei Wuxian.

(Wei Wuxian was running Yunmeng well. What use were the Jiangs in the face of that?)

Then again, Wen Ruohan couldn't allow himself to forget that Wei Wuxian was different from Wen Zhuliu and Wen Ruohan himself. He liked people, and worked well with them. If he was suddenly deprived of the family he had worked so hard to save, immediately moving him to Qishan (away from the martial siblings he was clearly close to) could be dangerous for the boy's mental health.

Wen Ruohan frowned deeper, then allowed his eyes to drift over the Jiangs again.

(Jiang Yanli sat next to Jin Zixuan, speaking with a cheery smile.)

Some of the Jiangs had an unquestionably negative effect on Wei Wuxian, but what about Jiang Yanli? Yes, the future Wei Wuxian would go on to kill her, but, as far as Wen Ruohan could tell, Jiang Yanli's impact on Wei Wuxian's life was unquestionably positive. She redirected her mother's anger, and she supported him where she could.

If she was left alive, would the emotional support she provided be worth increasing the risk of Wei Wuxian being turned against the Wens?

After thinking about that for a short while longer, he shook his head. There were too many unknowns for him to finalize any plan now, especially as the simulation had continuously flipped their expectations. It would be better to wait before making any irreversible decisions.

Wen Ruohan would secure Wei Wuxian's loyalty, no matter what it took.

"So, what do we think?"

"Well, for one, Wen Ruohan's obviously going to want to kill you," Jin Ling declared.

As he looked around, he saw Wei Wuxian give a bitter smile, Hanguang-jun frown deeply, Lan Sizhui and Ouyang Zizhen flinch, and Zewu-jun, who had been pouring them tea, falter.

Lan Jingyi just rolled his eyes.

"Oh, *of course* you started with that one," he grumbled. "Can't let anyone else say anything important, can you?"

"*Huh?* Then where would you have started?" Jin Ling indignantly snapped back.

"Hanguang-jun, of course!"

Lan Sizhui laughed, “We’re discussing how things in that world might go wrong; I doubt Hanguang-jun will change much from what was shown. The Lans will put up more defenses to prevent the burning of the Cloud Recesses, but there isn’t anything else for him to do.”

“No, no, don’t you see?” Ouyang Zizhen stood up. “He’s going to fall even more in love with Senior Wei!”

Hanguang-jun nodded once in agreement, while Wei Wuxian broke into open laughter.

“Zizhen, that’s very sweet of you,” he complimented. “Unfortunately, the baby-Hanguang-jun and I haven’t met yet in that world.”

“It doesn’t matter!” Zizhen ferociously shook his head. “Learning about you is all it will take! Now he’ll understand why you started demonic cultivation, so as soon as he lays eyes on your younger self he’ll pick him up off the ground and carry him to the Cloud Recesses and get married on the spot!”

As Ouyang Zizhen gazed into the distance with a far-off look in his eyes, Wei Wuxian’s laughter became so strong that he practically tipped over.

(All the while, Lan Xichen remained frozen. This was the second time he had left seclusion in the past six months; the loud laugher was startling.)

“Zizhen, if the little-Lan Zhan does that, Lan Qiren’s going to hate me more than ever-”

“Won’t matter,” Lan Wangji declared. “I don’t care.”

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian shouted, pinching his husband’s cheek. “Where on earth is this unfilial child coming from. Come now, Hanguang-jun’s supposed to be the most honorable person ever! You can’t say something like that!”

“Can.”

“Lan Zhan!”

“Wait, Hanguang-jun,” Sizhui looked back and forth. “You-you think what Zizhen said is a *possibility?*”

The high pitched squeak of Sizhui’s question contrasting against the hopeful exuberance on Lan Jingyi and Ouyang Zizhen made Wei Wuxian laugh even harder. It was nice that the kids didn’t seem especially bothered by what they had seen anymore.

“...No,” Lan Wangji responded once his cheek was released. “My younger self will know better than to do that.”

Than to copy their father, Lan Xichen acknowledged.

Jin Guangyao’s face flashed into his mind.

“Xiongzhang?”

Lan Xichen flinched.

“Ah, yes?” he asked, forcing his mind out of the dark corner of thoughts it had been trapped in.

Frowning in sympathy, Wei Wuxian asked, “If your younger self was given knowledge of everything the Wens did through the Massacre of Lotus Pier, how do you expect yourself and Lan Qiren to react?”

After a moment of thought, Zewu-jun responded, “It’s made much more difficult by the fact that the Wens are there. If they weren’t, I would expect the Lan, Nie, Jiang, and Jin Clans to follow Da-ge in launching a preemptive strike, knowing that we lost a significant portion of our army simply delaying the conflict. Now that they’re there, however… I assume the four other clans will join together to create an alliance that would discourage the Wen from attacking.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, feeling like that was a safe bet.

“Though it’s really too bad,” Jingyi sighed.

“Oh, what is it *now?!*’ Jin Ling snapped.

“And what’s that supposed to mean? I don’t complain all the time!”

“No, but when you *do* complain, it’s never about anything important-”

“Hey!” Zizhen interjected. “Hanguang-jun and senior Wei’s relationship *is* important!”

“Guys,” Lan Sizhui coughed, glancing around at the three highly bemused adults watching them.

“Uh, right,” Jingyi sat up straighter. “What I was going to say before *someone* rudely interrupted-”

Jin Ling huffed.

“-was that it’s too bad that other world’s Sect Leader Nie and Chifeng-jun didn’t stay longer. They don’t know he’s going to die or how.”

Lan Xichen *flinched*.

(Right. That was what he was risking in wanting to keep Meng Yao alive. But the young Meng Yao hadn’t done anything yet. But he might.)

Wei Wuxian laughed again, waving away their worries, “Don’t worry about that. The adults are taking care of it.”

He wasn’t sure whether or not to be insulted when all four juniors levied highly skeptical looks at him.

“What about the Jiangs?” Hanguang-jun asked, hoping to move the conversation back on topic.

“Well, they’ll put up much better defenses, for one,” Jin Ling proudly declared, head raised high. “And they’ll all obviously be much more protective of each other.”

“Yeah,” Wei Wuxian agreed, then frowned as Madam Yu flashed into his mind. “The only thing I’m worried about is whether or not they’ll want to kill my younger self when they get out.”

“*What?*” Sizhui gasped out. “Why would they want to kill you?!”

Wei Wuxian laughed, “Remember the whole ‘Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation thing?’”

“Well, that’s stupid,” Jin Ling humffed. “We all know you’re a good person, and anyone who’s watched that much of your life will definitely agree. And-and besides, they’ll all know *why* you invented it, so….”

The Burial Mounds flashed into the juniors’ minds, and, with that, came the way Wei Wuxian had *broken down in panic* when Lan Wangji approached because fierce corpses had been attacking on all sides-

“Alright, enough of that,” Wei Wuxian clapped his hands together loudly, shocking the juniors (and Zewu-jun) out of the memories they had all found themselves in.

(At ‘kill my younger self’ Lan Xichen’s mind had become overwhelmed by the possibilities of what Jin Guangshan would do to Meng Yao.)

“Wei-gongzi,” he spoke up. “What do you think… the Jins will do?”

Wei Wuxian paused here and glanced at Jin Ling as if debating with himself on how much to say.

“Don’t hold back,” Jin Ling ordered. “Just give me the truth. I can take it.”

“Can you though?” Jingyi whispered.

He got three simultaneous smacks from Sizhui, Jin Ling, and Zizhen at that.

Thinking it over, Wei Wuxian hummed then responded, “Well, starting with the easy ones, it seems like your parents as even closer now that they were at this point in our time.”

A blanket of relief seemed to settle over the juniors at that.

(At least one good thing would come out of what they did.)

“I’m sure, just like Madam Yu, Madam Jin will be much more protective of her child after watching this.”

Nothing specifically bad had happened to Zixuan yet, but he was still brought to the Wen indoctrination camp and had gotten into a significant amount of danger even before the Xuanwu showed up.

Then, remembering what Madam Yu's last words to him had been — what Jiang Cheng had shouted while choking him — he felt a shiver run up his spine.

"There's also… a chance of there being some tension between the Jiang and Jin houses after this."

Now, even Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen were staring at him in confusion.

"Didn't you literally just say my parents were getting along better?"

"Yeah, I'm just worried about how your Grandparents will feel about each other."

"...Oooooh."

"Yeah," Zizhen nodded. "Even without seeing the worst of what he did, no one can deny how disgusting Jin Guangshan is! The former Sect Leader Jiang must be outraged by him, right?"

Wei Wuxian decided not to comment on the matter.

"So," Lan Xichen glanced over. "You don't think Jin Guangshan will be especially different once he gets out?"

Wei Wuxian nodded, "All he knows is what the Wens did, not what his future self had planned. It's hard to tell whether he'll try to side with Wen Ruohan or with the Sunshot Campaign once they get out, but I figure he'll try to remain neutral. At most, he'll want to kill me like he did at the end of my last life."

"Not recruit you?"

"Since everyone saw the same thing, it'd be way too obvious if he tried to."

With every word Wei Wuxian spoke, Lan Wangji seemed to get more and more tense. He refused to allow Wei Wuxian to die, regardless of which Wei Wuxian it was.

"Anyways," Zizhen coughed. "We talked about the Jiangs, the Jins, the Nie, and the Lan. Only one Great Sect left to talk about!"

"Wow, I'm surprised you remembered them this time."

The juniors flinched. They knew Wei Wuxian had a right to be angry — they had specifically told him that only the Jiang, Jin, Nie, and Lan were inside the simulation — but it still stung.

"A-anyways," Jin Ling barreled forward. "Like I said, Wen Ruohan's obviously going to want to kill you."

"Probably," Wei Wuxian agreed.

“What about Wen Qing?” Lan Sizhui asked. “Will she be okay?”

“No, Wen Ruohan’s going to want her dead too,” Wei Wuxian revealed, and, upon seeing a dozen shocked eyes, elaborated, “She and Wen Ning save me and Jiang Cheng during the Massacre of Lotus Pier.”

“She did?” Lan Sizhui asked, voice breaking in emotion. The expression on Jin Ling’s face was simultaneously shocked into silence and annoyed at himself for not realizing that sooner.

“Jiujiu never told me,” Jin Ling muttered.

“Well, don’t worry too much. Luckily, we have a few things working to our advantage there” Wei Wuxian assured them. “No one knows what the simulation has done, so if Wen Ruohan instantly tries to kill Wen Qing upon waking up, it’ll be assumed that he was corrupted by the resentful energy and he’ll be stopped — Chief Cultivator or not. I told my younger self they’ll need to be in separate rooms for the ‘forced ejection’ to work, so Wen Qing will have plenty of time to escape before Wen Ruohan realizes.”

“But…” Sizhui frowned. “Is there nothing else we can do?”

“Not really,” Wei Wuxian responded with a sigh.

“We can’t enter that world,” Lan Wangji reminded them. “If we ask Wei Ying’s younger self for too much, he’ll stop trusting us completely.”

“Well, luckily, little-me has basically no experience with resentful energy, so it should be fine,” Wei Wuxian shrugged. “Honestly, it’s a good thing you messed up and didn’t manage to put little-me inside the simulation. We never would have known what was happening then.”

Another wave of guilt seemed to settle over the juniors, and they looked towards the ground in embarrassment.

“Will your younger self face any concerning problems?” Lan Xichen asked, staring directly at Wei Wuxian. “After all, the people inside the simulation will have spent around a week learning everything about you.”

“Remember, time’s slower in there. The amount of content they’ve watched is probably only around 10 hours or so, not a full week.”

“Still.”

When Wei Wuxian seemed to hesitate, Lan Wangji moved forward to nod, “I expect it will be. If nothing else, the people who had never met Wei Ying before will now be fairly familiar with him, while he still won’t know them. That will be easy enough to fix, but when they first wake up it may seem like a problem.”

“Yeah, but a little confusion like that will be good for him,” Wei Wuxian decided. “He kept asking me questions about why I wanted to let everyone out, so it seems like becoming substitute Sect Leader has made little-me get a bit uppity lately.”

“You always have been.”

“*Lan Zhan!*” Wei Wuxian leaned over, disbelieving laughter lighting his face up. “What is this?! *Betrayal* from my *own husband?!*”

“No,” Lan Wangji responded. “You are perfect just the way you are.”

“No, no, I’m not falling for it! First the thing with Lan Qiren and now this? Who are you and what have you done with my Lan Zhan?!”

He reached forward and began squishing Hanguang-jun’s cheeks again.

“Um, Senior Wei?” Lan Sizhui asked.

“What is it, my darling, most-favoritest radish?” Wei Wuxian asked, not looking away from where he was alternating between squeezing and pulling Lan Wangji’s cheeks.

“Are we done with the, um… ‘Operation: Figure out How Wrong This Has Gone’ end discussion?”

“Sure. Unless you have more to say?”

“No. It’s just… we…” he blushed deeply. “Jingyi, Jin Ling, Zizhen, and I wanted to apologize.”

Wei Wuxian froze and finally looked over.

“Apologize?” he repeated, as if not understanding the word. For a moment, in Sizhui’s place, he saw Wen Qing gazing back at him with warm, regretful eyes.

‘Thank you,’ she had whispered. ‘I’m sorry.’

Seeing his husband’s reaction, Lan Wangji reached forward and rested his hand on top of Wei Wuxian’s.

“W-well,” Jin Ling flushed. “We all went out and got you something, so you better be grateful!”

“My present is the best,” Lan Jingyi instantly declared.

“Excuse me?!” Jin Ling roared back.

“How dare you?” Zizhen added. “Wait until you see what I got-”

“It’s not a competition,” Sizhui protested.

“”””””Yes it is,””””” Jin Ling, Jingyi, Zizhen, and Wei Wuxian decided. Beside them, the twin jades looked at Sizhui and slowly shook their heads, silently telling him this was a battle he could never hope to win.

Sizhui reluctantly backed off.

As he watched the juniors gleefully hand their Senior Wei the gifts under his brother's watchful eye, Zewu-jun felt something in his heart throb. How long had it been since he had last seen something like this? Since when had the comforting, thoughtful silence of seclusion turned *oppressive?*

In what ways was seclusion actually helping him?

He looked away, unable to watch the idealistic scene any longer.

Chapter End Notes

Before you all angrily rush to the comments, please give me a moment to explain. Yes, I know the book is amazing. Yes, I know it does a better job of showing how much Wei Wuxian has changed. Yes, I know what the donghua did doesn't really make sense. Yes, I just made up an explanation for how Wei Wuxian was able to remove a core. Do I care? Not one bit!

(In other words, the book is probably objectively better, but I refuse to miss out on the way the donghua did Wei Wuxian's return. Sorry, but I'm a slave to the rule of cool when it comes to Wifi.)

:)

Absolutely Nothing Happened — a Defense by Lan Wangji

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Never in his life had A-Lu been so furious. Not only was he being left behind while his Da-shixiong went to the inner sect conference, but the preteen Jiang disciple hadn't even been given a role to help with the preparations! Even his sister — who, mind you, was the *same age* as him — had been given the job of testing out the swords that would be brought along.

He could have helped her test out the swords. But no, just because he'd broken a few of them — less than five! — Wei Wuxian hadn't asked him to help.

Now, the need for vengeance running through A-Lu's veins had overpowered all else.

With confident steps (that may or may not have been stomping) he entered the room where the unconscious Sect Leader Jiang was being treated (the other Jiangs having been moved to different rooms just in case Mo Xuanyu's request about the need for separate rooms was correct). Normally, seeing his Sect Leader's unconscious body filled A-Lu with a sense of powerlessness and despair.

Now, it doubled his anger.

"…. the presentation should go over the way we contacted Mo Xuanyu. If we don't, everyone's going to throw a fit," Wei Wuxian decided, marking something down.

"But… but won't it bother Mo-gongzi if every sect starts sending him messages?"

"Just because we tell them how to do it doesn't mean they'll be able to actually make the array," Wei Wuxian pointed out with a smug grin. "Can't accuse me of hiding anything then~"

A deep scowl fell onto A-Lu's face. There he was! And his Da-shixiong wasn't even commenting on the loud stomping A-Lu was possibly doing through the hallway. He didn't even look over!

With another set of maybe-stomps, A-Lu marched over to where Wei Wuxian was speaking with Wen Ning and sat himself down on the head disciple's lap.

"No, the strange things they've said about Mo Xuanyu probably don't need to be in the official report. Wen Xu will be there, won't he? We can just ask him about that," Wei Wuxian continued, unfaltering even after A-Lu sat on his lap. If it weren't for the hand Wei Wuxian wrapped around his waist to keep him from falling over, A-Lu would have wondered if he'd somehow become an invisible ghost in the last half hour.

"But Young Master Wei…." Wen Ning got quiet. "He… Wen Xu hasn't answered any of our letters on what he saw inside. He keeps dancing around the-the subject."

“Just like the rest of the watchers.”

“...Just like the rest of the watchers,” Wen Ning hesitantly confirmed.

“Then I think it would be in our best interests to not let him figure out how much we suspect him. If we can find a hint based off his reactions, then we’ll get a much better picture of what’s going on.”

Infuriated at being ignored, A-Lu began to wiggle around in Wei Wuxian’s lap indignantly. In response, Wei Wuxian began running his fingers through A-Lu’s hair, which appeased the boy more than he was willing to admit.

He leaned back against Wei Wuxian’s chest, content to relax as Wei Wuxian’s hand patted his head.

“But… wouldn’t it be best to just tell him?” Wen Ning asked. “It seems like everyone’s keeping secrets for no reason.”

“Well if they’re not telling us, I’m not telling them,” Wei Wuxian responded cheekily.

“Yes, but… what if they have a good reason? We don’t know why they’re doing this.”

Wei Wuxian took on a serious expression, “My current theory is that, right now, a terrifying dragon fish is holding us all hostage. If they reveal it to us, the whole country will be swallowed whole! The only way we’ll be able to help them is by figuring things out for ourselves and rescuing the dragon fish’s weakness, an enormous pearl, from the bottom of the ocean! It will be a difficult and dangerous mission, but we have *no choice.*”

“*Really?*” A-Lu turned to ask, fear easily apparent in both his and Wen Ning’s faces.

“Well, it’d be interesting if that were the case, right?”

“Young Master Wei!” Wen Ning whined, deflating abruptly at the realization that Wei Wuxian had just been making it up. A-Lu joined him in pouting.

“You shouldn’t lie, Da-shixiong,” he grumbled.

“But the conference is going to be so *boring!*” Wei Wuxian dramatically sighed. “Say, how many people do you think I would trick if I started my report to the other sects with that? I bet I could make Wen Xu go along with it if I really tried.”

“A-Yue says conferences are serious,” A-Lu interrupted, still bitter that he and his sister couldn’t go because of that.

“And A-Yue doesn’t have to know, does she?” Wei Wuxian asked, reaching down to tickle the boy in his lap. A high-pitched squeal cut through Wen Ning’s ears as A-Lu tried to escape Wei Wuxian’s hands.

“Young Master Wei?” Wen Ning shouted, trying to be heard over A-Lu’s laughter.

“Yeah?”

“What would you want to find out from Young Master Wen?”

At that question, Wei Wuxian paused in his tickling, glancing over at Wen Ning out of the corner of his eyes. In Wei Wuxian’s half-second of hesitation, it suddenly occurred to Wen Ning that, while Wei Wuxian didn’t trust the people inside the simulation, he might have just as much reason to not trust Wen Ning.

He was practically asking Wen Ning to go against his current sect leader, after all. What assurance did he have that Wen Ning wasn’t in on the secret already and just at Lotus Pier to spy?

Finally: “...Remember? During the last call, I asked them about Mo Xuanyu, and nearly got an answer from Jiang Cheng before Huaisang warned him. Jiang Cheng tried to amend his answer to be ‘the guy who dresses like Wei Wuxian,’ but that’s….”

Wen Ning nodded and breathed out a relieved gasp, grateful that Wei Wuxian had trusted him with that. He would take anything he could get, but the belief lifted a weight off his chest that he hadn’t even known was there.

Coughing to clear his throat, Wei Wuxian continued, “They also mentioned how his bright red hair ribbon matches mine, and I *never* told them anything about that.”

So they knew something about Mo Xuanyu that they weren’t saying.

“...How can I help?” Wen Ning asked. Wei Wuxian had defended him when disciples from his own sect were harassing him; even if Wei Wuxian hadn’t been the amazing, brilliant person Wen Ning had come to know, Wen Ning would want to help out.

“I-I can help too!” A-Lu rushed to say. A smile returned to Wei Wuxian’s face, and he pulled A-Lu close to his chest.

“I guess how you help will depend on what we do to get information from Wen Xu. On one hand, I’d love to just be able to interrogate him until he answers, but that’s… probably not going to go over well.”

“Could we just ask him to explain what’s going on inside?”

“I mean… we *could*.”

“...But?”

A shrug, “Like you said: he just keeps avoiding the details when asked.”

As the two teenagers thought to themselves, A-Lu turned to look back and forth between them. Their faces were frowning in concentration, and the hand Wei Wuxian had been running through his hair had stopped completely. After watching them for a bit, he spoke.

“Why don’t you just get Mo Xuanyu to tell him to tell you?” A-Lu asked.

“Ah, it’s a little more complicated than that,” Wen Ning responded. “He’s probably not an enemy, but….”

There were so many reasons asking for that wouldn’t work that Wen Ning wasn’t even sure where to *start* explaining. He had hoped Wei Wuxian would do it, but, to his surprise, Wei Wuxian seemed to be contemplating the suggestion instead.

“Wei-gongzi?” he asked.

Two thoughtful silver eyes glanced up at him again, assessing the trustworthiness Wen Ning had shown. Right now, as the sole defender of Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian knew he had to be careful.

Could he trust the innocent act Wen Ning was putting on?

‘The Jiangs will need a place to come back to,’ Wen Ning had pointed out, desperate to stop Wei Wuxian from trying demonic cultivation again. ‘Please… please don’t.’

Wen Ning had begged him to stop. It was true that Mo Xuanyu and the watchers hadn’t wanted him to do much demonic cultivation either, but….

Wen Ning’s request was only around his safety. Everything they could figure out without causing danger to themselves, Wen Ning had supported him in.

Wei Wuxian looked down at A-Lu and said, “What if we lied? Not a lot — not so much that we could be accused of anything if the truth was found out — but just stretch the truth a bit. Mo Xuanyu told us to take the watchers out. The Sect Leaders told us not to do that, but Wen Xu doesn’t know that. And the instructions we got were to do it without checking with the people inside, so… maybe revealing what we’re planning on doing will be enough.”

“It probably will!” Wen Ning lit up. “Wei-gongzi, you’re a genius!”

“Of course I am!” he glanced down. “Though it’s really all thanks to my wonderful assistant over here, right?”

“Right,” A-Lu responded, preening despite not being entirely sure what Wei Wuxian was talking about.

Oh, well. He’d just have to ask for stories once the head disciple got back from the conference. If it was going to be a bunch of talking like this, he supposed he’d be okay with being left behind so long as Wei Wuxian brought him a few souvenirs from his trip.

Wei Wuxian looked around the Jingshi and frowned, recalling how he had gotten there.

“Don’t bother with him,” Hanguang-jun had said. “Let him cry. When he becomes tired, drag him in.”

Lan Qiren breathed out sharply through his nose, and Lan Wangji clenched his fists.

“Where to?” Lan Jingyi asked.

“...The Jingshi.”

“Jingshi?!” Lan Xichen repeated. The Jingshi.

Wangji’s bedroom.

Lan Xichen had recognized it as the place Wei Wuxian was inside at the end of the last segment, but-

“Woah! Hey-I — hold on!” Wei Wuxian protested as the juniors dragged him away. The disbelief on the juniors’ faces was clear but unsurprising given the unusual situation.

The Jingshi was Lan Wangji’s private room where no one else was allowed to enter. Even the cleaning was done by Lan Wangji alone. And, above all else, it was his *bedroom*.

Looking back and forth between his uncle and brother, Lan Xichen saw that they were reacting similarly to how he was.

They were angry — they knew this was far too much like Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen’s father — and yet, now, they could see how complicated the situation actually was.

The last segment, just like the end of the second segment, featured Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji arguing over which sect Wei Wuxian would return to. Last time, Lan Wangji had respected Wei Wuxian’s distrust and backed off.

(And then Wei Wuxian had died.)

And had the Yiling Patriarch version of Wei Wuxian wanted to go back to the Jiang Sect either? Given the way he had put off returning for so long, Lan Xichen was inclined to say ‘no.’ The same had been true during the second segment in the thirteen years later future.

While Lan Xichen had trouble believing that the future Jiang Cheng would *actually* have tortured his brother, he probably would have insisted on Wei Wuxian coming back to his sect. Clearly, the adult Lan Wangji’s decision was much more complicated than it had initially appeared to be.

(Though, to his right, he could see his real brother internally and viciously cursing the simulated Hanguang-jun for his actions.)

When they finally arrived, Lan Jingyi turned to Wei Wuxian and shouted, “Hanguang-jun isn’t here right now, so don’t you dare touch anything! Do you hear me?”

Wei Wuxian just laughed, “Ah, young man, that’s so troublesome. Why don’t you just let me go?”

“He really is back to normal,” Nie Huaisang muttered, and Nie Mingjue nodded in agreement. The sudden flip from the Yiling Patriarch to the Yiling Patriarch post-death was shocking, and yet didn’t seem like an act.

(This one was the Wei Wuxian they had gotten to know. The Yiling Patriarch was practically a stranger by comparison.)

In response to Wei Wuxian's request, Lan Jingyi scoffed: "If Hanguang-jun wants you to stay, you stay. Besides, it's not like you can get out regardless of what we do!"

And that was true; without a jade token, it was impossible to enter and exit the Cloud Recesses. Although they were treating him almost carelessly, Wei Wuxian was a prisoner in all but name.

Lan Wangji clenched his fists.

Noticing continued silent (but half-hearted) attempts to escape them, Jingyi snapped, "Didn't you hear me?"

"I did. I did. I just think-"

"Just get in already!" Lan Jingyi told Wei Wuxian as he and Sizhui shoved him inside. Before Wei Wuxian could get off the ground, the door had been slammed closed.

As the door was closed, Lan Wangji couldn't help but momentarily see the silent walls of the Gentian House his mother had once resided in.

'*Prisoner,*' his mind whispered. '*You did this.*'

Though, having seen Wei Wuxian's full power, the watchers knew he was more than capable of taking one of the kids hostage or stealing a token, should it be necessary. Wei Wuxian was worried about what the Cloud Recesses would do to him considering he was a demonic cultivator, but not so much so that he was genuinely trying to escape. It was more a casual annoyance at how his travels had been delayed.

(This version of Wei Wuxian would never put the juniors in danger.)

(And this Hanguang-jun had known that.)

Frowning to himself, Nie Huaisang couldn't help but wonder if the Yiling Patriarch was truly as different from the normal Wei Wuxian as he first appeared to be.

After a moment's pause, Wei Wuxian walked closer to the door again. It was faint, but he could hear Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi still talking outside the walls.

If he was going to sneak out, now was not the time.

With an exaggerated sigh, Wei Wuxian laid himself down and closed his eyes, waiting for an opportunity to arise.

Wen Qing supposed she was glad that Wei Wuxian had at least gotten some sleep. Considering that he had been whipped by Zidian just a few hours ago — and the fact that Mo Xuanyu's body was surely much weaker than a body whose core had managed to *seal his sword* — she was sure he had been exhausted.

‘*Has he been getting enough rest out there?*’ she wondered, glancing up. ‘*A-Ning better be keeping a close eye on him.*’

Having remembered how he had gotten there, Wei Wuxian stretched his arms and stood up, glancing around.

‘*I need to get out of here,*’ he thought. ‘*When I summoned Wen Ning on Dafan Mountain, he obviously wasn’t conscious. I need to meet up with him and figure out what happened.*’

“...He seemed like a pretty normal fierce corpse to me,” Jiang Cheng commented disgruntally. The whiplash between the different versions of Wei Wuxian was getting exhausting.

Wei Wuxian turned to step outside the door, only to pause and sniff the air.

“Sandalwood?” he asked. “This is… what Lan Zhan smells like.”

A high pitched squeal came from Nie Huaisang as he stood up and turned to Lan Wangji, pointing excitedly at Wei Wuxian. Unable to resist, Madam Jin joined him in smiling at the comment.

However, underneath his reddening ears, Lan Wangji couldn’t say he was happy. After all, during the last segment, Wei Wuxian had quite clearly rejected his help. He wasn’t wanted.

(He couldn’t let himself think that this was a sign of Wei Wuxian liking him. He wouldn’t make that mistake again.)

Curiosity piqued, Wei Wuxian began to explore the Jingshi — Lan Wangji’s *room* — until he stumbled upon an incense pot. Picking it up, he brought it close and inhaled deeply.

Jin Guangshan brought his eyes up and down to give Wei Wuxian a long, assessing look.

Right as he stepped forward to put the jar down, Wei Wuxian heard an odd thump from the wooden floor tiles. He set the incense down completely and repeated the motion.

Another thump.

Lan Wangji stepped closer, wondering what the cause could be.

Frowning cautiously, Wei Wuxian bent down and removed the loose floor tile. His eyes widened in shock.

“*What?!*” Lan Qiren screeched.

“Emperor’s smile?” Wei Wuxian revealed, recognizing the contents of the seven jars just by the smell. A moment later, overjoyed laughter erupted from his chest as he dropped onto the bed behind him, the ends of his hair gliding down playfully.

A blinding, ecstatic smile lit up his face like it was the sun.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, you hypocrite. You told me off for smuggling wine, but now you’re hiding some in your room!”

“Wangji!” Lan Qiren shouted scoldingly.

“I apologize, Uncle,” Lan Wangji bowed lowly, shaking despite his forcefully calmed tone. “I don’t have any now, and I won’t allow myself to fall to-”

“I certainly hope not!” Lan Qiren continued, too shocked to remember the rule regarding interrupting. “With this and Wei Wuxian, why you… *you*....”

“Uncle,” Lan Xichen spoke up. “Perhaps we should wait a little longer before deciding anything. We’ve already seen how wrong we were when we tried doing that to Wei Wuxian; we don’t even know if he’s ever tried to drink them.”

“Of course he has! Why else would he have-”

Lan Qiren froze. The initial shock of the revelation had been too much for him to think properly, but now that he was taking a moment, the answer became obvious.

Emperor’s Smile.

Just like-

Wei Wuxian picked one of the jars up and began drinking from it gleefully. A small stream of alcohol flowed down his neck towards his barely-covered collarbones.

Just like it had his first night in the Cloud Recesses.

Like a river had washed it away, the cheer and disbelief that had spread across the kids vanished. Jin Zixuan looked down, Jiang Cheng scowled, Nie Huaisang frowned, and Lan Wangji froze.

Yes, Wei Wuxian stealing some of *Lan Wangji’s* alcohol was a hilarious concept, but, looking at it now, all it served to do was remind them of the fact that Wei Wuxian had *died.*

Jiang Yanli unconsciously clasped her hands together, forcing herself to breathe deeply.

From outside, a muted voice observed, “You don’t look very good. Did you have trouble during training?”

“Recently I’ve been struggling a bit,” a second voice agreed. “It’s been hard for me to concentrate.”

“Maybe you should ask the masters for some additional help.”

At those words, realization flashed through Wei Wuxian’s expression.

‘*The cold springs!*’ he thought.

“...What?”

The cold springs used to calm cultivator’s minds and help with meditation, so it was no surprise that Wei Wuxian had made a connection between it and the spoken words.

But that didn’t explain the look on his face.

With a worryingly conniving smirk, Wei Wuxian stood up completely and began refilling the jars he’d emptied with water. He sealed them, put them back inside, and recovered the floorboard.

By now, even Nie Huaisang was impressed by Wei Wuxian’s shamelessness. On the other hand, Madam Yu scoffed at the scene and rolled her eyes.

(If some part of her was grateful that Wei Wuxian was back to his normal self, no one had to know but her.)

Once he could no longer hear the passing footsteps, Wei Wuxian opened the door and sneaked out.

‘*Everyone in the Gusu Lan Sect has a jade token for passage through the barrier. You need to take off your clothes to get in the cold spring. No one would bother carrying the token with them after they’ve taken off their clothes, would they?*’

Growling, Lan Qiren cursed, “Shameless, unruly, undisciplined-”

‘*But he wouldn’t have to do any of that if the Lans weren’t keeping him prisoner, would he?*’

Prisoner wasn’t exactly the right word, but it was close enough that Lan Qiren’s infuriated mind wasn’t willing to bother considering the distinction between the two.

Silent as a mouse, Wei Wuxian walked down the paths with an easy confidence that discouraged people from questioning him. If anyone found his dark robes or unfamiliar face strange, the unworried look on Wei Wuxian’s face stopped them from asking any questions.

Mostly.

“Young Master Mo!” Lan Sizhui greeted.

After having spent so long hearing that voice only as a narrator, it was indescribably strange to hear it being spoken by the actual person again.

“Ah… Sizhui, was it?” Wei Wuxian smiled, carefully not showing the internal annoyance he was undoubtedly experiencing. “What are you two doing here?”

“Ah, Lianfeng-zun invited Zewu-jun to Jinlintai for a discussion. Hanguang-jun is seeing him off.”

A pause.

“Who?” Jin Zixuan asked.

“Lianfeng-zun?” Wei Wuxian repeated.

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember him?” Lan Jingyi demanded with an incredulous expression. “He’s the leader of the Jin Clan! He’s also your half-brother!”

“S-sect Leader?”

Frozen, Jin Zixuan was barely able to notice the way Jiang Yanli moved closer to him, her beautiful eyes wide with concern. His mother, who was clenching her teeth tightly enough to crack diamond, also went unnoticed.

In some ways, this shouldn’t have been a surprise. Jin Zixuan had already known he was going to die, and they were told in the second segment that Jin Guangshan was dead in this 20-years-later future. Of course someone else had been made Sect Leader; one of his half brothers was the best option.

But he had also been told from birth that the title would one day be his. Hearing it belong to someone else….

Seeing the unrecognition on “Mo Xuanyu’s” face, Lan Jingyi heaved a large sigh.

“Jin Ling did say you went mad and lost your memory. I guess he was telling the truth.”

And that was another interesting point. As Nie Huaisang furrowed his eyebrows, he thought over what they knew of the actual Mo Xuanyu. Kicked out of the Jin Sect for harassing someone and sent to his abusive, non-cultivating family.

(So then where had he gotten the instructions for the ressurection ritual? No normal disciple would have access to that.)

As Nie Huaisang continued to ponder over the mystery that was Mo Xuanyu, the simulation brought them through the Cloud Recesses. They passed towering stone staircases, tall, twisted trees, and serene, exquisite buildings, all the way to the base of the Cloud Recesses, where Hanguang-jun stood across from his brother.

“Xiongzhang, are you going to Lanlinjin to visit Lianfeng-jun?” Lan Wangji asked.

Lan Xichen nodded, “A-Yao wants to negotiate about the next discussion conference at Koi tower.”

“‘A-Yao?’” Nie Mingjue repeated, mystified. Lan Xichen shook his head at his friend, indicating that he didn’t currently know anyone who went by that name.

However, given the context, everyone could assume that “A-Yao” and “Lianfeng-zun” were one and the same.

‘*The bastard who stole my position,*’ Jin Zixuan thought.

A second later, he flinched back, horrified at himself. His mother had warned him for years that it was a possibility he needed to look out for, but…

That didn’t mean it was a valid reaction for him to have. After all, hadn’t Wei Wuxian unjustly been forced to face similar comments from Madam Yu?

He paused, then shook his head.

‘*What am I doing?*’ he wondered. ‘*I don’t know anything about him. Besides, I’m already dead in this reality; what right do I have to feel offended? That doesn’t make any sense.*’

His eyes turned to the side, and, as he looked at his father, he suddenly remembered the man’s quiet comments about Wei Wuxian’s new look. How if they’d chained him up somewhere-

Some ungrateful, disrespectful, unfaithful part of Jin Zixuan couldn’t help but laugh, ‘*It doesn’t matter who Lianfeng-zun is. He might not have gotten trained for the position his whole life, but the Jin Sect is obviously still thriving. It’s probably fine.*’

A pause.

‘*It’s not like he can be any worse than our father.*’

“What are you going to do with the arm you brought back?” Lan Xichen asked, allowing the watchers to recall the powerful limb that had appeared in the first segment.

Here, finally, Lan Wangji’s neutral expression gained a slightly stern tone.

“The arm is dangerous,” Lan Wangji responded. “According to Sizhui and Jingyi, the timing of its appearance is also unnatural. There’s a chance that someone deliberately brought it to Mo Village.”

And there was also a chance that whoever brought it had known Wei Wuxian would be resurrected at that time. Nie Huaisang had to admit that he was impressed; if someone was actually behind everything that had happened, their capabilities should not be underestimated.

(Not that he would know anything about that.)

“I will join the elders tomorrow to try and summon its owner,” Lan Wangji explained. “We’ll see if we can find something.”

Just then, Wei Wuxian, Lan Sizhui, and Lan Jingyi appeared in the watchers’ lines of sight. Apparently the mention of Lan Xichen’s plans had piqued Wei Wuxian’s interest to the point where he was delaying his search for a token.

As soon as he saw Lan Xichen, a smirk formed on Wei Wuxian’s face.

A foreboding shiver ran up Lan Qiren's spine.

'*Perfect,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Gusu-Lan places a lot of importance on seniority. If I horrify Lan Xichen, not even Hanguang-jun will be enough to keep me from being kicked out!*'

"Oh, no," Jiang Cheng rubbed his temples, mentally preparing himself for what was to come.

However, right as he moved to open his mouth, Lan Wangji glanced over and Wei Wuxian's lips were sealed shut.

"Huh?"

When muted sounds of distress began to escape Wei Wuxian's sealed lips it became clear what had happened. Lan Wangji had cast the silencing spell on Wei Wuxian.

Nie Huaisang snorted, then fell over in full-blown laughter.

"Wangji-xiong, would you look at that. You kept being caught off guard by Wei-xiong, but your older-self can predict his every move!"

Lan Wangji did his best to not show the way that realization created a strange flutter of happiness within him.

Noticing what Lan Wangji had done, Lan Xichen gave an amused smile before undoing the silencing charm with a wave of his hand.

"It's not often that you bring guests home, and it's even more rare for you to be so happy about it," Lan Xichen commented. "Treat him with courtesy, Wangji."

There was a long pause.

"...Happy?" Jiang Fengmian checked, half-sure he had misheard. Looking at the perfectly neutral face of the adult Lan Wangji, it was clear that thirteen years had made Hanguang-jun's discipline *vastly* eclipse his teenage self's.

Even Wei Wuxian would surely struggle to get a reaction out of this version of Lan Wangji.

As Lan Wangji silently instructed the two disciples to drag Wei Wuxian back inside, the Yiling Patriarch expressed similar thoughts. No one but Lan Xichen could read Lan Wangji's expression.

The two juniors continued to follow Lan Wangji's orders, and Wei Wuxian cooperated with them without complaint. Soon, seeing his lack of struggle, Lan Jingyi began to speak. He rambled about the plans being made and the decisions at play, as well as the current political climate. To Wei Wuxian, who had been dead for the last thirteen years, and the watchers, who knew none of this, it was extremely informative.

"You know, Lianfeng-zun, Chifeng-zun, and Zewu-jun became sworn brothers after the Sunshot Campaign," Jingyi offhandedly mentioned.

"...What?"

"They're legendary masters known as the Venerated Triad!"

Gaping, Lan Xichen and Nie MIngjue turned to each other, making bewildered eye contact. There hadn't been much focus on them in the simulation so far, but it seemed like that was starting to change.

"Should I call you er-ge, then?" Nie Huaisang wondered, smiling widely.

"...I suppose that depends on Lianfeng-zun's age," Lan Xichen pointed out. "Or… 'A-Yao's,' I suppose."

Nie Mingjue gave a hearty laugh, unable to resist the smile forming on his face as well.

"It's such a pity that Chifeng-zun has passed away."

Nie Huaisang's grin froze.

"He died in his prime. It was a qi-deviation. Something went wrong while he was practicing."

Slowly, Nie Huaisang turned to look at his older brother.

Nie Mingjue's eyes were wide with the shock of how abruptly that had been revealed. He did a double take, analyzing Lan Jingyi's expression, and found nothing but honesty in it.

He took a deep breath, then opened his eyes.

In them, there wasn't fear, disbelief, or denial; just a tired, silent acceptance.

(A look so at ends with the battle-hungry, uncompromising person Nie Mingjue was supposed to be that Lan Xichen felt his blood halt abruptly.)

"It's a sad story," Jingyi concluded.

"...Da-ge?" Nie Huaisang asked.

Nie Mingjue shrugged, "Everyone dies eventually."

Even Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli — whose deaths had also been foretold — gaped in shock at him. Their parents, friends, siblings, and teachers all reacted the same.

Wen Ruohan couldn't resist the intrigued smirk that appeared on his face. He wondered if it was one of the natural, qi-deviation caused deaths of the Nies.

(Or if someone had planned it, just like he had planned Nie Mingjue's father's.)

After a pause, Sizhui added, "Back in the day, during the Siege of Nevernight, the four clans fought as one and battled for days."

The world around them shifted, reforming into a bloody battleground around the Nightless City.

“The final battle?” Wen Ruohan wondered.

“The Venerated Triad joined forces, and the battle was won.”

A large gate creaked open, revealing a room painted red with blood. There seemed to be countless corpses present, and not even the active ones Wei Wuxian used in his army. This area had already been taken care of.

The Yiling Patriarch stepped through the gate, his silver eyes apathetically taking stock of the scene before him. In his hand was Chenqing, not Suibian.

Instead, Suibian was with Jiang Cheng, who held the sword out for Wei Wuxian to take. Without speaking, the Yiling Patriarch reached forward.

And the vision faded away, leaving Wei Wuxian in Mo Xuanyu’s body grasping at nothing.

Throughout the simulation — the abyss, the rabbit, and the Yiling Patriarch’s arrival — the simulated Jiang Cheng had always returned the sword to his shixiong.

Where was it now?

“The battle… shook heaven and earth,” Sizhui solemnly concluded.

Not noticing the far-off look in Wei Wuxian’s eyes, Lan Jingyi nodded and added, “They say the water surrounding Qishan turned red and remained red for years!”

“Jingyi, you’re exaggerating things again.”

Lan Xichen smiled at the familiar antics.

“I’m not! Okay, maybe not years, but at least one year, alright?”

Wei Wuxian began to smile as well. He looked over at the clear, still lake beside the boardwalk they travelled on, trying to clear his mind of those thoughts.

Wen Ruohan frowned, annoyed at the lacking description of what had happened. Perhaps there would be more later.

“You know, the Yiling Patriarch was there.”

Wei Wuxian startled.

“Oh?” Wen Ruohan wondered.

“They say he used the Stygian Tiger Amulet to massacre the city in cold blood.”

Wei Wuxian looked down, and, in his reflection, the cold gaze of the Yiling Patriarch stared back at him, surrounded on all sides by brilliant fire and blood.

Then he blinked, and it was gone.

Knowing that the spirits had put in what Wei Wuxian was imagining at that time was somehow a very different sensation when they had experienced the effects of demonic cultivation first-hand. Yes, they weren't as fine-tuned as the spirits, but they could now understand how such a detailed image could be pulled from a demonic cultivator's thoughts.

The demonic cultivator was probably the hardest to ignore.

Jingyi sighed, "They say Wei Wuxian was a great warrior before he went astray. He was a cultivated gentleman, excelling in the six arts. What was he thinking when he chose the dark path?"

"It wasn't a choice," Lan Qiren whispered. And it hadn't been a choice; it had been a reaction. Wei Wuxian had been thrown into the Burial Mounds and had *reacted* when corpses attacked by subconsciously commanding them to stop. Yes, he should have switched back once he had escaped, but, after what he had been through, it would be no surprise if his mind was broken in more than one way.

~~And, because of Lan Qiren, he had refused the help Lan Wangji offered.~~

'*The Stygian Tiger Seal,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*That should never have been created.*'

Concern abruptly flooded Lan Wangji's body, and he recalled the battle it took to forge the seal in the first place. Considering the resistance it put up, he would not be surprised if the seal had been difficult for Wei Wuxian to control.

And the Wei Wuxian of the future, after death, regretted what he had done. That, more than anything, confirmed for the watchers that *this* was the Wei Wuxian they knew.

Then, as silently as ever, Wei Wuxian glanced over to where Sizhui and Jingyi were departing, not noticing that Wei Wuxian was lagging behind. They had been told to take him back inside, but, with his good behavior and seemingly lacking cultivation, they had dropped their guards.

Now, it was easy for Wei Wuxian to take a left and head back to the cold springs.

'*He's annoyingly good at reading people and responding accordingly,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*I'll have to keep a close eye on him when we get out.*'

As the sky darkened to a rouge-dusted orange, Wei Wuxian's black robes and red ribbon gave him an impeccable camouflage against the shadows of the forest. With everyone else wearing blindingly white robes, it was nearly impossible for someone not expecting him to notice him.

He snuck through the Cloud Recesses, collecting things for his journey.

Within minutes, the world had become a dull-blue dusk, and the walkways turned desolate. A gleaming ivory moon lit up the night sky as the ever-flowing rivers of gusu poured over the cliff edges. The water lilies and lilypads floating in the stream swayed with the rushing current. On land, the only motion was Little Apple, munching on some grass.

"Hello again, Little Apple," Jiang Yanli greeted warmly, and Jin Zixuan couldn't help but wave at the virtual donkey as well, flushing in embarrassment as he did.

A jar was rolled onto the ground in front of it.

"Lan Zhan was always so determined to capture and punish me," Wei Wuxian muttered, storing a few things he would take with him on LIttle Apple's back. "What's taking him so long?"

He patted Little Apple down, making sure the supplies he had stolen were secure.

"No, he'll probably come for me after he sorts out the severed arm. I'd better get going."

Remembering the broken look that had flashed across Wangji's face when Wei Wuxian had first accused him of that, Lan Xichen frowned deeply. Why were there so many obstacles in between his brother's relationship with Wei Wuxian? It seemed like every time they turned around a new challenge appeared.

"Alright, Little Apple. Let's go."

Wei Wuxian hadn't taken more than two steps before he was abruptly jerked back by teeth on his sleeve. With the stubbornness of a rock, Little Apple was holding tight.

"Yes, Little Apple!" Nie Huaisang cheered. "Keep them together! Make them meet!"

(If putting on a false act of cheer would lower his brother's guard, Nie Huaisang was more than willing to pretend he'd forgotten about Nie Mingjue's reaction to his *death* for the time being.)

"Huh?" Wei Wuxian asked, mouth open in shock as Little Apple grumpily turned its head away. "Seriously? Don't you think this place is boring? Why do you want to stay?"

The world 'boring' began to echo in Lan Wangji's mind without rest.

Wei Wuxian pouted and looked away.

'*This place is heavily guarded,*' he thought. '*Maybe I should get the token first, and pick up Little Apple later.*'

A playful smirk formed on his face.

Bouncing on the edge of his seat, Nie Huaisang impatiently awaited his friend's latest great scheme.

The moon was now high in the sky. As Wei Wuxian approached the brook, the tweets of birds were soon joined by the sound of tumbling waterfalls crashing into a lake below. Wei Wuxian continued confidently, grateful that the rebuilt part of the Cloud Recesses had been made identical to how it was before the Sunshot Campaign.

Once he arrived, he heard a slight, unnatural splash.

'*Is someone inside already? Perfect!*'

Lan Qiren sighed once again, dreading the shameless act to come.

(But at least Wei Wuxian seemed to be back to his normal self. He would gladly accept this disgraceful but altogether harmless behavior from the boy to maintain that.)

The disciple on duty at the cold spring was quite a ways away, and female cultivators didn't come to this section of the Cloud Recesses to use it. Nobody in the Lan Sect would ever consider watching someone bathe anyways, so the security wasn't especially tight.

Then again, peeping wasn't Wei Wuxian's goal either.

'*I'm sorry, gongzi,*' he mentally apologized. '*I'm not intending to watch you take a bath; I just need your jade token. Please don't turn around.*'

Madam Jin couldn't help but quirk her lips up slightly, amused by the way Wei Wuxian's shameless act was actually quite understandable if you knew why it was happening.

(So many things about Wei Wuxian changed when you knew why they were happening.)

In the center of the pool, surrounded on all sides by running water, a Lan disciple stood. He was facing away, preventing the watchers from seeing anything except his long hair and his cloud-patterned ribbon.

Flushing warmly, Jiang Yanli turned away again, briefly making eye contact with Jin Zixuan as she did. Somehow, that half-second of shared acknowledgement only made her *more* embarrassed.

It was adorable.

(Jin Zixuan could barely keep himself from squealing at her cuteness.)

However, a moment later, a cold, sinking feeling spread over him. He hadn't forgotten his father's comments about Wei Wuxian, nor was he blind to the way Jin Guangshan had been looking at the future Lan Wangji.

But this was his *father*. Jin Guangshan wasn't even interested in men; as his mother had said, he was just acting somewhat like that because he was bored and ~~interested in~~ respected the pair's power. It wasn't serious. It wasn't something to be concerned about. Jin Guangshan wasn't *actually* going to do anything.

~~Probably.~~

Behind a large boulder to the back of the pond, Wei Wuxian waited, out of sight of the unknown man. He glanced over, and found a set of folded clothes laying on the ground.

Even Jiang Cheng couldn't resist gaping slightly when he saw their perfection.

'*Damn. It's folded so neatly that I almost don't have the heart to look through it,*' Wei Wuxian though, silently chuckling to himself. '*At least he's alone, that'll make it easier to-*'

He glanced up and *froze*.

At that moment, the simulation cleared up and allowed the watchers to see what Wei Wuxian was looking at.

The person in the water was quite tall. His skin was fair and his hair was pitch black, dripping and gathered to one side. The lines which outlined his waist and back were smooth; graceful, yet holding strength. In simple terms: he was a beauty.

However, that was not what had pulled in Wei Wuxian's eyes.

What had attracted his attention was the man's back. Specifically, the dozens upon dozens of intersecting scars whipped onto his skin.

The scars of a discipline whip.

Jiang Cheng subconsciously flinched and found himself reaching toward his own body, remembering how his other-self had received one at the hands of the Wen. That scar would never come off, and a single strike had been considered appropriate torture for the heir of an enemy sect.

And the person before them had far, *far* more than his measly one.

"Who is this?" Lan Qiren hissed, scrunching his brows. Unlike with Jiang Cheng, these scars had most likely been punishment given by the Gusu Lan Sect's elders. Who could have possibly done something this horrible, and yet been allowed to stay in the sect regardless?

Frowning, Lan Xichen stepped forward, walking across the virtual lake to get a look at the mystery disciple's face. Once he had reached the other side, his eyes widened in shock.

"Xichen?" Lan Qiren asked. "Who is it?"

Lan Xichen opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Any answer he might have planned on giving was swallowed by the horror rapidly spreading across his expression.

"Xiongzhang?" Wangji asked.

Lan Xichen flinched at the voice.

Moving past his surprise, Wei Wuxian shook those grim thoughts from his mind and looked around. When he spotted a large leaf by the clothes, he smirked, then waved his

hand in the air.

Now that they had experienced it in full, the watchers had become more sensitive to every use of demonic cultivation from the founder of the art. As soon as the command was given, they knew what it was for.

There was a dim spark of red light, then movement. From underneath the clothes, a red-tinted leaf pulled itself out and then stood up, waddling back to the clothes for further inspection. Within moments, it had found and retrieved a jade token from the pocket.

"My, it's surprisingly useful for subtle work," Jin Guangshan commented, not having expected that after the terrifying display Wei Wuxian had put on last time.

All the while, Lan Xichen remained frozen and focused on the man in the pool. Concern growing, Lan Qiren began to walk forward to join him and see for himself.

Face lighting up in smug satisfaction, Wei Wuxian lifted a finger and made a beckoning motion towards the leaf.

Lan Qiren abruptly halted in his journey, forced to fight an artificial urge to turn around and walk back to Wei Wuxian.

However, right as the leaf made its daring leap towards Wei Wuxian's waiting hand, the figure in the water glanced back. As two familiar golden eyes landed on the watchers, a sudden burst of water covered their vision, knocking the leaf to the ground.

One of the droplets landed on Wei Wuxian's gaping face as the man exited the pool and pulled on his robes in a single, smooth motion. Now, the figure was fully in view.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Those golden orbs found their way to him.

'*He's grown up nicely*,' Jin Guangshan thought, observing the way the now-soaked, semi-transparent robes clung to Lan Wangji's sculpted body.

Everyone else was too stunned to move.

"Those scars…" Lan Qiren whispered. "He had… did I-"

"And a brand?" Jiang Yanli noticed.

And indeed, there was. On his chest was the sun of the Wen Clan, burned onto his skin like he was cattle in exactly the same place Wei Wuxian's had once been.

Just like the simulated Wei Wuxian, the watchers were confused beyond belief.

Wei Wuxian gave a nervous laugh, standing up and explaining, "I… I found the pass on my way. I was just trying to give it back."

Silently as ever, Lan Wangji stepped forward and picked the token off the ground, observing it calmly. At his feet, the damaged leaf struggled like a fish out of water.

Wei Wuxian stilled it with a glance.

How many times would Wen Ruohan be rendered speechless by the careless *power* Wei Wuxian wielded? Even something as small as this demanded an intricacy Wen Ruohan had never seen from a talisman before.

(Behind him, Wen Chao's trembling increased, the silent orders of the Yiling Patriarch rattling in his bones.)

The two men stared at each other for a long moment.

One smiled.

In the next instant, Wei Wuxian was gone. He had fearlessly taken off, reminding many of his days of fleeing Lan Wangji's discipline during the disciple exchange at the Cloud Recesses. The return to the now long-ago moment was more than a little weird.

Nevertheless, Wei Wuxian ran like a beam of light, darting through the trees and roots at breakneck speed-

And promptly crashing into Lan Jingyi.

Wen Qing stood up at the sudden collision, quickly checking Wei Wuxian over for injuries.

Immediately after, Lan Jingyi grabbed his arm to keep the stumbling Patriarch still and shouted, "There you are! How could you disappear like that? Do you know how hard we've been looking for you! If you leave and Sect Leader Jiang finds you-"

"I didn't see! I didn't see anything! I'm not here to watch Hanguang-jun bathe!"

"*What?!*" both Lan Qiren and Jiang Cheng shrieked. Madam Yu stood up, outrage overflowing at Wei Wuxian disgusting, disgraceful, absurd-

'*Perfect. They'll have no choice but to kick me off the mountain now!*' Wei Wuxian thought.

Although they could see the logic, very few could bring themselves to agree.

"I get that you want to leave," Jiang Cheng muttered tiredly. "But do you have to do it… like *that?!*"

In his disbelief at Wei Wuxian's words, he promptly forgot about the 'if Sect Leader Jiang finds you' clause in Lan Jingyi's warning.

"You… what?" Sizhui asked, finally recovering from his speechlessness. "Hanguang-jun? Hanguang-jun is in there?"

“That’s absurd, you-you damned — is Hanguang-jun someone you can peek at?!” Jingyi followed up.

“Aw, Wangji-xiong, look. Your little ducklings are defending you.”

Wei Wuxian as the Yiling Patriarch had rejected Lan Wangji’s offer of help. Therefore, Lan Wangji had absolutely no right to think about how Wei Wuxian was the only person the juniors shouldn’t need to defend his honor from.

His ears burned a fiery red.

“No, no! I didn’t see how he looks without his clothes at all!”

Even in his seemingly infinite composure, Jiang Fengmian couldn’t resist a small snort at Wei Wuxian’s comment. When Lan Qiren sent him an undeniably betrayed look, Jiang Fengmian forced himself to bow back in apology, trying desperately to not start laughing again.

(It didn’t work.)

“If you didn’t, then what were you doing here?” JIngyi demanded. “Just look at you — you have no face at all!”

Wincing dramatically, Wei Wuxian covered his ears with his hands and said, “Hey, hey, quiet down a little. Loud noises are prohibited in the Cloud Recesses!”

“*You-!*”

More than one jaw dropped open.

Lan Qiren gave a long sigh.

“Of course. He knows the rules perfectly well, but he insists on breaking them regardless.”

“To be fair, given the way he turned the Wen rules against Wen Chao, it could be much worse,” Jiang Fengmian pointed out. The look Lan Qiren sent him made it very clear that he was still not forgiven.

Then, footsteps began to approach, and the juniors quieted at once.

“Hanguang-jun,” they greeted respectfully.

Seeing the unquestioned deference the juniors showed to his brother, Lan Xichen couldn’t help but smile. It seemed Lan Wangji had continued to prove himself worthy of his title even after thirteen years.

(But then what about the scars? What could explain those?)

“Hanguang-jun!” Jingyi spoke up. “This Mo Xuanyu has gone too far! You brought him back to thank him for helping us, but he… *he-!*”

‘*Kick me out, kick me out, kick me out!*’ Wei Wuxian mentally begged.

And Lan Wangji undoubtedly would, after what just happened.

However, after a moment of silence, Lan Wangji simply sheathed his sword and grabbed Wei Wuxian by the collar.

“Leave,” he ordered to the juniors, dragged Wei Wuxian in the opposite direction.

All at once, their memories of what happened the last time they were watching the future returned full-force. Wei Wuxian — a flirtatious pout on his face — claiming that Lan Wangji was “his type,” and Lan Wangji responding in kind.

“That… isn’t how I expected you to react,” Nie Mingjue admitted.

Wen Qing nodded in agreement, “I thought you would become offended and walk… away.”

Just like he had at the end of the last segment. And *that* had ended with Wei Wuxian dead and reviled by the world for *decades* after his demise. After that, was it really a surprise that he was trying something new?

‘*No*,’ Lan Wangji shook his head. ‘*He didn’t want to come back with me. He mistakenly thinks I’m going to punish him, but it’s not as though Jiang Wanyin was actually going to hurt him — we saw how much they cared about each other. He might have not intended for it to go that far, but the past Jiang Cheng lost his core in an attempt to protect Wei Ying. I’m deluding myself thinking my older self did it to protect him.*’

He was not his father.

(But then where was Hanguang-jun taking him?)

The Jingshi, as it turned out. Again.

And this time, Wei Wuxian was thrown onto Lan Wangji’s *bed!*

Jin Guangshan gave an impressed whistle, and Lan Wangji felt so much blood flow to his head that he began to feel faint.

‘*Since when has the Lan Clan tolerated something as shameless as watching one of their most distinguished cultivators bathe?!*’

“We don’t,” Lan Qiren sternly announced.

‘*Fine then. I’ll strike while the iron’s hot!*’

He turned around, ready to launch into his next segment, only to pause when his eyes fell on Lan Wangji’s form. He was used to seeing Lan Wangji dressed impeccably. To see him now, with loose hair and thin clothing, meant Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but glance back a few times.

While Madam Jin felt an amused smile form on her face as Wei Wuxian was abruptly confronted by his attraction, her usual partner in the WangXian cheer squad, Lan Xichen, was far more solem. It was difficult to see, but Lan Wangji's clothing was loose enough right now for Lan Xichen to make out the Wen mark branded onto his brother's chest.

Fear for his brother abruptly overwhelmed Lan Xichen, and he moved closer to the real Lan Wangji as if that would protect him from the rest of the world. As much as Wangji wanted to protest, the scars of the discipline whip kept him silent.

(Taking Wei Wuxian back? Putting him in his room? On his bed? His older-self was now undeniably shameless. The scars must signify that Lan Wangji had allowed himself to be tempted away from righteousness.)

Following Wei Wuxian's gaze, Lan Wangji noticed how it had fallen to the sear. Without speaking, he adjusted his collar so that it covered the mark, becoming the indifferent Hanguang-jun once again.

At that moment, a bell toiled outside.

"It's nine," Lan Wangji explained to Nie Huaisang's questioning glance. Which meant it was the end of the day.

"You will be sleeping here," Lan Wangji explained. Without giving Wei Wuxian a chance to reply, he turned on his heel and walked to another room in the Jingshi. The door clicked shut, and Wei Wuxian was left alone, sprawled on the bed and *indescribably* confused.

Seeing that Lan Wangji had no plans to take advantage of Wei Wuxian (despite the other man's persistent and provocative flirting) set Madam Jin's mind at ease. It made sense — given his reputation, there was no way Lan Wangji would behave like her husband — but it was still reassuring.

'*Does he know who I am?*' Wei Wuxian wondered. '*But Lan Wangji is the most upright person I know. Our arguments weren't insignificant back then — if he knew who I was, he would have fought with me no matter what.*'

Remembering the argument they had in the previous segment, any optimism that had been in Lan Wangji's expression was washed out. No one else could tell, but it was obvious to Lan Xichen. He sent his brother a reassuring smile, but the complicated emotions toiling within Lan Wangji remained.

Wei Wuxian sighed.

'*Back then, he didn't tolerate anything I did. And yet now I've pulled out every trick I have, and he still hasn't lost his patience. Should I congratulate him for making so much progress? How could he have changed so much?*'

At those words, Wei Wuxian was forced to recall the scars he had seen on Lan Wangji's body.

Lan Qiren clenched his fists.

'*Lan Wangji has always been an example to all disciples. What kind of unforgivable mistake could he have done to receive such a severe punishment?*'

No one had an answer to that. In some ways, this was just as unbelievable as Wei Wuxian killing Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli — and yet both seemed to be true.

And now they knew Nie Mingjue was also dead.

"I don't like this future," Nie Huaisang grumbled angrily.

From there, the simulation sped forward, flashing forward around half an hour. After that long time of staring at the ceiling, Wei Wuxian sat up. He looked around, and saw a dim light still emitting from Lan Wangji's room.

'*Maybe I'll be able to get the jade token from him now.*'

Considering how his last few attempts had turned out, the watchers were excited to watch this one unfold.

Even after searching around the room, Wei Wuxian was unable to find anything. It seemed, despite his hopes otherwise, that the token was truly still with Lan Wangji.

Silent as a mouse, Wei Wuxian crept inside the adjacent and found Lan Wanji sleeping peacefully on his bed. Smirking gleefully, Wei Wuxian reached out a hand to inspect carefully.

Lan Wangji's eyes fluttered open.

Jiang Cheng didn't even try to withhold his groan.

Wei Wuxian jerked back upon the realization that Lan Wangji was awake, before desperation overcame his expression. He didn't have time to plan an excuse out.

So he jumped onto the bed-

"*What?!*"

"Wei-xiong!"

"Wei Wuxian?!"

Remembering how Lan "I don't touch strangers" Wangji had reacted at the abyss, Wei Wuxian tensed up and prepared to be thrown off.

Hanguang-jun was frozen.

"Ah, Wei-xiong, you've misunderstood-"

Lan Xichen took a step towards his brother, who was frozen in shock. Right now, it was clear to all the watchers that Lan Wangji's feelings for Wei Wuxian were not disgust, but Wei Wuxian — who, unlike them, hadn't been able to see inside Lan Wangji's head — didn't know that.

"Wait…" Nie Mingjue subconsciously began to move back. "How… how far is this going to go-"

He cut off, unable to finish as Wei Wuxian began to adjust his body. His legs were wrapped around Lan Wangji's waist like a blanket, and his hands rested to each side of the second young master's face. In that position, his head was probably close enough for Lan Wangji to feel the heat radiating off his body.

As the silence bore out, Wei Wuxian soon realized that he would have to do more. Slowly, he began to lower himself further, giving a seductive grin as he shortened the distance between their faces.

Six centimeters.

Then three.

Two-

"Get off."

"No," was Wei Wuxian's instant, cheeky response.

Even knowing it was an act, Jiang Cheng had to look away in disgust. Feeling unquestionably embarrassed, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan did the same.

(They knew how Lan Wangji felt. If the object of someone's affections came on to them in such a way — looking as unquestionably temping as Wei Wuxian did — who could possibly reist?)

Lan Wangji's cheeks turned scarlet.

"Get off," Hanguang-jun repeated.

"No. You let me sleep here; you should have known that something like this was going to happen."

But *Wei Wuxian* was the one who didn't understand-

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

Wei Wuxian blinked.

'*For some reason, I feel like I should think twice before answering this question.*'

If Jin Zixuan's face got any more hot, he would start releasing steam from his ears. The flush spreading across his body was boiling, and he could hear more than one person giving high-pitched squeals.

This couldn't be happening.

But Lan Wangji liked him, and Wei Wuxian was *literally asking for it and-*'

"I… I don't think we should be watching this," Nie Huaisang observed. Yes, he was an appreciator of the arts and knew his friends were incomparably attractive (he had *eyes*, thank you very much), but this was different. This was a whole new level of personal.

Even *he* knew they shouldn't watch this.

"Complaint registered," a voice that sounded a lot like Wen Ning announced.

"What?"

"Pausing now."

A bright red light in the shape of an array appeared under most of the watchers, dictating the "zones" which would be influenced by the spell.

And, just like that, they froze. Jin Zixuan, Jiang Yanli, Jiang Cheng, Madam Yu, Lan Qiren, Lan Xichen, and Nie Mingjue were all too uncomfortable to want to watch. Wen Qing, although a doctor, respected the boys' privacy too much. The same was true for Jiang Fengmian, Madam Jin, and Nie Huaisang.

Although Wen Ruohan wasn't the type to be made uncomfortable by such an act, he had no interest in it either. Outside from its function of producing heirs, he had never been particularly invested in sex. He had no desire to watch.

"Xiongzhang?" Lan Wangji asked, speed walking towards his brother. However, no matter what he did, Lan Xichen continued blankly staring into space, frozen in time.

'Then I'm pleased to announce the great news: we've finished the Concealment Zone!' Wei Wuxian declared. 'It'll activate based off a voice command. You don't have to say anything specific; so long as the general sentiment is 'i don't want to watch this,' you won't have to.'

A yelp shocked them out of their thoughts. With a single tap on a pressure point, Lan Wangji had paralyzed Wei Wuxian's body, forcing it to collapse on top of him.

"Then you can stay like this for the whole night," Lan Wangji decided, his deep voice vibrating in his chest.

Now, Lan Wangji knew he had more important things to worry about than the simulation. The Concealment Zone had activated, and he had no idea when the watchers would be released from its hold.

However, at that moment, he couldn't focus on anything else.

“What?” he whispered.

‘*You paralyzed him,*’ his mind responded.

“...What?” he repeated, doing a double take. However, the second he did, he realized what a mistake that had been. With Wei Wuxian switching back to his normal hair style, he looked nearly indistinguishable from his real body. And right now, that very same body was lying across Lan Wangji’s chest.

Up close like this, he could see the slight rise and fall of Wei Wuxian’s chest, and a temptation to wrap his hands around it grew. Around Wei Wuxian’s wide eyes, long eyelashes fluttered in confusion. A mouth was gaping open in shock, looking inviting enough for him to-

“Oh?” a voice muttered. “Are you going to have your way with him?”

Before those words could sink in, they were replaced by another concern altogether. The simulation was showing *Lan Wangji*. Of everyone present, he was the only one who had a right to see this.

But Jin Guangshan had never known shame in his life.

(And, going by the quiet, broken breaths in the background, Wen Chao was there too.)

The flush that had been gradually spreading across Lan Wangji face instantly paled to a pearly whiteness, making him truly resemble a piece of jade.

Luckily for the real Lan Wangji’s sanity, when Hanguang-jun shifted, it wasn’t to take part in any inexcusable acts. He simply shut the light off with a single hand motion, and pulled the blankets back up.

“Sleep,” he commanded.

Jin Guangshan clicked his tongue in disappointment.

Frozen though he was, Wei Wuxian’s thoughts raced forward at record speed:

‘*What?*’ he thought. ‘*Hold on… what?!*’

He couldn’t move at all. His befuddlement multiplied.

‘*What’s happened to Lan Zhan?! How could he have become like this? Is this the same Lan Zhan I know? Between the two of us, he seems more likely to have been possessed!*’

Lan Wangji gave no answer.

As Jin Guangshan’s discontentment increased, Lan Wangji felt a rush of gratitude wash over him. It was fine; he was fine. No matter how much his future self seemed to have changed, it hadn’t been this much.

On the side, Wen Chao clicked his tongue.

“Should have done more,” the Wen Chao breathlessly grumbled, growing more and more panicked with every word. “You had it pinned and motionless. How could you just *let it go?* Fool. It’ll take revenge now! Can’t you see that it-”

“What?” Lan Wangji asked, slowly realizing who ‘it’ referred to.

Wen Chao glared up, “You should have taught it to fear you while you had the chance!”

Hanguang-jun had fallen back asleep.

“...No.”

Wen Chao glanced over.

“No,” Lan Wangji repeated, looking back and forth between both of them. “No, you *cannot* say that. You-”

“You must have been thinking it too,” Jin Guangshan commented with a raised eyebrow. “Considering how enamored you are with him, I can’t imagine you were indifferent to the way he presented himself to you and *crawled on top of your*-”

“Stop!” Lan Wangji commanded. “That isn’t — you can’t-”

“Hanguang-jun should have at least *considered it*,” Wen Chao hissed.

“Be *silent*. If you-”

“Wangji? When did you get over there?” Lan Xichen asked. To the people who had just woken up from their frozen state, it almost looked like Lan Wangji, Wen Chao, and Jin Guangshan had teleported between one blink and the next. Their sense of time had completely frozen for those minutes.

“I…” Lan Wangji looked between Wen Chao, Jin Guangshan, and Lan Xichen, unsure of where to begin.

“The Concealment Zone,” Wen Ruohan realized first. “It kept going for you three?”

Finally, Wei Wuxian caved in and tried falling asleep, lost in his thoughts atop Lan Wangji’s body.

Taking a quick inventory of the state of things, Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow and asked, “You didn’t sleep together? I would have thought you would capitalize on such an opportunity.”

Struggling to find his voice, it took Lan Wangji a moment to respond, “He… didn’t mean it.”

As Lan Wangji tried and failed to come to terms with what had just (not?) happened, Lan Qiren stepped back. First the whip scars, then the brand mark, and now this? Even if Lan

Wangji hadn't actually slept with Wei Wuxian, he had still-

Did Lan Qiren even know this version of his nephew anymore?

The world faded to black.

Noticing that, and having nothing their speechless minds could think to say, they turned back to the simulation and waited for it to begin again.

When it did, the crowded forests around Jinlintai were what appeared before them. Koi tower appeared to approach from the distance as the simulation brought them closer and closer.

Madam Jin clenched her fists in preparation.

As they approached the Sect, the watchers couldn't help but notice numerous, unfamiliar towers which had been set up along the way. They were set over equal distances, as if governing those areas of land.

Then, they made it to the shining symbol of the cultivation worlds' wealth: Koi tower.

With even, steady steps, a figure walked out towards the balcony. His golden robes shimmered as the wind brushed them, and the tall hat on his head did nothing to diminish the serene look in his eyes.

'*My replacement*,' Jin Zixuan thought, unable to keep a sting of bitterness from biting him no matter how illogical he knew it to be. He was dead; there wasn't anything else that could have happened.

But it hurt nonetheless.

Once he was fully in the light, the watchers were greeted to the sight of a vermilion mark atop two clear eyes.

'*Eyes the exact same shade as A-Xuan's,*' Madam Jin noticed, then flinched.

She recognized that face. How could she not, after *her words* had prompted her husband to push the boy down the stairs? She could be wrong — he was years older now — but with this and the brief glimpse of the young man fighting with Lan Xichen in the last segment?

She knew that bastard child.

And he had *stolen her son's rightful place.*

"Meng Yao, courtesy name Jin Guangyao," Ouyang Zizhen revealed.

A few people raised a confused eyebrow at the "Guang" prefix, but no one spoke up about it.

(As the name "Meng" rang in Jin Guangshan's ears, he began to tear through his memories in the hopes that he would be able to figure out who it referred to. His wife was already mad; if

he couldn't even remember who the boy's mother was, her anger would undoubtedly skyrocket.)

"Sect leader," a man said, confirming their suspicions about the Jin. Jin Guangyao's eyes momentarily narrowed, before a kind smile appeared on his face and he turned to face the disciple who had spoken.

"Yes?"

"Zewu-jun is here."

"Ah, let him in," the new Jin Sect Leader ordered, walking towards the main hall.

As the man stepped through Koi tower, Jin Zixuan's thoughts ran in a million different directions.

'*Here he is. The thief who-'*

'Didn't you say you wanted a brother?'

'Look at how obnoxiously composed he is. As if he didn't take-'

'I'm supposed to be there. It shouldn't be him! It's not supposed to be him, he-'

Jin Zixuan didn't know what to think. How could he say anything when the person before him had *stolen his job* except he had already been dead so it wasn't stealing except it was still *his* and this man had *no right* except….

Somehow, until now, it hadn't quite sunk in for Jin Zixuan what "dead" entailed.

"Er-ge," Lianfeng-zun greeted, nodding to Lan Xichen.

Even Lan Wangji couldn't keep his eyes from widening at the greeting. Judging by the kind smile Lan Xichen was sending back, they truly viewed each other as brothers.

Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue made eye contact, tentative excitement beginning to bubble over in their expressions.

"A-Yao," Lan Xichen nodded back.

"You've had a long journey," Jin Guangyao commented. "You must be tired."

That was supposed to be Jin Zixuan's place.

And as a result, Jin Zixuan couldn't help but compare them.

(Jin Guangyao was calm, composed, and graceful, but-)

Giving Jin Guangyao a quick look over, Lan Xichen mentioned, "It looks like you stayed up all night working again."

Glancing back at the pile of papers on his desk, Jin Guangyao laughed and commented, "I am a man with little talent, yet you all trusted me and made me chief cultivator. I can't let you down."

(Humble; hard-working; the Chief Cultivator.

Perfect.)

'*If this person had heard what our father said about Wei Wuxian, he would he have hesitated to speak?*' Jin Zixuan wondered. '*And Mo Xuanyu… he was our half brother too, wasn't he? If this man had known about the circumstances Mo Xuanyu was living in, what would he have done? Would I have done the same?*'

Jin Zixuan didn't know. He didn't know anything. He didn't know how he was supposed to feel about his brother ~~the thief~~ and he knew he shouldn't blame the man, but-

With practiced hands, Jin Guangyao began to pour Sect Leader Lan tea.

"A-Yao, don't undervalue yourself," Lan Xichen recommended. "You were a hero in the Sunshot Campaign. If you hadn't killed Wen Ruohan, tens of thousands more would have died."

"Don't mention it."

"Alright," Lan Xichen allowed with a huffed laugh, picking up his cup.

Startling, Wen Ruohan did a double-take towards the man. Killed him. *Him?* He knew he had died, but to *see* Jin Guangyao and know that everything he had worked for was *ruined* because of-

He took a deep breath, gritting his teeth together and refusing to lose composure even as Jin Guangshan made a pathetic attempt to separate himself from his successor.

"I heard you plan to ask each clan for manpower and money to build another 2,000 watchtowers."

"Watchtowers?" Nie Huaisang asked, looking at the human encyclopedia that was Lan Wangji. However, the second jade merely shook his head, indicating that he didn't recognize the term.

"Yes," Jin Guangyao confirmed. "Very few of the great sects live in the remote places evil spirits tend to haunt. When there's a situation, the watchtowers allow for the rest of us to be alerted on time. I hope that this project will allow us to protect far more people from evil."

The comfortable smile on Lan Xichen's face was nothing but genuine.

'*Don't look at him like that. He stole my job!*' Jin Zixuan thought, then looked away. He knew Jin Guangyao hadn't — he *knew* that — but that man was right there and-

But Jin Zixuan had never given much thought to his half siblings before. It would be silly to; his mother would never allow them to meet. But he had seen first hand how bad things were for Mo Xuanyu.

(And how bad things could get in the Jiang Sect for Wei Wuxian.)

Why had he never asked about them before?

(Behind him, Wen Ruohan watched Jin Guangyao with terrifyingly frigid eyes.)

Then, Lan Xichen stepped forward and rested a hand on Jin Guangyao's shoulder, causing the other man to glance back.

"I agree with you. However, you must be careful. Some believe you are requesting this money just to fill your pockets. The watchtowers have proven useful, but building 2,000 more in one go… you'll face even greater opposition."

Jin Guangyao laughed, "It's fine. I have a clear conscience."

Could Jin Zixuan say the same?

(No. Not after he'd kept silent about his father's words.)

"Besides, I have you to support me."

Hearing that, Jiang Yanli glanced over and moved closer to her fiance, giving him a warm smile. It was all the support she could offer for now, but she hoped it would be better than nothing.

(She couldn't imagine how strange it was for him to see a stranger standing where he should have been. In this world, Jin Zixuan had died when he was still just an heir, hadn't he? He had never become Sect Leader Jin.)

The unjudging reassurance in Jiang Yanli's clear eyes helped ease the turmoil growing inside Jin Zixuan's mind. He flushed in embarrassment at his own reaction, but made sure to send her a grateful smile in return.

After a half second of surprise at Jin Guangyao's declaration of unconditional trust, Lan Xichen smiled and nodded in agreement.

"The three of us took an oath to protect the world and maintain peace. Da-ge died before us, leaving his unfulfilled ambitions for us to take on."

A petal on a nearby peony broke off and fell to the ground.

As silent and unnoticeable as a speck of dust drifting through the air, Nie Huaisang moved closer to his brother to give him a full look-over. This time, even worse than his earlier resignation, Nie Mingjue had just blinked once in acceptance.

The Jiangs, who had gotten far more time to accept their deaths, still flinched whenever it was mentioned. The Lans, who had barely known Qingheng-jun, still frowned whenever they were reminded. Wen Ruohan, usually far more calm than Nie Mingjue, still growled whenever his was mentioned. Wen Chao would never be able to forget his own death.

And yet Nie Mingjue seemed completely unphased.

Was he just pretending to be strong for Huaisang? No, Nie Huaisang could always tell when his brother was trying to do that. This was something else and-

He and Lan Xichen made eye contact with each other, the same thought running through both of their minds. Battle-hungry or not, Nie Mingjue should not be treating this so casually.

They would need to talk to him once the simulation ended.

After his pause at the reminder of Nie Mingjue, the simulated Lan Xichen continued, "You've worked tirelessly for our common cause, A-Yao. I'll support you with whatever you need."

Letting out a relieved sigh, Jin Guangyao stood up and bowed in appreciation, "Er-ge, that's very kind of you. Thank you."

'*Evil, thieving, stealing, bastard!*' Madam Jin mentally hissed. However, as his eyes glanced warmly on Lan Xichen, she couldn't help but see the boy her husband had kicked down the stairs in response to her fury.

(And no matter how much she tried to ignore it, a newfound feeling of guilt remained.)

Jin Guangyao looked down, "...If I recall correctly, the anniversary of Da-ge's death his approaching."

Nie Huaisang couldn't help but flinch, but Nie Mingjue once again gave no noticeable reaction.

"It is," Lan Xichen confirmed.

The more apparent Nie Mingjue's easy acceptance became, the more frozen Nie Huaisang felt. A cold, sinking feeling was spreading through every nerve in his body and weighing him down.

(Why wasn't Nie Mingjue asking any questions? Why wasn't he double checking anything? Asking other people to look for clues? Didn't he want to at least *try* to prevent his own death?)

With a melancholy air, Jin Guangyao walked over to the rows of peonies encasing the aisle and gently ran his hand over them. He gave a small, sad smile:

"Huaisang wrote to me and asked when we'd arrive so that he could get ready."

Here, finally, they got a reaction out of him. However, instead of worry about his *death*, it was relief that Nie Huaisang was still alive. The tension in Nie Mingjue's body had vanished as soon as his brother's name was mentioned.

The second they left the simulation, Nie Huaisang was going to ground his brother — Sect Leader or not. Lan Xichen would undoubtedly help him in the endeavor.

"I've almost sorted out my affairs, so I can leave at any time," Jin Guangyao finished. "What about you?"

"Oh, everything has been going well at home. Wangji brought back an arm the other day. An unusually ferocious one."

"An arm?" Jin Guangyao repeated, his eyes narrowing.

Wen Ruohan immediately picked up on that, directing his full attention to the conversation.

Jin Guangyao — Meng Yao — had killed him. To have done that meant one of two things: Meng Yao was either a very powerful cultivator, or a very skilled manipulator. If it was the former, Wen Ruohan would do everything he could to get that man on his side. If it was the latter….

Nie Huaisang might not be the only one Wen Ruohan would need to deal with once they got out.

(Either way, the more weaknesses Wen Ruohan could find, the better.)

Turning, Jin Guangyao made eye contact with Lan Xichen and asked, "Can you tell me more?"

Xichen shook his head, "That's all I know. Before I left, I entrusted all the domestic affairs to Wangji. He'll handle it."

The world darkened to black.

"Aw, such trust," Nie Huaisang teased with a smile, referring to both the trust Lan Xichen had in Lan Wangji and the trust he had in Jin Guangyao to explain all that. The comment brightened Nie Mingjue's mood, proving to Nie Huaisang that his brother hadn't zoned out at all.

(But if his mind hadn't shut down from the shock, why wasn't he reacting to his own death?)

As Nie Huaisang continued to ponder, the day's first slivers of sunlight were beginning to reach over the horizon, and the simulation returned them to Gusu. It was the morning after Wei Wuxian's escape attempt.

In the early morning light, a figure brushed some hair out of the sleeping Wei Wuxian's eyes. It was too dark to clearly make them out, but the grace in the figure's actions made it obvious who they were.

A high-pitched squeal of excitement escaped Nie Huaisang's mouth, and only Madam Jin's rigorous discipline kept her from acting the same at the sight of Hanguang-jun's affection.

Lan Wangji himself, on the other hand, was far too distracted by the Yiling Patriarch to pay that any mind.

Although there were a few minor differences, Mo Xuanyu's face and body were so unbelievably similar to Wei Wuxian's that knowing they were the same soul made it easy to transfer any attraction over.

So the sight of this — *Wei Wuxian* sleeping peacefully yet carelessly in a thin white under robe (which he *hadn't been wearing* when he fell asleep) — was intoxicating. As the shadow of Hanguang-jun tucked the Yiling Patriarch into bed, Wei Wuxian's free flowing, silky hair made a stark backdrop for the low-collared inner robes he was wearing.

Nothing had happened. Lan Wangji had seen for himself that Hanguang-jun had simply *paralyzed* Wei Wuxian so he had collapsed on Lan Wangji's bed. The real Lan Wangji couldn't necessarily blame his older self (Wei Wuxian *had* been the one to jump on the bed after all), but, seeing it like this now-

"Wow, you really look like a married couple who slept together, don't you?" Jin Zixuan asked.

Lan Wangji would never be able to make eye contact with his brother or uncle ever again.

There was another flash forward, and the sun moved high in the sky. Bright daylight shone through the paper doors and illuminated Wei Wuxian's sleeping form.

Two knocks against the door.

At their sound, Wei Wuxian groaned and stretched himself out, finally starting to rise.

"Young Master Mo, have you woken up?"

"Xiao Sizhui, why have you woken me up this early?" Wei Wuxian complained.

"Early?" Sizhui parrotted. "But… it's already nine."

The Nie brothers snorted at that declaration, and Jiang Cheng gave a heavy roll of his eyes. Internally, however, they were all pleased. Wei Wuxian's sleep schedule had been discussed during his arrival to the Cloud Recesses back when he was fifteen; the mention of it again almost made them feel like he hadn't changed at all.

(As if the Yiling Patriarch was just a bad dream.)

After thinking it over for a moment, Wei Wuxian laid back down on the bed.

'*My bed,*' Lan Wangji couldn't help but think.

“I can’t get up,” Wei Wuxian declared.

“Eh? What’s wrong this time?”

“What’s wrong?” Wei Wuxian repeated, before sobbing dramatically. “I’ve been ravaged by Hanguang-jun!”

“*WHAT?!*” Lan Qiren shouted.

The composure Lan Wangji had desperately tried to maintain was demolished by that declaration.

“You-how dare you?!” Lan Jingyi bellowed. “Come out here! If you keep speaking nonsense like this, I’ll make you regret it!”

No matter how loudly Lan Jingyi screamed, Lan Qiren remained still. His haunted eyes turned on his younger nephew, who was frozen in shock.

“Really! He took me all night long! I can’t go out! I don’t have the face to see anyone anymore!”

“...Wangji,” Lan Qiren said. “You… during the time in which the Concealment Zone was active, did your other self — did he-”

“*No!*” Lan Wangji shouted, his self control completely eroded by Wei Wuxian’s endless taunts.

“You have no shame at all!” Lan Jingyi shouted, stomping his feet but unable to enter the Jingshi due to it being Hanguang-jun’s residence. “Hanguang-jun is not a cut-sleeve. He did you? I’d be more than grateful if you would tell me you didn’t do him! Get up!”

Inside the Jingshi, Wei Wuxian listened to Lan Jingyi’s shouts with an amused expression and began to pull on his robe.

At the reminder of the change in clothes, Lan Qiren’s face lost all its color as he turned back to his nephew.

“Wangji-”

“No,” Lan Wangji repeated, straightening himself up and trying desperately to calm down. “No, Wei Ying is just… making it up. We didn’t do it — didn’t have — didn’t *anything*.”

Looking at the state of Wei Wuxian’s disheveled appearance now, Jin Guangshan has to admit that he’s extremely impressed with the future Lan Wangji’s restraint. If it had been him in that situation-

Before Jin Guangshan could finish that thought, Jingyi continued, “And take that donkey of yours and train it properly! It makes so much noise!”

“What did you do to my Lil’ Apple! Don’t touch it; it’ll kick you,” he advised, finally opening the door now that he was dressed.

“W-what’s Lil’ Apple?”

“My donkey!”

“He seems like a completely different person,” Jiang Fengmian muttered, unable to connect The Yiling Patriarch with this post-death version.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Nie Huaisang shrugged. “Though more subdued, he seemed pretty normal to me when he was talking to Jiang-guniang.”

“He’s always able to hide his true self from A-Li,” Madam Yu scoffed, and her husbands’ disapproving look was far from enough to change her mind. Wei Wuxian would kill her daughter and son in law; nothing would make her forget that.

(But, remembering how *she* had blamed him right before he was thrown into the Burial Mounds, she could acknowledge that part of that eventual disaster was her fault.)

~~Maybe a little more than just ‘part.’~~

The brays of a donkey hammered into the watchers like a mallet, announcing to them that Little Apple was on its way. Soon, the rest of the world faded into existence, and they were able to see the donkey expressing its displeasure, surrounded by an army of fat, round rabbits.

“Oh my,” Jiang Yanli gasped out, shocked at their sheer quantity. Seeing that, Wen Qing couldn’t help but wish Wen Ning was inside the simulation to see it too.

Poor Little Apple continued to make sounds of distress, unable to eat any grass due to the few dozen pompoms covering the field. As he saw them, Wei Wuxian’s expression lit up in delight.

“So many rabbits! Here, here, let’s put them on a stick and start roasting!”

“No killing in the Cloud Recesses,” Lan Qiren snapped, speaking in sync with Lan Jingyi. However, unlike Jingyi, Lan Qiren’s shouts were somewhat subdued. After all, after spending so much time watching Wei Wuxian, he knew full-well that the threats were unlikely to be serious. Wei Wuxian just enjoyed riling up poor, unsuspecting Lan disciples.

Little Apple gave an especially violent bray.

“Make your donkey shut up right now!” Lan Jingyi ordered. “The disciples doing early readings have asked about it multiple times! If it keeps this up, we’ll be scolded to death!”

“No shouting in the Cloud Recesses,” Lan Qiren grumpily added.

“At least he’s trying to enforce the rules, right Uncle?” Lan Xichen suggested, recalling the shouting Lan Qiren himself had been manipulated into creating once Wei Wuxian identified him as a target. That time, Wei Wuxian had been rebelling against the — admittedly unfair — way Lan Qiren had singled him out; this time, Wei Wuxian was trying to escape.

Huffing in annoyance, Lan Qiren glanced over at his younger nephew and muttered, “At least your older self seems to be able to keep him on his toes.”

Lan Wangji stubbornly looked away.

Little Apple made another noise of protest, and Lan Jingyi straightened himself up to shout again-

“Have some patience, won’t you?” Wei Wuxian requested. “Lil’ Apple’s only doing this because it’s hungry. We just need to feed it a little. Here, I took this from the Jingshi.”

And with that, he pulled an apple out of his sleeve — possibly tucked away for when Wei Wuxian made his attempted escape — and stuffed it in the donkey’s mouth. At long last, the obnoxious noise Little Apple was making quieted down.

Jiang Cheng scoffed and rolled his eyes, “Of course. It takes him *two minutes* to figure out a solution to a problem that stumps all the other cultivators who try.”

A temptation sprung up in the watchers, but they forced it down fiercely. No matter how appropriate it seemed, they would never say ‘Wei Wuxian can do anything’ again. They had all seen exactly what that meant.

A bitter taste formed in Lan Wangji’s mouth.

“By the way, where did you get this donkey from?” Lan Jingyi asked.

“What do you mean? From Mo Village! We seem to get along so well, so I took it as my servant.”

Little Apple made an offended noise.

Despite his best attempts, Jin Zixuan couldn’t help but snort at the donkey’s reaction.

As Wei Wuxian reached out to stroke Little Apple’s neck, his thoughts inevitably began to drift to the barrier of the Cloud Recesses locking him inside.

The watchers had no doubt that he would be more than capable of shattering the barrier if he wanted to. However, just like they didn’t need to worry about him taking one of the kids hostage, they knew they didn’t have to worry about him splitting open the Cloud Recesses barrier and leaving everyone inside vulnerable while also revealing his identity as the Yiling Patriarch. He wasn’t quite that desperate yet.

Then, a round ball of fluff sat itself on Wei Wuxian’s foot.

“I really can’t roast them?” Wei Wuxian glanced over to confirm. “...If I roasted them, would I be chased off the mountain?”

“You can’t!” Jingyi immediately responded, spreading his arms wide to block the bunnies. “These are Hanguang-jun’s! We just occasionally help him look after them! Don’t you dare roast them!”

‘*No shouting in the Cloud Recesses,*’ Lan Qiren wanted to say. ‘*No pets in the Cloud Recesses. Do not disrespect your seniors. Do not threaten others.*’

However, every time he opened his mouth to speak, the image of Hanguang-jun’s flayed back jumped into his mind.

(What rule had Lan Wangji broken to get those marks? If he was keeping these rabbits to remember Wei Wuxian by, then was the brand mark on his chest the same?)

(Who had to be the one to tell him that Wei Wuxian had died?)

Ignorant to the implications running through Lan Qiren’s mind, Wei Wuxian fell to the ground, laughing at the ridiculousness of Lan Wangji taking care of so many rabbits.

‘*What an interesting person Lan Zhan is!*’ he thought. ‘*Back then, I had to trick him into accepting them, but now he’s secretly raising a whole bunch! And he said he didn’t want them. Who was he kidding? Oh, please. I bet he actually loves these white, fuzzy things! Hanguang-jun, holding a rabbit while maintaining a straight face — Oh my god, I’m going to die!*’

With every word, the red spreading across Lan Wangji’s face became darker and darker, and the laughter of the other teenagers became louder and louder.

However, right then, Wei Wuxian recalled how he had been stuck on top of Lan Wangji the previous night, and his laughter died abruptly.

The same happened to the laughter of the heirs, and the blush in Lan Wangji’s ears seemed to glow scarlet.

“...Are you sure-”

“Nothing happened!”

Before Wei Wuxian could make any further comments, the ringing of a bell spread out across the Cloud Recesses. It was hurried and violent, as if a madman was striking it.

The three Lans instantly paled.

Lan Sizhui and Jingyi took off at once, all joking forgotten. Seeing that, Wei Wuxian immediately followed them to the source of the sound, understanding instantly that something was wrong.

The sound was coming from a watchtower.

“What’s going on?” Wen Ruohan demanded.

Lan Qiren glared at Wen Ruohan — furious that the person whose son *burned down the Cloud Recesses* would ask — but answered the question regardless:

“That watchtower is called the ‘Mingshi.’ Our Lan Sect uses it to summon spirits. The walls are made from a special material with incantations carved on it that are sensitive to the situation inside. When the bell starts to ring on its own, it can only mean one thing — an accident has happened to the people performing inside.”

Recalling the power the arm had shown in Mo Village, Nie Mingjue frowned and clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Outside the watchtower, Lan disciples were scurrying around like a swarm of bees whose hive had been smashed apart. They darted from one way to the other nervously, pulling different elders towards the problem in the hopes that one could help. As more and more people were incapable of doing so, the crowd gathered in front of the tower grew and grew.

Even those who hadn’t known of the tower previously could read the incantations on the door. It was clear why the Lan disciples were unable to enter.

The door of the Mingshi was black and made of wood, but it was also tightly locked, only able to be opened from the inside. It was not only extremely difficult to destroy the doors, but it was also forbidden to do so. There were almost no times when the summoning had failed before, so the Lan disciples’ panic was understandable.

Wen Ruohan sat back, wondering how the Yiling Patriarch would tackle the situation.

Resentful energy radiated out of the ringing tower in waves, spreading in every direction at a terrifying speed. The dark clouds blocking the sun left the area a dull monotone that was reminiscent of the Burial Mounds (and made all the more-so by the layers of resentment).

Struggling to draw breath, Jiang Yanli allowed herself to sit down.

“It’s been almost an hour since they went in,” Sizhui revealed, his face grim as he stared at the tower. “Why is the bell still ringing now?”

A wind picked up, making the spirit attracting flags on the walls raise themselves until they were parallel to the ground. The watchers had no time to comment on them, however, as they were immediately brought inside the tower to see the battle for themselves.

The arm thrashed wildly, it’s resentment struggling against the Lan’s spiritual energy and becoming a cyclone of power.

Now, Jiang Yanli was joined on the ground by quite a number of people whose breaths were cut off by the unbelievable power.

And this included the simulated Lans. All around them, the powerful and talented Lan elders were knocked out on the ground, having lost to the arm. The only reason the arm hadn't broken out was the powerful song created by a single guqin.

Hanguang-jun was still there.

At that moment, the pride Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren felt for Lan Wangji nearly surpassed their heart-stopping fear for him, causing them to both turn to the youngest member of their family and nod at him. Lan Wangji was supremely grateful that his older self at least *somewhat* lived up to his reputation.

However, the arm wasn't stopping either. Hanguang-jun narrowed his eyes, playing with even more power than before. His fingers flew across the guqin's strings as more and more spiritual energy was put into the attack. That energy then wrapped around the thrashing arm, trying to control its movement.

Hanguang-jun strummed-

The guqin's power knocked the outside juniors off their feet.

"It's power is stronger than it had been at Mo Village," Lan Sizhui revealed. "I've never seen something like this before."

None of the people present had either. It was quickly becoming clear that even though this was a 13 years-later future, there would be no shortage of surprises from the simulation.

Wen Qing clenched her fists, annoyance at her own inability to help bubbling over.

Wei Wuxian frowned and straightened up, grabbing his hastily-made bamboo flute with one hand. He marched toward the doors.

They had no way of knowing what was going on inside. Normally, Lan Qiren would be able to compose himself, but just a short while ago, the simulated Lan Wangji had nearly died to the core melting hand. And just before that he had nearly died to the Xuanwu of slaughter. And before that the burning of the Cloud Recesses. And just before that he had nearly died to the fierce corpses who had broken out. And just before that was the waterborn abyss and-

All those times, the watchers had constantly reminded themselves that they had seen the future; they knew Lan Wangji would survive past those encounters. That wasn't true now.

Lan Qiren felt faint.

What could be happening inside — *what was that arm* — what could it do — *why wasn't anything working* — what could be done *now?* The doors were sealed shut and Lan Wangji couldn't open them because the arm was still attacking and they had *seen* what resentment could do if something more went wrong and they had no way of helping because there was no way to open the door and-

"*Open!*"

The doors slammed open, releasing a huge gust of wind that sent everyone but Wei Wuxian stumbling back.

It wasn't the sudden jump in resentful energy that made half the watchers gape, and it wasn't the danger Wei Wuxian was going to be facing either.

"...Did he just-"

Before Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi's impossibly wide eyes, Wei Wuxian entered the Mingshi. The doors closed behind him.

"...I think he did."

Inside, the cyclone of resentful and spiritual energy gathered around the arm generated a fierce wind that sent the flowing clothes and hair of the collapsed cultivators flying dramatically. Despite that, Wei Wuxian showed no signs of fatigue as he walked opposing the direction of the current.

Finally, Wei Wuxian reached the steps and climbed up them to the platform where the Lan elders laid.

Lan Wangji's deep concentration turned into unhidden shock when he saw who had entered.

"Go Wei-xiong!" Nie Huaisang enthusiastically cheered. "Save your to-be husband!"

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue shouted back in a voice that would be terrifying if not for the smile he (along with everyone else) couldn't quite keep off his face. In the last segment, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had parted ways. As the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian seemed to have completely forgotten what morality was — resurrecting corpses and desecrating the dead as he pleased. *No one* could blame him — they all knew why it had happened — but-

The version before them in Mo Xuanyu's body was the Wei Wuxian they all knew. Someone who would step forward to help Lan Wangji out, regardless of how that might bring unwanted attention to him. No one but Xichen had been able to see the shock in Lan Wangji's expression, but, by this point, they all knew him well enough to guess at his feelings.

'*Wei Ying*,' Lan Wangji thought, breathless in shock.

Wei Wuxian sat down, and determination returned to Lan Wangji's expression. They made eye contact for a single second, before Wei Wuxian raised his flute and began to play.

The watchers immediately cringed.

The sound was horrid. Every other note was the wrong length, and the pitches changed sporadically at random times. Alone it might not be so bad, but when played side by side with Hanguang-jun's guqin it sounded positively abysmal. The song Wei Wuxian was playing couldn't even be recognized as "Evocation!"

“Very impressive,” Wen Ruohan muttered.

“Is that meant to be a joke?!”

“It’s not. He’s intentionally making it sound worse to disguise himself. The skill required to know how to change the notes of Evocation without changing the effect is astronomical.”

After having listened to the Yiling Patriarch, no one could disagree.

Still-

Lan Qiren huffed, “Does he have to disguise himself like *this?*”

However, time went on, and the song began to reach its conclusion without a spirit having been summoned. Usually, only a few lines would be needed to summon it, and yet now-

Another wave of energy crashed down, making Jiang Fengmian, Madam Yu, Jin Guangshan, and Madam Jin sway on their feet. They could feel the effects of the song; no spirit should be able to resist this.

However, the arm’s resentment merely continued to climb in strength and potency. If anyone but Wei Wuxian had tried guarding the west side, they would have undoubtedly ended up the same as the simulated Lan Qiren was. To resist the call of the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun…

‘*It’s almost impossible for that to not have worked. Unless… unless this person’s soul has been cut apart along with its corpse.*’

Frowning deeply at the thought, Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen both closed their eyes and sent the unknown person in the future a solemn prayer. Whoever they were, the pair had trouble believing they deserved *this*.

‘*...It seems this person’s death was even worse than mine.*’

Unconsciously, Jiang Yanli let out a relieved breath of air. Earlier, before the simulation had begun the flashback, the watchers had wondered if Wei Wuxian’s soul had been torn to pieces. It would explain why no one had been able to summon him, and it cleared up why Wei Wuxian didn’t know anything about what happened while he was dead — unlike any other lingering spirit.

But that hadn’t happened.

(Though, if you asked Wen Ruohan, “his soul wasn’t shattered” and “his afterlife was pleasant” were two very different things.)

(The grim displeasure that thought generated within him surprised even himself.)

After a moment’s hesitation, Lan Wangji’s fingers changed rhythm. Evocation wasn’t working, so their best bet was to switch to playing Rest. Wei Wuxian followed his lead.

And the intentionally awful playing continued, to the distress of the three Lans.

Lan Wangji had probably never played with someone so awful before. After a while, he couldn't take it anymore and raised his head to look at Wei Wuxian with an expressionless face.

Wei Wuxian pretended he hadn't seen anything.

Only Lan Xichen could appreciate the *scathing* degrees of reproach in Lan Wangji's expression.

A particularly sharp screech escaped Wei Wuxian's worthless flute-

One which made even Wen Ruohan wince.

-And the unconscious Lan Qiren gave a violent shake. Woken up by the unbearable sound, Lan Qiren actually sat up and sent Wei Wuxian a terrifying death glare, blood dripping from his face.

"Stop that!" he shouted in a hoarse voice. "Stop playing! Get out! Get out now! Stop-"

He promptly fell unconscious again.

The subdued chuckle that escaped Jiang Fengmian made Lan Qiren's mood worsen even further.

Wei Wuxian gaped. It was clear to anyone who knew the man what Lan Qiren's next words would have been. '*Stop tainting my favorite disciple's guqin with your horrid flute notes!*' To think that Wei Wuxian's playing had actually been so awful that it enraged Lan Qiren into waking up.

When Wei Wuxian's mouth became an amused smirk, Madam Yu couldn't help but sarcastically grumble, "At least *someone's* happy about this."

With a laugh on his lips, Wei Wuxian continued to play. The tornado of resentful and spiritual energy swirled around, Wei Wuxian taking control of the former, and Lan Wangji providing the latter. The arm's desperation became apparent when it pulled its resentment close to condense the energy around itself, meeting resistance as if it was loading up a spring.

A pause.

The energy exploded out in a shockwave which sent the trees all around the back hill of the Mingshi swaying until the weaker ones uprooted.

And sending the weaker watchers flying back.

"A-Li, are you okay?" Jin Zixuan gasped out, running to kneel beside her.

“Ah, y-yes. I’m fine,” she gave a reassuring smile. “It was… it was still nothing compared to the Burial Mounds.”

No one could deny that.

Inside the Mingshi, the arm’s last resistance proved futile. Hanguang-jun had effortlessly put up a powerful barrier around himself made of his bright blue spiritual energy, and the Yiling Patriarch had put up a similar one around himself and the now-unconscious Lan Qiren, glowing a terrifying red with resentment.

“Equals in every way that matters,” Nie Huaisang teased in a hushed stage-whisper to Lan Wangji. Not making eye contact, Lan Wangji tried desperately to not show the flutter of embarrassed joy those words sparked within him.

The black resentment continued to pound on the dome-like shields surrounding the two, but it couldn’t so much as dent the barriers. However, it hadn’t succumb yet either.

Frowning, Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes, turning them a bright scarlet.

Wen Chao froze and stared at them.

In Mo Xuanyu’s body, with the much more playful personality, it was difficult to associate him with the Yiling Patriarch. Although a lingering fear of the man had remained, Wen Chao had slowly begun to calm down as time went on without Wei Wuxian acting like the demon who had conquered the Burial Mounds.

But now — with those eyes — the flute — the *resentment-*

Wen Chao collapsed to his knees, mind coming to a screeching halt.

Unaware of the terrified eyes watching him, the simulated Wei Wuxian gave his commands. They were far less powerful than the ones used by the Yiling Patriarch, but the solid, unquestionable control there was impressive in its own right.

And, hearing the command, the resentful energy given off by the arm jumped to attention. The flute music rose in pitch, and so the resentment did as well. It surged together on three sides of the arm, gaining a nearly-physical form with how concentrated it was. Red lightning flashed and the black appendages lunged forward, wrapping around the arm and trapping it in place-

Lan Wangji played a note on his guqin, and the restrained arm was surrounded by spiritual power as well. The blue energy coiled up the black, meeting Wei Wuxian’s red at the top.

A golden array appeared in the sky, high above the Mingshi, where the two energies’ battle had reached. It slowly began to lower itself, dispersing the energy as it went.

In Nie Huaisang’s opinion, it was unfairly pretty. Why was all *his* training about practicing sword forms when *this* was an option all along? He sent a glare towards his Da-ge which was immediately ignored.

As the haunting guqin and flute melody continued — made somewhat awkward by Wei Wuxian's intentionally awful playing — the golden array pressed down on the arm.

And made it submit.

Coughing to clear his throat, Lan Qiren turned to his nephew and nodded once, commenting, "Good work, Wangji. You and Young Master Wei work well together."

Lan Wangji gracefully bowed back, but Lan Xichen could see the barely-contained joy in his expression.

"I agree," Jiang Fengmian nodded. "Perhaps, once we're out, we can try a few joint nighthunts between the two of you. It seems highly effective."

There would be unknowns in what the political situation turned into, and there would be unknowns in how to deal with Wei Wuxian, but, for the first time, most of the watchers were able to look toward leaving the simulation with optimism, rather than dread.

Blushing, Lan Wangji nodded in agreement.

Outside the Mingshi, Lan Sizhui, Lan Jingyi, and the other dozen or so Lan disciples gazed in unhidden bewilderment.

Jin Zixuan smirked, "That probably isn't something you get to see every day."

And considering that the Lan disciples mostly knew of "Mo Xuanyu" as a raging lunatic, their thoughts were probably a long string of question marks without any words. Jin Zixuan couldn't blame them; if he didn't already know who "Mo Xuanyu" was, he would be acting the same way.

Inside, as the final the notes began to draw to a close, the golden array disappeared at last. Having been drained of its energy, the arm made no move to attack again.

"What on earth is that arm?" Wen Qing muttered, and Nie Mingjue shrugged in equal confusion.

The doors slammed open.

"Hanguang-jun!" a dozen concerned voices called out.

Despite her best efforts, Wen Qing couldn't shake the feeling that she was watching a swarm of ducklings rush to their parents.

"Hanguang-jun, the gong stopped. Did it succeed?"

"It is suppressed," Lan Wangji responded honestly. "Give aid to uncle and the elders."

"Understood."

As the juniors spread out and began to help the collapsed adults, Wei Wuxian knelt before the arm observing it intently. He tilted his head, his mind searching through the information he had like a thief whose desired treasure was the truth. Then, he stood.

"You… you're okay?!"

"Huh?"

"I thought you were…" Lan Jingyi trailed off.

Wei Wuxian laughed, "Don't underestimate me!"

On the side, a now conscious Lan Qiren got his nephew's attention and asked, "Wangji, who is this Young Master?"

The expressionless Hanguang-jun bowed once and responded, "Shufu, his name… is Mo Xuanyu."

"He knows, doesn't he," Lan Qiren sighed. No one disagreed.

"Mo-gongzi?" Lan Qiren repeated. "...I'm impressed."

"And it doesn't seem like Hanguang-jun is going to punish him either," Nie Mingjue pointed out, smirking as he made eye contact with a smiling Lan Xichen.

"Yes, it seems Wei-gongzi's fears are unfounded."

Just as Lan Xichen had predicted in the second segment, Lan Wangji didn't want to punish Wei Wuxian. The whole reason Wei Wuxian had been trying to escape was to avoid that, but it was never a possibility to begin with.

"Xiao Sizhui?" Wei Wuxian asked. "What's wrong?"

Sizhui, who had been looking at the arm with a downcast expression, glanced over. By now, it had become more than clear that "Mo Xuanyu" wasn't an ordinary person, nor was he just a lunatic like all the rumors claimed. After thinking for a moment, Sizhui took a deep breath and forced himself to respond:

"It's just that I feel guilty."

"Huh? Why?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"Guilty for what?" Wei Wuxian similarly inquired.

"...The hand was coming for us Lan disciples."

"What makes you say that?"

"Spirit attraction flags at different levels are drawn in different ways, and have varying amounts of power. The ones we drew at Mo manor had a range of only 25 meters."

Despite the heavy subject matter, Jin Guangshan couldn't help chuckling at Lan Sizhui's explanation. It wasn't the boy's fault, but there was a certain irony in someone trying to explain how spirit attraction flags worked to their *inventor*.

However, unaware of that, Sizhui continued, "Despite that, this ghost hand appeared. It's extremely powerful. If it had been within range from the beginning, Mo Village would have become a village of blood long ago. However, it appeared after we arrived… meaning someone set it on us intending to do harm."

Honestly, Nie Huaisang had no idea why anyone would even *think* of doing something so scary!

"Not bad," Wei Wuxian acknowledged. "Your analysis is quite thorough. You've been trained well."

Both Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren developed a carefully-hidden glow of happiness at those words. Unlike Sizhui, they knew two random Lan disciples were far from the most likely targets who had been at Mo Village. That said, the boy's thought process had merit.

Even Wen Ruohan could admit the boy was impressive. Certainly much more capable than most cultivators his age.

Awkward and unsure of how to respond to Wei Wuxian's praise, Lan Sizhui finished, "So… for the lives lost at Mo Village… I believe we're also responsible. And now Lan-xiansheng and the others have been knocked out because of it as well."

A heavy layer of grief settled over the younger watchers. Lan Wangji, Nie Huaisang, Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, and Jiang Yanli couldn't exactly claim to pity the Mo family, but the guilt Sizhui was feeling was more than understandable. Silently, Wen Qing shifted closer to Sizhui, internally cursing the fact that she couldn't help.

After another moment, Wei Wuxian stepped forward and patted Sizhui's shoulder.

"The ones responsible aren't you, but instead the ones who set the ghost hand. In this world, there are some things impossible for one to control."

"Like getting thrown into the Burial Mounds?" Jiang Cheng muttered, sending a vicious glare toward Wen Chao. Unfortunately, given that Wen Chao had seen the Yiling Patriarch's rage first-hand, the teenage Jiang Cheng's anger didn't register as any sort of threat.

All conversation stopped as Hanguang-jun approached them, and Wei Wuxian turned to face him. With a face from which no emotion could be read, Hanguang-jun spoke:

"Anything?" he asked.

A playful smirk formed on Wei Wuxian's face and he turned a nearly predatory gaze on the arm.

Wen Chao's skin turned an even pastier white.

Using the flute as a pointer, Wei Wuxian directed Lan Wangji's attention toward a mark on the arm and said, "Soul Expeller, a kind of dark cultivation, can ward off the original soul. Based on what I'm seeing, whoever did this to the arm's owner is highly skilled."

"Can we remove it?"

"We can," he twirled the flute in his hand before knocking it against his shoulder. "But removing such a sophisticated array will take time."

"Wow. Even for him?"

"Don't be an idiot," Wen Qing advised with a sharp glare. "Remember: there are plenty of things even he can't do."

In some ways, the fact that he was certain he could remove an array despite being 13 years behind in terms of the cultivation world's inventions was the most impressive thing so far.

Then, Wei Wuxian's smirk was exchanged for a more subdued look of concentration.

'*Mo Xuanyu specifically summoned me, and the arm was released at Mo Village right after. And Wen Ning on top of that… it seems like someone doesn't want me to rest in peace.*'

"Seems like there's something for us to learn from this thirteen-years later timeline as well," Madam Jin commented, and Lan Qiren nodded in agreement. It had initially seemed like everything important happened during the time Wei Wuxian was alive, but with this and Nie Mingjue's specifically mentioned death….

A feeling of apprehension spread over the watchers.

Kneeling before the arm, Lan Jingyi gave it a curious look-over.

"Get back!" Lan Qiren hissed. The boy might not have half the composure Sizhui did, but if something happened to one of the juniors — who were practically infants at this point — someone would have to pay.

"Huh? Am I seeing things?" Jingyi asked. "I think the arm just… moved."

The hand snapped up, and Jingyi jumped back with a scream.

"Then stay away from it!" Lan Qiren ordered, making Lan Xichen laugh and Lan Wangji clench his fists nervously. Lan Jingyi was actually older than the real Lan Wangji was, but knowing the real version of the boy wasn't even born yet made him seem so *impossibly* young.

(Especially given how obvious it was that these future juniors were completely innocent to the horrors of war. After what they had all watched happen to Wei Wuxian, they were willing to give up anything to keep it that way.)

With a wave of his hand, Lan Wangji weakened the array suppressing it and allowed the arm to move. It sat upright, then, with a crack of dry skin, pointed.

Nie Huaisang jumped inside his Da-ge, seeking protection from the unknown person's arm.

"So, Hanguang-jun, what do you think?" Wei Wuxian asked, leaning close to give it a look-over.

"We should trace it to the source."

"Good plan. If we reconnect this arm to the rest of the body, we'll probably be able to figure out who it is and save them."

"Great…" Jiang Cheng trailed off. "And how are we going to do that?"

Similarly, and although Lan Jingyi had long since realized that "Mo Xuanyu" wasn't actually a madman, he couldn't help but criticize, "You make it sound so simple. The spirit summoning didn't work, and it's become a big mess! How could we possibly find the rest of it?"

"The Northwest," Hanguang-jun answered.

Jin Zixuan tilted his head, then made questioning eye contact with Jiang Yanli. The two of them were equally lost.

"The Northwest?" Lan Sizhui parroted. "Hanguang-jun, how do you know it's in the Northwest?"

"Hasn't it already pointed us in the right direction?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Wei-xiong, slow down," Nie Huaisang sighed, lacking experience in night hunts despite his intelligence. "You're leaving everyone else behind."

(Leaving behind everyone except Lan Wangji. Lying was forbidden, so if asked whether that thought made him happy, Lan Wangji would be forced to remain in an embarrassed silence.)

"Shown to us? By who?" Lan Jingyi glared and interrogated. "Who showed us? Hanguang-jun didn't!"

"*It.*"

In synch with the Lan disciples, the watchers who had been left behind suddenly realized that Wei Wuxian was pointing towards the ghost hand.

The arm's movement, which had scared Jingyi, was not just an attack. It had risen itself up to point in a single direction. Curious, a brave disciple reached forward and turned it 50 degrees.

The arm turned back to its original position.

"...Oh."

"I keep forgetting that he's not just an inventor," Jin Guangshan mumbled, and Madam Jin was forced to nod in agreement. As Wei Wuxian's experience with night hunting was mentioned, Madam Yu smirked boastfully.

(Privately, and although he would never say it aloud, Jiang Fengmian thought she didn't have a right to be proud of that when all her contributions had been toward making Wei Wuxian a *worse* cultivator, rather than a better one.)

The Lan disciples had been frozen, having never seen something even close to an arm that kept pointing in one direction. Their shock was tangible.

Finally, Lan Jingyi asked, "What… what is it pointing towards?"

"What else could it be? If it isn't pointing towards its remaining body parts, then it's pointing towards the culprit who made it this way."

Hearing that, a few boys in the Northwest direction began to shuffle aside.

Jiang Yanli couldn't help but giggle at their fear, making Jin Zixuan smile as well. The two of them made eye contact, the same thought running through both their minds.

'*Would Jin Ling have done that too?*'

They didn't know their to-be son well enough to tell. They would need to wait and see.

Watching Wei Wuxian frighten the juniors with his words, Lan Wangji gave him a *look* and stood up.

"Care for Uncle properly."

"Yes," several juniors responded.

Lan Xichen nodded at his brother, proud of Wangji's older-self's actions.

"Hanguang-jun," Sizhui stepped close. "Will you leave the mountain immediately?"

"Mn."

Hearing that, Wei Wuxian sneakily shifted behind him and loudly spoke to himself, "Yes, yes, yes! Now we can finally get off this mountain and elope together!"

"*Wangji,* what did you-"

"*Nothing*, Shufu," Lan Wangji bowed more deeply than he ever had before. "Nothing happened. Wei Ying is just trying to… he's trying…."

Lan Wangji couldn't finish.

They all knew Wei Wuxian was just trying to get off the mountain. However, that knowledge just made the teasing hurt so much more. After all, Wei Wuxian was dangling a promise of the very thing Lan Wangji wanted most in front of him, without meaning a single word.

Just like when he had pulled off Lan Wangji's forehead ribbon, tying them together without actually understanding any of it. He almost couldn't believe his older self was accepting these attempts so well.

(Apparently, there was still a lot they didn't understand.)

The world faded away.

"...Wangji-xiong?"

"Yes?"

"Just making absolutely sure, but-"

"Nothing. Happened."

"But Wei-xiong keeps-"

"He's just teasing."

"And everyone else thinks it's weird-"

"Of course they do."

"But your older self isn't reacting at all! The love of his life is flirting and teasing and *crawling on top of him* and he's doing absolutely nothing in response!"

This time, there was nothing Lan Wangji could say. He was equally confused about his older self's ability to maintain composure. If it had been him, he would have kicked Wei Wuxian out of the Cloud Recesses long ago, even if not for the reason Wei Wuxian thought he would.

(He supposed that was why Wei Wuxian kept trying the same strategy.)

Quietly, this time being sure to not say anything aloud, Jin Guangshan decided he was in complete agreement. No matter how much self control Hanguang-jun had, surely he would at least *talk about it* with Wei Wuxian. All in all, it was more than a little confusing.

Next, Lan Xichen stepped forward, "In regards to the Concealment Zone, would I be correct in saying that Wangji, Sect Leader Jin, and Wen Chao were all not affected?"

"Correct," Lan Wangji responded.

"Yes, well, surely none of us could have expected it to work like that," Jin Guangshan defended. "It appears Wei Wuxian's invention is much more sensitive than we initially realized."

“I’m not blaming you,” Lan Xichen assured him, sending a look to the annoyed Nie Mingjue to keep the older man quiet. “However, the next time this sort of scene comes about, perhaps you can adjust yourself to be pulled in with us? I don’t see any reason why you wouldn’t.”

“I’m afraid I don’t see any reason why I would.”

It was only his years of practice that kept Lan Xichen’s smile from faltering.

“For one, it’s personal,” Nie Mingjue pointed out, getting involved despite Lan Xichen’s silent request for him to stop. “Those two allegedly haven’t done anything yet-”

“We *haven’t*,” Lan Wangji hissed.

“But we know their feelings for each other, so there’s no guarantee that will stay true. Now that Wei Wuxian is no longer drunk on resentful energy, there’s no telling what will happen.”

“Ah, but if something does happen, do you really expect Lan-er-gongzi to genuinely tell us?”

The three Lans stiffened at the accusation.

“I highly doubt he would lie,” Jiang Fengmian pointed out. “Wei Wuxian has the utmost confidence in his righteousness. He’s generally a good judge of character.”

“I won’t deny that, but-”

“We don’t need to know,” Madam Jin decided. “So long as they’re happy together, what they do with each other is their own business. He doesn’t *need* to tell us.”

“And what if it’s important?” Wen Ruohan asked. “Something like that will most likely cause a change in their later actions. If we don’t actually know what happened between them, we might misunderstand something again.”

“But-”

“Besides, I doubt Chao-er will be willing to look away.”

At that, everyone’s eyes fell to the ground where Wen Chao was kneeling. The trembles racking his body were less powerful than they had been earlier, but were still noticeable all the same.

He squeezed his hands together and looked up, bloodshot eyes watering from how desperately Wen Chao kept prying them open, unwilling to miss a single thing. Then, slowly registering what his father had said, he began desperately nodding in agreement.

“I’m not — no. I’m not going to look away.”

“You-”

“I refuse to miss anything they show about Him!”

Silently, both Jin Guangshan and Wen Ruohan made eye contact, grateful that the politically-inept Wen Chao was directing everyone's ire away from them and onto himself.

"What could you possibly need to see that for?" Jin Zixuan accused, standing up fully next to his glaring mother. "Unless Lan-er-gongzi *wants* you to see those parts of his life, you have no right to!"

"Besides, how would watching that help you?" Lan Qiren demanded.

"'How would it help?' That was the most caught off guard we've *ever* seen Wei Wuxian! Nothing compares! Why shouldn't I watch him at his weakest!"

"Wait," Jiang Cheng interrupted, cutting off his sister who had been about to protest.

Slowly, he turned his gaze toward Lan Wangji instead.

"What… what exactly did you do to Wei Wuxian?"

"I told you: nothing happened."

"Then what does he mean?!"

Seeing an opportunity to capitalize on his earlier statement regarding Lan Wangji's hesitancy to be honest, Jin Guangshan interjected, "They didn't actually sleep together. However, Hanguang-jun paralyzed Wei Wuxian, and made him sleep on Lan Wangji's chest that night."

Several gazes fell on the Second Jade.

"...He refused to get off," Lan Wangji elaborated. "My older-self asked several times, but Wei Ying was determined. He thought that would be the best way he could go about getting removed from the mountain."

That was fair; none of the watchers had recognized the Lan Wangji who responded to such shameless acts with an equal amount of teasing.

"Whatever," Jiang Cheng snapped. "If you do anything to hurt him, I'll make you *wish* you only had the Yiling Patriarch to worry about."

Despite it being his future self and not technically "him," Lan Wangji gave an instant nod of agreement.

"There's no need for that," Lan Xichen stepped forward. "I'm sure there's no need to worry."

"Zewu-jun, with all due respect," Jiang Yanli bowed. "I believe A-Cheng is right here. Young Master Lan took A-Xian back to the Cloud Recesses without permission; I believe, given everything that's happened to the Yiling Patriarch, some overprotectiveness is warranted."

Remembering the unfortunate circumstances which brought Wei Wuxian to the Cloud Recesses, the three Lans had nothing to say in response. Outwardly, Jiang Cheng smirked.

Internally, he fumed. He was worried about Wei Wuxian — of course he was, Wei Wuxian didn't seem to be able to go a minute without getting into some sort of life-threatening danger — but there was more than that.

(When he realized what the Concealment Zone had done, some part of him became furious at the fact that there would be yet another thing Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian would share without him. Wei Wuxian was *his* shixiong, why did someone who had never met Wei Wuxian get to share so many things with him? How did that make any sense?)

(Was this growing divide between the Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian the reason the Yiling Patriarch betrayed the Jiang Sect?)

Jiang Yanli was torn. On one hand, she wanted to help her brother in the debate he was having with the Lan Sect. Her concern for Wei Wuxian was somewhat tempered by the fact that he was with Lan Wangji, but it still remained.

On the other hand, her fiance sat frozen beside her. From the far off looks both he and Madam Jin had gained, she was sure they were thinking about the man who would be Sect Leader in twenty years.

Even though Jin Zixuan's death wasn't Jin Guangyao's fault, the feeling of being unfairly replaced would remain.

As the Lan and Jiang Sects continued to argue the schematics of what had occurred between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, Nie Huaisang stood up and frowned, losing all of the carefreeness and playfulness he was known for. With determined steps, he spun on his heel and walked straight to Nie Mingjue.

With his presence alone, he ensnared his Da-ge in a net of desperation and pulled his incoperal brother along. Once they were far enough away for some semblance of privacy, he glared.

"So."

"...So?" Nie Mingjue asked.

The longer Nie Mingjue's confused silence dragged on, the more impatient Nie Huaisang became.

"Why aren't you doing anything?"

"About what-"

"We just found out you died and you barely reacted! What am I supposed to think about that?!"

In response, he got a tired sigh.

"Look, Huaisang-"

Despite Nie Huaisang remaining silent and expectant, Nie Mingjue wasn't able to finish his thought. He looked to the ground, showing none of the fearlessness everyone in the cultivation world knew him for.

Somehow, that just scared Nie Huaisang even more.

"Da-ge?" he asked, his voice transitioning to genuine terror.

"Huaisang we… our father died young like that. And our grandmother. And our great grandfather. It's just… not a surprise anymore, right?"

"Da-ge, our father's death wasn't a coincidence, it was a murder," he pointed out. "Neither was our great grandfather's. It's… it's not so common that you can just *accept it*. I-"

He looked down, voice cracking from the emotion welling up inside it.

"Is there... a *reason* so many people in our clan have died of qi deviation?"

"Huaisang, there's… it's nothing you need to worry about."

Which was essentially a 'you'll understand when you're older,' and meant Nie Mingjue wasn't going to explain anything to him no matter how much he asked. If he wanted to know, he would have to figure it out himself because Nie Mingjue didn't *trust him and-*

In Nie Huaisang's humble opinion, this was officially the worst day ever.

This was going to be the best day ever. Nie Huaisang had originally been apprehensive when he received a call to come to the Cloud Recesses, especially given the idiotic plan Hanguang-jun was putting together to force the position of Chief Cultivator onto *him*. Luckily, that nervousness vanished soon enough. After all, inviting him before they were done laying the groundwork was far too sloppy for a plan Wei Wuxian put together! That left only one thing Lan Wangji could want someone of his "specific expertise" for.

A party, of course!

And it didn't take him long to figure out which one either. He had heard from the cousin of a wife of a seamstress for a messenger at Gusu that the Lan elders were requiring the eloped Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian to have a "proper wedding" worthy of their statuses as Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Patriarch. Although things had been a little tense between him and Wei Wuxian lately, he was sure his former friend at least trusted his artistic expertise — especially when the other option was asking the Lans. In preparation, Nie Huaisang had gone all out.

From the seamstress to the cooks to the cultivators to the painters, there wasn't a single person in Qinghe who hadn't helped him prepare. Now, Nie Huaisang was traveling to Gusu with an entire carriage of fabrics and alcohol and food samples in preparation for any question Wei Wuxian could possibly ask him.

(And besides, while he was there, maybe he would be able to figure out a little more about the emergency Wei Wuxian's most recent invention had caused. Nie Huaisang's disciple's cousin had known a little, but Wei Wuxian was doing a wonderful job of keeping it all very "hush-hush" and creating no shortage of talismans to detect eavesdroppers. Needless to say, Nie Huaisang's curiosity had been piqued.)

Although losing Wei Wuxian's trust was an acceptable (if unexpected) consequence of what he had done, the olive branch Wei Wuxian had sent out was more than welcome. In fact, Nie Huaisang had gotten so excited as he mentally planned out every detail of the wedding's decorations that he had ordered someone to put some of his best liquor in the cart. Today seemed like it would be a day for celebration.

"Sect Leader Nie," Lan Sizhui greeted at the gates of the Cloud Recesses. With his low bow and composed aura, Nie Huaisang almost couldn't believe he had recently been responsible for the mysterious disaster which Wei Wuxian's inventions had been used for. He couldn't wait to find out more.

(It had been *forever* since he'd last found something this interesting to gossip about!)

"Hanguang-jun asked to see Sect Leader Nie," Nie Huaisang's third in command explained, handing over the letter.

"Yes, I was told. We simply weren't expecting so much… supplies to be brought," Lan Sizhui explained, glancing back at the carts and wagons full of priceless goods.

"Well, of course!" Nie Huaisang cheerily laughed. "We're all very excited for the upcoming discussion. I just wanted to make sure I brought everything I might need. Is it too much? I hope there isn't a problem — I just don't know where I'd put it all if you say I can't keep it here and the Yiling Patriarch would be so disappointed if I couldn't show him-"

"No, no problem at all," Sizhui rushed to say, then turned to the boy beside him. "Wuling, can you please call some people to help with the supplies while I escort Sect Leader Nie inside?"

"Of course," the other boy responded, still somewhat slack jawed as he stared at the piles of riches Nie Huaisang was carrying behind him. After a moment of contemplation, Nie Huaisang had to admit he might have gone slightly overboard with the chests of garnets and sapphires he included, but the colors matched Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji so well that he couldn't resist!

It had been far, far too long since he had been able to attend a party that wasn't also an excuse to convince Jin Guangyao of his absolute incompetence. He shouldn't be blamed for going a little overboard.

"This way, please," Lan Sizhui instructed, directing with a smooth hand motion. With that, Sizhui, Nie Huaisang, and Nie Huaisang's head disciple began walking towards one of the conference halls inside the Cloud Recesses. For a brief moment, Nie Huaisang considered seeing if he could get information about Wei Wuxian's latest invention from Lan Sizhui. However, before he could, they arrived at a building Nie Huaisang had never seen before.

Now, Nie Huaisang didn't *know* what the room was, but his fourth disciple's cousin worked for the Lan Sect, and had a loose tongue whenever he was outside of the 'no gossip' zone that was the Cloud Recesses. If he wasn't mistaken, Wei Wuxian's private lab was standing tall before him.

An uneasy premonition fell over Nie Huaisang's body, but he knew, having already taken out his best alcohol, it was too late to back out now.

With a heavy heart and skittish feet, Nie Huaisang forced himself to enter.

"Sect Leader Nie," Lan Wangji greeted, bowing as perfectly as always as Wei Wuxian waved goodbye to a departing Sizhui. Left alone with the terrifying couple, Nie Huaisang's 'frightened deer' look became even more obvious.

He really, really hoped this is just a party planner meeting.

Those hopes were promptly dashed when he saw a few papers on Wei Wuxian's desk detailing plans to win the Nie Sect support and get it firmly back in the Great Sect's category after the way Nie Huaisang weakened it in his plan to destroy Jin Guangyao. It didn't seem like them to just directly ask him to become Chief Cultivation — especially given that they surely knew he'd say 'no' — but the chances of that were becoming higher and higher every second.

"...Hello, Hanguang-jun," he pathetically managed to speak out. "I don't suppose I could ask how the wedding is coming along?"

"Ah, no," Wei Wuxian gave a regretful shrug. "Unfortunately, that's been put on hold for now."

"What?" Nie Huaisang gasped out.

'*After all the work I did to bring you back to life?*' he mentally added on.

"Yeah, a bit of a cataclysmic disaster has occured, and we probably won't be able to get back to planning the wedding for a little while. Sorry."

"Eh? Really?" Nie Huaisang leaned back nervously. "What kind of disaster?"

"Do you really not know?"

"I-I'm not sure what you're talking about, Wei-xiong," he answered, slipping back into their childhood form of address in a desperate attempt to garner mercy.

Unfortunately, the Yiling Patriarch was not known for his mercy.

"...Alright then," Wei Wuxian smirked. "As Sect Leader Nie is so *very* ignorant about the things around him, I'll keep it vague. If, hypothetically, we had a way to contact a less technology-advanced civilization but no way to physically do anything to them, how would you get them to do what you want them to do?"

“That is… very vague.”

Wei Wuxian just unapologetically shrugged in a ‘you reap what you sow’ way, and Lan Wangji remained completely enamored by his husband’s confidence, and therefore no help at all.

“Then… well, I don’t really know. It was all so vague, I’m not really sure what kind of answer you want me to give.”

“Any answer is fine,” Wei Wuxian’s smile turned vicious. “It’s the least you can do for an old friend, isn’t it?”

‘*It’s the least you can do considering you nearly got the juniors killed several times in your crazy revenge scheme,*’ Nie Huaisang heard.

Nie Huaisang coughed, “You specifically mentioned that we have progressed further than them. Can I assume you mean in regards to cultivation?”

A nod.

“...Then set yourself up as a center of information. Anyone who wants to use the better technology we have will need to do what you say. If they’re sufficiently far enough back in terms of development, you might be able to pretend to be a deity who is blessing those who serve faithfully with knowledge.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too,” Wei Wuxian nodded. “One problem: due to the way the communication is set up, I can only contact one place, and the leader of that place has stopped trusting me.”

“Because they’re incompetent, or-”

“Because they’re intelligent enough to realize we kept things from them,” Lan Wangji answered.

“Oh. Well, if Hanguang-jun is saying that, then it must be true.”

“No, Lan Zhan’s just a flatterer,” Wei Wuxian grumbled, looking away. Nie Huaisang couldn’t see anything in Lan Wangji’s expression, but he had a sneaking suspicion a hint of amusement was appearing on the man’s face.

“You disagree?”

“I don’t *disagree*, I just don’t think that’s why he’s being a problem.”

“And what would that be?”

Wei Wuxian buried his face in his hands and groaned, “Because he’s the most annoying and impossibly stubborn person I’ve ever met! Like, he’s decided he’s going to do something, and now he‘ll put everything on the line to see it through! Anyone else would have caved in by now, but he’s just… I don’t know how to deal with him!”

“Wow. I thought Lan Wangji was the only person who would ever be able to out-stubborn *you*.”

There was a nearly undetectable noise from Hanguang-jun, after which Wei Wuxian immediately spun towards him with a shockingly betrayed expression.

“Lan Zhan, are you… *laughing* at your poor, pitiful husband?”

“No.”

“Lying is forbidden in the Cloud Recesses, Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian shouted, reaching forward to squish is husband’s cheeks together. “I can’t believe you would do this to me!”

Lan Wangji nodded his head in a half-bow of apology.

“To be honest,” Nie Huaisang interrupted. “What to do next will depend a lot on what you’re specifically trying to do. The people you need to talk to will change depending on that.”

At that, Wei Wuxian finally turned away from his husband. Nie Huaisang instantly regretted that change when two piercing silver eyes landed on him instead.

Finally, Wei Wuxian spoke:

“I guess I should probably be a little bit more honest with you then. Say, Nie-xiong, what would it take to make you believe in time travel?”

“Eh? You-you mean like going to the past?”

“More… sending messages to the past.”

“...And who are you going to be contacting?”

“The Five Great Sects from before the Sunshot Campaign,” Lan Wangji answered.

“Why?”

“Because a few mischievous radishes sneaked in somewhere they shouldn’t have and sent back information on the entire campaign to them.”

Well, that answered several of Nie Huaisang’s questions.

And created a few dozen more.

Taking a deep breath, Nie Huaisang looked back at Wei Wuxian, staring into the burning grey eyes. On one hand, he could keep playing up the incompetent act despite Wei Wuxian having already seen through it. On the other….

“Are you trying to say that you’ve created a world in which my Da-ge is alive?”

“I have.”

Nie Huaisang directed a glance at Lan Wangji, and found nothing but a man with absolute faith in his husband. After several seconds, Wangji lifted an eyebrow, and Nie Huaisang forced himself to answer.

"...I did hear a few things that would make that believable."

"Of course you did," Wei Wuxian bit out with a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

"Right, well… in that case, I don't suppose the stubborn person you can't deal with is-"

"Himself," Lan Wangji confirmed. "When we found out about the Wen sect being included in the watchers, we asked him to take them out forcefully. He no longer trusts us, so he refuses to."

Wei Wuxian grumpily sank into his arms, pouting heavily until Lan Wangji patted him twice on the head as though he was one of the Cloud Recesses' bunnies.

"Alright then," Nie Huaisang coughed. "I must be honest: I think you're underestimating your… younger self. He is well within his rights to not trust a mysterious voice from a body he doesn't know, and, knowing you, has probably figured out quite a bit. Given that he left the Wens in, we know he doesn't know about the Sunshot Campaign, but he's… what?"

"Fifteen," Lan Wangji answered.

"Okay then. You're probably trying to manipulate him like you would manipulate the juniors. Believe me when I say that a fifteen year old Wei Wuxian is equal to Lan Qiren in terms of stubbornness, my Da-ge in terms of charisma, Jin Guangshan in terms of political sensitivity, and Wen Ruohan in terms of intelligence. If you expect him to do as you tell him to, you haven't been treating him like even half the person he actually is."

Struck into a rare moment of speechlessness, Wei Wuxian floundered for a moment before responding, "At fifteen, my greatest concern was Madam Yu. I barely paid attention to the Great Sects' politics."

"Because you didn't need to."

"I-"

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji whispered. "He has a point."

When Wei Wuxian pursed his lips instead of agreeing, Nie Huaisang realized he would have to go all-in.

"Wei-xiong, do you still want my advice?" he began, then waited for a nod to continue. "I don't know exactly, but I really think you should be more open and honest with your younger-self. Maybe not all the way to 'this is the future,' but at the very least a somewhat-honest explanation about why you lied."

"I wouldn't have expected *you* to advocate for honesty."

“Eh? I don’t know what you’re talking about, Wei-xiong.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Of course! And besides, in that regard, I don’t think you have any room to talk either.”

“Nie-xiong, how could you level such a grievous accusation against someone as delicate as me?” Wei Wuxian asked, swooning into Lan Wangji’s waiting arms like they were fifteen again.

But it was an act of nonchalonce, not genuine trust.

(And everyone there knew it.)

Nonetheless, Nie Huaisang was happy to play along.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean anything by it! Of course I wouldn’t expect anything from you! I just thought, since your husband’s the Chief Cultivator, maybe something was going on!”

“I won’t be for much longer,” Lan Wangji interjected.

“Eh? Hanguang-jun, I’m not sure what you mean.”

Wei Wuxian snorted, “If you really had a problem with it, you never would have let us get as far as we have.”

“I’m really not sure what you’re talking about,” Nie Huaisang responded, flapping his fan delicately. Then, his fan froze, and his face darkened for a half second before clearing up into casual curiosity.

“Something wrong?”

“Just wondering something. A friend of a friend mentioned to me that er-g… *Zewu-jun* was helping you out with whatever project you were working on. Can I ask how?”

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji both froze.

Zewu-jun was in seclusion, trying to understand everything that had happened. If he was smart, his greatest priority when dealing with the past would be keeping Nie Mingjue safe.

If he wasn’t-

“I’m starting to think you already know the answer to that,” Wei Wuxian admitted.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Nie Huaisang laughed. “I’d really rather you confirm one way or the other.”

A pause.

Wei Wuxian's smile turned grim as he finally made eye contact again with Nie Huaisang. This time, it was the Yiling Patriarch who was hesitant to meet the Headshaker's eyes.

"...You're not going to like it."

Nie Huaisang's fan snapped closed, and the last of his masks broke apart.

"*I know*."

Chapter End Notes

I'm now imagining Wen Chao and Jin Guangshan as the angel and devil on Lan Wangji's shoulders, except they're both devils because Lan Zhan is so inherently good that he needs two to balance himself out. 😈😇😈
:)

Lan Wangji's Steady Fall to Insanity

Chapter Notes

Beta Read by tintin!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The looming buildings of the Nightless City were a sight to behold. As Wen Ning escorted Wei Wuxian through the grounds, guards and cultivators and civilians alike watched him with heavy eyes split fifty-fifty between pity and fear.

Wen Xu had allowed the rumors regarding Wei Wuxian to flourish wildly, it seemed. That would be more annoying than the Lans — who had done everything in their power to squash the rumors — but was better than the Jin, who had done everything they could to blacken his reputation beyond repair in Lanling.

(Not that he had expected anything else. It was "beneath them" to view him as an equal, wasn't it?)

"Here's the place you'll be staying, Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning explained, nervously opening a large, exquisitely decorated door. If Wei Wuxian wasn't mistaken, it was significantly higher quality than the buildings where the other three sect representatives were staying, and no explanation had been given for why.

At least this emergency conference would only be two days rather than the usual week. Wei Wuxian wasn't sure he'd be able to survive here that long without blowing something up and/or declaring war on another sect. As things were, he still wasn't sure he'd make it through the night.

"Thanks, Wen Ning," Wei Wuxian nodded, smirking fearlessly and directing the disciples he'd brought with him to set up watch. If Wen Ning hadn't seen first hand how frantic Wei Wuxian was while preparing for the conference, he never would have believed it. All the Jiang disciples clearly thought Wei Wuxian knew exactly what was going on (which was why Wen Ning was the only one who noticed how tense Wei Wuxian became when they heard a set of heavy footsteps approach).

"Welcome, Wei-gongzi," Wen Xu greeted. "I hope the amenities have been to your liking."

"Of course! Thank you, Wen-gongzi. The respect you have for all the visiting sects has not gone unnoticed," he responded with a slightly too-shallow bow. Wen Xu just smirked, not even trying to deny the favoritism shown to the Yunmeng Jiang Sect — to Wei Wuxian, specifically.

"While your disciples settle in, why don't we take a short walk?"

“I wouldn’t want to impose-”

“Please, I insist.”

Not even Wen Ning could see any hesitance in Wei Wuxian’s careless shrug of agreement. The two of them walked off, leaving Wen Ning and the Jiang disciples to make bewildered eye contact with each other, all equally uncertain about what to do next.

As Wen Xu and Wei Wuxian walked through the towering halls of the Nightless City, everyone they passed bowed deeply. Wei Wuxian knew of the things whispered about him outside of Yunmeng.

“That arrogant-”

“It’s dangerous-”

“Do we even know what he’s doing?”

“Just the son of a-”

And yet, as he walked just a step behind Wen Xu, he could see glee in the faces that had once held fear. The more Wei Wuxian thought about it, the more unsettled he became. Whatever Wen Xu had told them, it didn’t seem good for Yunmeng.

Then, in a show of surprising generosity, Wen Xu glanced over and, noticing his discomfort, he switched paths so that they headed to an empty back garden. Wei Wuxian had never been shy, but he had to admit that he was grateful for the change.

“...Wei-gongzi,” Wen Xu spoke, reclaiming Wei Wuxian’s attention. “May I ask if there has been any update in regards to the Sect Leaders?”

Wei Wuxian had originally been planning on waiting for the conference itself to begin this talk, but he supposed it would work out even better if he could observe Wen Xu one on one.

“Do you remember what I told you about Mo Xuanyu?”

“I do.”

“Well, he contacted me again. Apparently, he miscalculated earlier and the simulation is much more dangerous than he had initially realized. He wants me to force the watchers out.”

Wen Xu froze, and Wei Wuxian kept walking, watching the Wen heir out of a reflective pond to their left.

“That was why I told you to put the Sect Leaders in different rooms. Apparently, it’s necessary for the forceful ejection to work,” Wei Wuxian laughed. “I figured I could bring it up at the conference just to make sure the sect leaders had been put in different rooms before I brought them out.”

“...Did Mo Xuanyu explain why?” Wen Xu asked, forcing himself to start walking again.

“He said the resentful energy the system was based off was corrupting their cores.”

“And do *you* think that’s true?”

“Sure, why not?” Wei Wuxian decided, shrugging again. “I don’t see why he’d lie about this.”

In the silence that followed, Wei Wuxian could practically *taste* the thoughts flashing through Wen Xu’s mind like lightning.

“...Have you asked the watchers about this?” Wen Xu inquired.

Always deferring to his father, wasn’t he?

“I sorta implied it, but they seemed a little weird,” Wei Wuxian responded. “I think the extra time they spent inside the simulation has probably messed with their minds, so it seemed safer to not trust them.”

“But you trust Mo Xuanyu?”

“He’s been nothing but honest so far,” Wei Wuxian lied. “Is there a problem?”

“I just wonder if we should think it over a bit more first. He could have another motive for saying that. Have you seen any evidence of corruption in their cores?”

“Nope.”

“Then maybe we should just be patient.”

“What reason could he have for wanting us to stop?” Wei Wuxian asked, waving flirtatiously at a few female Wen disciples he saw in the distance. They all blushed and waved back, laughing amongst themselves, then scurried back to wherever they’d sneaked over to watch him from.

Relaxing at the playfulness Wei Wuxian had just shown, Wen Xu gestured forward and asked, “While we're here, would you like to spend some time socializing with the citizens of Qishan?”

“No thank you,” Wei Wuxian easily responded, refusing to back off. “So, do you think I should let them out today?”

“No, I-I really feel like we should wait a bit longer.”

“Why?” Wei Wuxian asked, spinning on his heel to face the Wen heir. "Something wrong?"

“No, it's just... the simulation, it's... it's giving us information on the place Mo Xuanyu is from,” Wen Xu finally revealed, not seeing another way out of it. “He didn’t mean to send it to us, so I assume he’s only recently realized what, exactly, was sent over.”

“Why?” Wei Wuxian tilted his head. “Does he think we’ll be able to attack him with it? Can we?”

“No, he’s just worried about how it'll change our actions and policies,” Wen Xu responded, making Wei Wuxian nearly laugh out loud at the overly-vague answer. Some of his amusement must have been obvious, because the tension in Wen Xu's body instantly multiplied. Right as Wei Wuxian was about to move in for the kill, he heard the snap of a twig behind him, and turned to see three more people enter the garden. They bowed in greeting, and, before he had time to think about it, Wei Wuxian had responded with the same.

“Welcome,” Wen Xu smiled, grateful for a way out. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Not necessarily. We happened to run into each other, and heard from one of our disciples that the two of you were meeting,” a woman in Lan robes explained. “We thought we would join you and greet Wei-gongzi.”

Wei Wuxian smiled and nodded back, observing the trio before him.

They were the representatives for the Lan, Nie, and Jin sects. Wei Wuxian wanted to maneuver them away so that he’d be able to speak more with Wen Xu without losing the tension he’d built up, but, right as he was about to, he was distracted by a faint red edge he could see shimmering around the Lan. Upon further examination, he realized what it was: a trace of dormant resentful energy.

Given its inactivity, it didn’t seem to be a problem, but it was odd regardless. It felt very much like the aura around Wen Xu, which Wei Wuxian had assumed was leftover from contact with the simulation.

(What Wei Wuxian didn’t realize was that he already knew the cause. This was Lan Ziming, whose son, Lan Jingyi, had activated the simulation and attached his soul to his parents so that it would enter the appropriate body when the time was right.)

Unfortunately, as Wei Wuxian lacked that knowledge, he could only bookmark the thought for later as the conversation resumed.

“I hope everything has been to your liking,” Wen Xu began.

“Of course. We are grateful for the generosity you have shown,” the Lan woman bowed again, resisting the urge to fidget and generally looking uncomfortable with the situation (unsurprising, given that she wasn’t a member of the Clan’s main branch). Despite Qingheng-jun supposedly not having been affected by the simulation, the Lan Sect Leader had remained in seclusion, refusing to take on the duties of his sect. It seemed likely that the few rumors which had escaped the Cloud Recesses were setting Lan Ziming on edge.

(Wei Wuxian could relate. After all, he was going through the exact same thing; he was just much better at hiding his nerves.)

“I was wondering,” the man in the Nie uniform spoke up. “In regards to the simulation, will you be able to give us a more accurate time frame for when the Sect Leaders will wake up?”

“I can do that right now,” Wei Wuxian confirmed, his mouth sliding into a cocky grin. “They’ve gotten through just over a fourth of the simulation in the past 9 days, so if we let them stay until completion, they’ll most likely be out in three weeks and two days. Whether they’ll be able to immediately get back to work is still unknown, however.”

The man he was speaking to was Nie Zhonghui, Nie Mingjue’s head disciple. He had taken over the Nie Sect while the Clan Leader was unconscious, and had regained the sect’s usual level of effectiveness quickly enough.

“And we’re just supposed to trust that?” the third voice demanded. It took Wei Wuxian a moment to figure out who it was, but the arrogant sneer in the man's expression allowed Wei Wuxian to recall what Wen Ning had told him on the way over: that the Jin sect's representative was Jin Zixun, the Sect Leader Jin’s favorite nephew. Apparently, although his cultivation was lacking, the connections his uncle had helped him create were more than enough to raise him above his opponents. In addition, he was just old enough (and immature enough) to look down on the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian at every turn.

(Or so Wen Ning had warned him. In Wei Wuxian’s opinion, it seemed unlikely that the age difference mattered as much to Jin Zixun as Wei Wuxian's parentage did.)

“Is there a problem, Jin-gongzi?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“The Violet Spider hasn't exactly kept quiet about how your experiments usually end up. Do you really expect us to just hand our leaders over to you? I don't know about you, but I'd sooner believe in *time travel* than expect that," Jin Zixun sneered, making the entourage of Jins in the distance narrow their eyes at Wei Wuxian.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow and asked, "And what exactly do you think will go wrong?"

“It’s not *my* job to look into those things," he declared, giving Wei Wuxian a mocking look. "Like the Jiangs, the Jin Sect leaves *that* to our servants."

“Really? I’m surprised you’d trust just anyone with the lives of your Sect Leaders.”

Lan Ziming snorted. She tried to cover it up with a cough, but Wei Wuxian knew what he had heard. And the well-hidden smile on Nie Zhonghui’s face didn’t go unnoticed either.

“W-well,” Jin Zixun flushed. “Some of us have more important things to do. We can’t be expected to read *every* notice sent out. *I* had a sect to run.”

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian agreed, wondering how far he could push. Wen Xu, Lan Ziming and Nie Zhonghui hadn’t stepped forward to back up Jin Zixun, nor had they been visibly bothered by Wei Wuxian’s words. Going a little farther probably wouldn’t ruffle anyone’s feathers except the Jins.

(Given the staggering *lack* of assistance from them, Wei Wuxian didn't feel particularly bad about that.)

“No need to worry,” he assured. “When we discuss the great sleep tonight, I’ll try to include a bit of review for the people who were too busy to read up on it. I’m sure that’ll be helpful to everyone who found something else ‘more important’ than the lives and safety of their sect leaders.”

A bright flush spread across Jin Zixun’s face.

“Hardly!” he snapped. “But I wouldn’t expect the son of a *servant* to understand that!”

“I suggest you watch your next words carefully,” Wen Xu interrupted. “An ally of the Wen Sect deserves to be treated as such.”

Wei Wuxian did a double take, swerving his head to face Wen Xu just in time to see the older man step in front of him, protective and possessive in equal amounts.

‘*What?*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*Since when were we allies?! You never so much as brought that up-*’

“But…” Jin Zixun hastily backed up. “I mean, of course, Wen-gongzi.”

“Wonderful. Tonight's banquet will begin soon. Perhaps we should all separate and take some time to prepare,” Wen Xu suggested. "I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay."

With those parting words and a single nod, Wen Xu left the garden to call over one of his servants, informing them to do one last check over the dinner preparations. The four sect representatives left behind turned to each other, for once united (in confusion over Wen Xu’s actions).

Jin Guangshan and Wen Ruohan were the two strongest allies among the great sects. And yet, for some reason, it seemed like Wen Xu was willing to throw that all away to maintain an alliance with Yunmeng Jiang. He would never do something like that without his father’s approval, but how could he have gotten that? They couldn’t talk to each other now that Wen Xu had left the simulation, so, whatever the cause was, it would have had to have occurred beforehand. Wen Xu had been taken out fairly early, but he’d apparently learned enough to be suspicious of both Mo Xuanyu's forced separation *and* the Jin sect. Were they related, somehow? Had something happened between Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan? Or was there a new agreement between him and Jiang Fengmian that Wei Wuxian didn't know about?

Perhaps he should talk to Wen Ning about this.

The watchers' jubilant mood hadn’t yet faded when the simulation started again.

“When cultivators from prominent clans go out on night hunts, there are usually crowds of people around them like a parade. Hanguang-jun, however, always prefers going alone because he’s the absolute best and-”

“Jingyi, that’s not in the script,” Lan Sizhui pointed out, cutting his friend off.

Lan Xichen sent a proud smile his brother’s way, making the real Lan Wangji look away as a rush of emotion poured through his veins. The embarrassment and pride warred with each other until he lost all clarity of thought.

(He had spent his life being praised as the Second Jade, but, somehow, it felt completely different when it was from his future students. A warm feeling spread through his chest.)

Coughing to clear his throat, Lan Jingyi continued, “The arm was quite strange, and could possibly harm other people if it wasn’t handled with caution. Therefore, he didn’t bring any Lan disciples with him. Instead, he brought Wei Wuxian, watching him as closely as he could.”

The world shifted and an illusion of a city faded into existence. It was late at night, and the streets were only lit by the red glow of celebratory lanterns put up for a local festival.

“Wei Wuxian had originally planned on sneaking away during their expedition off the mountain. However, every time he tried to run away, it always ended the same.”

A foreboding shiver ran up Jiang Cheng’s spine and he crept closer to his sister.

On the streets of the red-lit town, a watchman began to make an announcement.

“The weather is dry, be careful of fire,” he sang, banging a drum several times. Nearby, in one of the brightly decorated taverns, a second floor window cracked open, and the Yiling Patriarch jumped outside.

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli squeaked, watching Wei Wuxian flawlessly land on the hard ground.

Although Mo Xuanyu’s body was significantly weaker than Wei Wuxian’s had been, his instincts and reactions had remained. Combined with the fact that Mo Xuanyu was still stronger than the average person, Wei Wuxian felt confident in his ability to escape from Hanguang-jun.

Lan Wangji frowned, a conflicted bubble of emotions tumbling within him at the sight of Wei Wuxian trying to run away.

Letting out a relieved sigh, Wei Wuxian began his trek down the streets and thought, ‘*Thank god! I’m finally going to be able to escape him!*’

He turned a corner and immediately knocked into a towering body.

“Ah!” he yelped, stumbling back and then sighing. “Hanguang-jun, it’s already late. Why aren’t you asleep?”

“Go back,” Hanguang-jun ordered.

When Jin Guangshan chuckled lightly, Lan Wangji felt a terrified chill sink through his bones.

"I don't want to — *Ah!*"

Lan Wangji had tied him up!

"Lan-er-gongzi, *what do you think you're doing*?!" Jiang Cheng shouted. Beside him, Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Yanli were sending disapproving looks his way.

Wei Wuxian shouted and sobbed exaggeratedly, flailing his limbs and trying to kick Lan Wangji away.

"Save me!" he screamed. "Somebody! Please save me!"

"Who is screaming like the ghost in the middle of the night?!" a woman shouted, throwing open her door.

"Is she not at all worried about the fact that he's shouting for someone to save him?" Nie Mingjue wondered incredulously. Nie Huaisang just shrugged in response, while Wen Qing scoffed at the lady in disbelief.

"Auntie! Hurry up and save me! This man is trying to kidnap me!" he got out of Lan Wangji's hold just enough to turn to her, pleading with his watering eyes.

"Huh?" she scowled. "What are you saying? *He's* trying to kidnap *you?!*"

"Of course! He's been keeping me captive for several days now! He doesn't let me escape!"

The old woman spat at him, "Don't be ridiculous! Are you trying to fool me? That man right there looks like a prince. Who do you think you are?"

"Huh?"

"Don't be fooled, you idiot!" Jiang Cheng shouted at her, glaring viciously at Lan Wangji as the second jade did everything he could to not shrink in on himself in shame.

Jin Zixuan rolled his eyes, "It's like they're blind! Anyone should be able to see that Wei Wuxian is the victim here!"

Everyone was in complete agreement.

The woman huffed again, "Honestly. *Him* wanting *you*? It looks like you're just being clingy and refusing to leave!"

"Huh?" Wei Wuxian repeated.

'*How dare you speak that way to him?*' Lan Wangji glared. '*My future self is the one in the wrong! You aren't worthy to breathe the same air as Wei Wuxian.*'

A moment later, he realized the pettiness and vindictiveness in what he had just thought, and added another copy of the rules to his mental list of punishments for himself.

Footsteps approached from the right, and the three people in the street glanced over to see the earlier watchman marching towards them, an annoyed glare on his aging face.

"It's already so late, why are you still out here causing trouble?" he demanded, then glanced at Lan Wangji. "Young master, is this ruffian bothering you?"

"No."

"This is just *sad*," Nie Huaisang muttered, pity for his friend overflowing. The other watchers were in agreement. The longer Lan Qiren spent watching the wrongful accusations, the more outraged he felt.

"Why does everyone always assume the worst of him?"

The moment after he asked that, he noticed Lan Xichen's eyes on him and flinched back. Although neither of them would say it out loud, the same thought rang in their minds nonetheless.

(Wasn't assuming the worst exactly what Lan Qiren had done to him time and time again?)

As the watchman and older woman continued to prod Lan Wangji for answers, Wei Wuxian sighed, '*Ah, I'm the only one in trouble. He refuses to let me go — how did that get twisted into me refusing to let go of him?*'

"The *audacity,*" Madam Yu hissed. "Who do they think they are?"

"Do you people have any conscience or sense of morality at all?!" Wei Wuxian whined.

"Rubbish!" the man responded. "No matter how you look at it, you're the one trying to switch the blame onto this young master! Do you want to be hit?"

"That's right!" the woman added. "Young Master, these rascals are very common here. Do you want us to help you?"

After a moment of shocked speechlessness, Wei Wuxian laughed, "Alright, fine. How about you people help him chase me away?"

"No need," Lan Wangji countered.

"Poor, pitiful, Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang muttered.

"You really don't need our help, Young Master?"

"That's right! If you have any more trouble with him, contact us right away!"

"This is a personal matter."

“That’s unbelievably unfair,” Madam Jin was forced to acknowledge. She knew Koi tower placed a much higher emphasis on social class than most of the other sects, but even *she* couldn’t believe what was happening.

However, even as she thought that, she found her eyes unconsciously drifting towards Yu Ziyuan and Lan Qiren. Right now, both of them could scoff at the easily-misled civilians, but, just a few days ago, they would have probably been the same. And Madam Jin would have agreed with them.

(What did that say about the things she must have done to the bastard child who became the next Sect Leader Jin?)

Nodding farewell to the two people who had come to help him out, Lan Wangji used his unbeatable Lan strength to grab Wei Wuxian by the collar and drag him along like a mother cat with a kitten.

“Ah — hey! Help me! Auntie and Uncle don’t just stand there refusing to help a dying man!”

“Eh? What was that just now?”

“What exactly is the relationship between those two?”

“How strange.”

It wasn’t as though they expected the civilians to be able to do anything to a cultivator, but the sheer indifference they showed in regards to Wei Wuxian’s safety was more than a little annoying.

(Especially after having watched the simulated Jiang Cheng show a similar lack of regard during his reunion with the Yiling Patriarch a few segments ago.)

Back at the hotel room, the door was pulled open and a resisting Wei Wuxian was thrown inside. As he was tossed on the bed, he whined dramatically and glared over.

Lan Wangji merely sighed.

“This is the twelfth time,” he muttered.

“Wow,” Nie Huaisang blinked. “I’m not sure whether to be more impressed by Wei-xiong’s or Lan-xiong’s persistence.”

“Sleep,” Hanguang-jun ordered.

‘*Ah, Lan Zhan, oh, Lan Zhan,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*You should be the one resting. I’ve tried escaping 12 times, and 12 times you’ve tied me up and forcefully brought me back. You may not be tired, but I’m already exhausted!*’

His cries echoed into the night.

Lan Xichen smiled warmly, “My, Wangji. You’re certainly quite forward-”

The violent glare Lan Wangji shot him cut off what he was about to say and surprised both Lan Xichen and their uncle with its viciousness. Unbeknownst to them, all Lan Wangji could hear were Jin Guangshan’s and Wen Chao’s words.

‘Oh? Are you going to have your way with him?’

‘Hanguang-jun should have at least considered it.’

An embarrassed, humiliated, ashamed flush spread across Lan Wangji’s face, and he glared at his other-self with the ferociousness of a thousand suns.

This time, it was Ouyang Zizhen’s voice which narrated with a dreamy, excited quality: “Due to Wei Wuxian’s escape attempts resulting in repeated failures, he decided to change his strategy. Instead of running away, he began to stick as close to Lan Wangji as he could, especially at night.”

Another disgusted shiver began to run up Jiang Cheng’s spine.

It was once again twilight, and Hanguang-jun stepped into his room at a new inn. The glow of a few outside lamps poured in through the paper window on the wall, illuminating a spectacularly lumpy bed.

Knowing that there was a less than 0 chance Hanguang-jun was responsible for that bed, the nearby watchers began to cautiously take steps back. Their wariness only increased when the lump on the bed began to move.

With a sigh, the simulated Lan Wangji approached.

“Ah, Hanguang-jun!” Wei Wuxian said, peeking his head out from under the covers to meet Lan Wangji’s deadpan expression.

Several of the sect heirs snorted at the sight, but Lan Wangji was too busy being mesmerized by how adorable Wei Wuxian looked to pay them any mind.

“Aiyo, you’re finally back. Do you have any idea how long I spent waiting?” he pouted, then brightened up and patted an empty space on the bed. “Come here. I already warmed up the bed for us, you see? Come, come, come.”

“Oh?” Jin Guangshan murmured.

As soon as he heard that, frantic, high-pitched sirens began to go off in Lan Wangji’s mind and he shut his eyes, refusing to allow himself to become corrupted in the same way his older self obviously had been.

The temptation being laid out before him far outclassed anything he had ever experienced before.

However, to the great surprise of the real Lan Wangji, the simulated Hanguang-jun merely sighed.

"Your room is next door," he said, apparently not at all tempted by seeing the Yiling Patriarch in only a thin inner robe asking him to come close.

Lan Qiren truly and honestly did not get it. Did the future version of his nephew have no self control, or infinite self control? Every time he thought he knew, he was proven wrong yet again.

"What 'next door?'" Wei Wuxian asked, faking innocence. "Your room is better. I like it here."

After a pause, Lan Wangji turned back toward the door and began to walk.

"Eh? Don't go!" Wei Wuxian protested, jumping out of bed and latching onto Lan Wangji's arm.

'*Do not think about it.*' Lan Wangji told himself. '*He said no. He doesn't like you, he likes girls. He tried to run. Do not think about it. Do not think about it. Do not think about it. Do not think-*'

"We'll change rooms," Lan Wangji responded.

"Why would we change rooms?"

'*Do not think about it. Do not think about it. Do not think about it. Do not think about it. Do not think about it. Do not-*'

"If you like this one, it's yours."

"Eh?" he glanced back. "Ah, that's too much trouble. We can just share the room."

'*DO NOT THINK ABOUT IT. DO NOT THINK ABOUT IT. DO NOT THINK ABOUT IT. DO NOT THINK ABOUT-*'

This time, when Lan Wangji sighed, it was in reluctant compliance.

"As you wish."

'*DO NOT! DO NOT!! DO NOT!!! DO NOT!!! DO NOT!!! DO NOT!!!! DO NOT!!!! DO NOT!!!!*'

Smiling brightly, Wei Wuxian hopped back on the bed and pulled the covers up. His eyes closed, he had no way of seeing the beautiful, warm smile Lan Wangji sent down to him.

"Oh, my. You two really are the perfect couple," Jin Guangshan laughed, looking the scene up and down appreciatively. When he didn't get the outraged response he had been expecting, he glanced to the side.

An endless stream of error messages poured through Lan Wangji's brain, leaving him frozen in his spot.

As Wei Wuxian settled in, he smiled and thought to himself, '*Those people said I'm clinging to you, didn't they? Now that I really am clinging to you, what will they say next? Let's see who'll lose patience with the other first.*'

Finally, he opened his eyes to see Lan Wangji still standing above him.

"Hey, Hanguang-jun, aren't you going to sleep?"

"Mn."

"Then come on in, let's sleep together."

"...Okay."

Still mentally falling apart, Lan Wangji was unable to notice the red glow under most of the watchers.

(Now that it had been activated by the voice command Nie Huaisang had given, the Concealment Zone no longer needed anything to be said aloud. The reflection of Wen Ning's ghost general consciousness had been added on, giving the Zone the ability to look ahead and judge which scenes would need to be skipped — activating automatically once it got there. If it had really been for skipping past unrelated information, it would have worked perfectly every time.)

(Unfortunately for them, it had been activated to pick up on their embarrassment, rather than indifference.)

Just when the real Lan Wangji's brain had finally started to function again, he noticed Wei Wuxian cracking his eyes open from where he laid next to the simulated Lan Wangji. They closed, then opened again. It happened over and over, increasing the real Lan Wangji's wariness each time.

"What — what is he going to do?" Wen Chao gasped out, shaking in his boots at the smirk growing on Wei Wuxian's face. The real Lan Wangji also wanted to know the answer, but it seemed like the only person able to predict the Yiling Patriarch was his older self; the real Lan Wangji stood no chance.

In correlation with Wen Chao's rising terror, Wei Wuxian repeatedly glanced back at the man sleeping beside him, his excitement visibly growing.

"Oh no," he sat up. "My pillow isn't in the best position. I need to change."

He reached back, then, in an act so natural it would have seemed real if it weren't for the fact that this was *Wei Wuxian*, his elbow knocked against the window sill and the pillow went flying out.

“Oh no!” he cried out, gasping in shock as the pillow vanished from their sight. The look on Hanguang-jun’s face perfectly matched the one on the real Lan Wangji’s.

Just a little while ago, Lan Wangji had watched Wei Wuxian catch an arrow Wen Ning had mistakenly shot with one hand. No matter how good Wei Wuxian was at playing the fool, no one who had seen the former would ever buy the clumsy performance on display now.

“Aiya, what do I do now?” Wei Wuxian thought aloud, tilting his head in exaggerated consideration. “How am I going to sleep without a pillow?”

Breathing out sharply through his nose in a barely-contained sigh, Lan Wangji glanced over and ordered, “Get another one.”

“It’s too late to ask for another one,” Wei Wuxian laughed. “I’ll just share yours. Scoot over a little.”

Unable to stand it for a second longer, Lan Wangji turned away. By now, he had accepted his budding feelings for Wei Wuxian. That didn’t change the fact that Wei Wuxian had told him time and time again that he wasn’t interested in men.

Which meant the thoughts he was having were absolutely *not okay*.

~~But the collar of Wei Wuxian’s inner robe was slipping down and Lan Wangji could see far too much of his chest and if he slipped a hand in there he would never be able to face his uncle again.~~

With another barely-repressed sigh, Hanguang-jun complied.

As Wei Wuxian snuggled closer to Lan Wangji’s body, Jin Guangshan raised an expectant eyebrow. At this point, Hanguang-jun would have to be insane to not take advantage of the opportunity given to him. With Wei Wuxian hanging onto his side like that, it would be child’s play for someone as strong as the second jade to turn over and pin Wei Wuxian in place against the bed. Surely, not even Lan Wangji would be able to resist.

“Wait, wait, Hanguang-jun!” Wei Wuxian called out. “Why are you sleeping in so many layers? So uncomfortable. Here, I’ll help you take them off.”

“*What?!*” Lan Wangji shrieked out, slamming a hand over his mouth when he realized how undisciplined he had been. To his left, Jin Guangshan licked his lips.

“Wait-”

Ignoring Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian reached over and slipped his hands inside Lan Wangji’s outermost robe, making the older man freeze like he’d been restrained by Zidian. Wei Wuxian’s hands began peeling off the first robe and reached down to Lan Wangji’s waist.

“Wow, your belt is so tightly fastened,” he observed, gritting out the last word as he clenched his teeth in concentration from the exertion of pulling.

Finally, a hand snapped down and halted Wei Wuxian's movement.

"Why on earth would your older-self do that?" Jin Guangshan wondered.

"Because he's — it — that *shameless*-"

"He's the one initiating it. If your older self wants to continue, why would he stop him?"

By this point, Lan Wangji was too consumed by embarrassment to answer.

"How am I supposed to help you if you grab my hands like that?" Wei Wuxian protested.

Hanguang-jun was forced to take yet another calming breath (though, this time, it was to combat a growing arousal rather than anger).

"It's after nine."

"Yes, yes, I understand."

With a dejected expression, Wei Wuxian forced himself to lay back down and close his eyes, attempting to sink into the realm of unconsciousness once again.

Wen Chao finally let out the breath of air he had been holding, panting in his relief that the Yiling Patriarch was slipping into a peaceful slumber.

That relief vanished a moment later, as Wei Wuxian began tossing and turning in bed, too full of adrenaline to rest properly. For several minutes he shifted around, and yet the call of sleep eluded him.

Soon enough, he gave up.

"Hanguang-jun, are you awake? I can't sleep."

Golden eyes cracked open once again.

"Calm your mind," he suggested.

Instead, Wei Wuxian sat up again, turning to face him as he whispered, "Hanguang-jun, I know why I can't sleep. Ah, I can't bear it anymore. Here, touch here. Listen."

And with that, he pulled Lan Wangji's hand to his chest so that every heartbeat could be felt. To help the remaining watchers, the spirits had amplified the sound so that it rang in their ears.

Du-*dun*. Du-*dun*. Du-*dun*.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji shouted in protest. This was almost as bad as the teasing Wei Wuxian had done during his punishment in the library. No, because of the physical nature of the teasing, this was even *worse*.

And yet Hanguang-jun's only reaction was a slight flush to his ears.

Clearly, Lan Wangji's older-self was a disgraceful, shameless, indulgent-

"Hanguang-jun, can you hear it?" Wei Wuxian asked, his half-lidded eyes dripping with seduction.

Raising a somewhat disbelieving eyebrow, Jin Guangshan greedily took in the sight being offered to him.

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to speak again, only for Lan Wangji to pull his hand out of Wei Wuxian's reach and snap his fingers. A moment later, muffled sounds of protest escaped Wei Wuxian again as the silencing and body-binding spells kicked in. Those exclamations of shock soon turned into annoyed grumbles as Wei Wuxian glared over, cursing Lan Wangji with his mind. As cool and calm as always, the adult Lan Wangji just closed his eyes.

"Rest," he repeated.

"There was really no need to cut that off," Jin Guangshan protested, sighing in disappointment. Really, was letting it go a little longer too much to ask for? Jin Guangshan hadn't abstained this long in years! Everyone else was getting information they wanted; why couldn't he get even just a short show?

Paralyzed and silenced, Wei Wuxian could only grumble to himself and whine inside his own thoughts:

'*Hmph. The silencing and body binding spells again. Honestly, how did Lan Zhan become so tolerant of things like this? He used to be embarrassed with just a little bit of teasing.*'

The real Lan Wangji knew full well just how true that was. It was official: nothing could possibly be worse than this. Lan Wangji's life was over.

'*It was fun to watch him get embarrassed,*' Wei Wuxian recollected. '*But now, not only does everything I try to do to him fail, but he keeps getting back at me. If this continues, when will he let me go?*'

"Wangji?" Lan Qiren asked, waking up from the Concealment Zone.

"Hello, Uncle," Lan Wangji forced himself to bite out, not wanting to raise unnecessary concern.

"Did the Concealment Zone activate again?" Nie Mingjue asked. "But… no one said anything to initiate it this time?"

"I assume this was a continuation of the last time," Jiang Fengmian commented. "If the same people feel the same… emotions, maybe it activates automatically?"

To the watchers, who knew nothing about the Ghost General's consciousness nor what Wei Wuxian could do with that, Jiang Fengmian's theory was the most likely possibility. As the

idea that it could start at any time settled in, Madam Yu frowned deeply and glared.

“What happened?” she demanded. “What did that boy do?”

“Nothing happened,” Lan Wangji repeated. “I… Wei Ying tried to disgust me — my older self — again, so Hanguang-jun paralyzed and silenced him.”

This time, neither Jin Guangshan nor Wen Chao disagreed, so the watchers were forced to accept that as the truth. Lan Wangji’s completely dead eyes seemed like a bit of an overreaction in that case, but they were well aware of how proper the Second Jade of Lan had been raised to be, so maybe that explained it.

(On the other hand, Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, feeling that Lan Wangji was finally reacting appropriately to just how incomparably shameless Wei Wuxian had become. It was aggravating that there were things Lan Wangji was sharing with Wei Wuxian that Jiang Cheng was being excluded from, but he supposed it wasn’t entirely bad. He had absolutely no desire to see two men acting in such a way.)

Finally, as the world switched to a town at noon, the watchers heard Jin Ling’s haughty narration begin:

“Every time Wei Wuxian tried disgusting him, Hanguang-jun would paralyze Wei Wuxian’s body and stuff him in another set of blankets for the night, where he would remain until daylight broke. Gradually, as he encountered loss after loss and was forced to endure a sore body every morning, Wei Wuxian began to give up.”

‘*Thank god,*’ Lan Wangji thought.

“The two followed the hand’s directions, duetting Rest every single day in order to temporarily calm its killing intent. As their travels neared Qinghe, the direction the arm had been pointing suddenly changed. Its index finger curled back so that it was forming a fist instead.

“They were near.”

“Do you think it’ll be hard to find?” Jiang Yanli asked, frowning in consideration. After everything they had just watched the teenaged Wei Wuxian go through, she was certain that he (and, to a lesser extent, the watchers themselves) deserved a break.

“It would be best to temper our expectations,” Wen Qing advised. “I’d rather be pleasantly surprised than disappointed.”

After a moment of thought, Jiang Yanli was forced to nod in agreement.

“Huaicang Mountain,” Jin Ling explained, and a cloudy sky over a fairly overgrown town formed before their eyes.

At an inquiring gaze from Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue explained, “It’s a mountain on the outskirts of Qishan. The town right next to it is on the poorer side, but there’s a bustling trade district not too far from there.”

Lan Xichen nodded, hoping that the not-quite-yet-but-maybe-soon couple would get to spend some time together in that town. The Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun had (allegedly) been enemies; now there was finally a chance for that to change.

Laundry hung to dry rose in the wind, and leaves danced to the same tune. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian stepped into the desolate street, the former's pure white robes looking out of place amongst all the dust.

Once again, Huaisang found himself mourning that he didn't have his paints with him.

"The arm was been pointing northeast before it stopped," Lan Wangji thought aloud. "If we continue heading this way, we shouldn't be far off."

Wei Wuxian nodded in agreement, his eyes cautiously scanning their surroundings. Then, some ways behind the pair, an approaching foot knocked a small rock aside.

Lan Wangji spun around, but there was no one in his line of sight.

The footsteps retreated to the outskirts of one of the nearby houses. Eyes narrowing, Wei Wuxian spun on his heel and vanished — sprinting forward. In less than a second, he landed several meters beyond the man's hiding spot, snatching something out of the air. Just as the unknown man was about to stand up, a flash of white impaled the ground in front of him.

It was Bichen. And Lan Wangji following after.

"What the-" Nie Huaisang jumped back with a yelp. "I didn't even see you move!"

Raising an eyebrow, Wen Ruohan gave an impressed hum and sent the real Lan Wangji an assessing look which caused Lan Xichen to flinch and move between them, glaring Wen Ruohan down.

Hanguang-jun's robes, ribbon, and hair all eased, landing flat against his back right as two golden eyes turned toward the unknown man.

"Why are you following us?" he asked.

On trembling limbs, the man instantly lowered himself to the ground.

"Hanguang-jun, please spare me!" he shouted. "I'd heard rumors of a strange castle up ahead, so I came… to try my luck!"

'*A 'strange castle?'*' Nie Mingjue repeated. '*In Qinghe?*'

He really, really hoped it wasn't the one he was thinking of.

"What do you mean? Are you looking for something?" Wei Wuxian asked, standing up from where he had crouched on the floor behind the man. In his hand was a dirty spirit attracting talisman painted in blood, created by the man who had been following after them.

“I-I practice demonic cultivation, and seek weapons left by the Yiling Patriarch!”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened and he sucked in a gasp of air.

“He…” Lan Qiren couldn’t believe his ears. “He just admitted it?”

“And Lan-er-gongzi didn’t even blink!” Jin Zixuan pointed out.

“I…” Jiang Fengmian shook his head. “Part of it might be that he’s low leveled? I… couldn’t feel anything.”

And that was true. Next to Wei Wuxian, the spirits registered the man as a raindrop beside a hurricane, only detectable after an intense study.

(However, he was clearly a demonic cultivator all the same.)

“...Wow, when you look at it like this, it’s almost like Wei-xiong started a whole new sect after he left the Jiangs, isn’t it?”

Jiang Cheng flinched at the reminder.

Meanwhile, realizing that there was no threat, Lan Wangji re-sheathed his sword and stepped back, lessening his intimidating presence and silently encouraging the man to continue speaking.

After several seconds to make sure he wasn’t about to be killed, the demonic cultivator cleared his throat:

“People say that the Ghost General, the Stygian Tiger Amulet, Wei Wuxian’s manuscripts, and his other powerful weapons were all destroyed long ago, but the Ghost General is rumored to have appeared on Dafan Mountain recently! Maybe the other weapons are still in existence.”

Wei Wuxian looked to the side and awkwardly scratched his cheek, unable to make eye contact with them while knowing that this was his fault.

A growl.

“You might not be real, but if you refer to my brother as a ‘weapon’ again I’ll take out your eye,” Wen Qing promised, annoyance rising. As a dark aura developed around her, Nie Huaisang began warilly stepping back.

(Despite that, Nie Mingjue remained calm. She had half expected him to start a fight over her scaring his brother — jokingly or not — and yet Nie Mingjue had simply rolled his eyes in response.)

(Perhaps she didn’t need to be quite so worried for Wen Ning after all.)

“The-the treasures will contain untold power. If we could find them-”

He cut off as Wei Wuxian began to laugh, "You think you can find one of the Yiling Patriarch's weapons in a deserted place like this?"

"You never know!" the man protested. "They can't be easy to find."

'*And yet,*' Jin Guangshan thought. '*You don't recognize the man in front of you — the greatest prize of all. How are you planning on identifying his weapons if you can't even do that?*'

As he watched his father's expressions, a shiver ran up Jin Zixuan's spine.

(What would Jin Guangyao do if he was in this situation?)

"So, you came here to find some sort of castle?" Wei Wuxian checked.

"I… I don't know much about it. I was going to the center of town to… ask around?" he responded hesitantly, quickly realizing that if the powerful beings before him wanted to check out the castle, there was no chance of him getting anything there.

"Poor guy," Jiang Cheng muttered, understanding the feelings of inadequacy, even if on a different scale.

"Hanguang-jun, what do you say we go check that out?" Wei Wuxian smirked, making the pitiful demonic cultivator's expression instantly fall.

"Mn."

The man collapsed in on himself in disappointment.

Nie Huaisang snorted, then covered up the following laughs with fake-coughs. However, as the world faded to black in a transition, he found himself frowning deeply.

"Say, if demonic cultivation is practiced by other people, doesn't it seem unlikely that Wei Wuxian was actually corrupted by it?" he pointed out. "I mean, after what he went through, those personality changes should be expected, right? Maybe he gets back to normal pretty quickly, and we're just confused."

"You think *everyone* is lying about my daughter's death?" Madam Yu hissed.

Squeaking and scrambling to hide inside his Da-ge, Nie Huaisang responded, "I don't really know! I just — they were wrong about the fall of Lotus Pier, weren't they?"

There was nothing Madam Yu could say to that.

"We don't know enough to say for sure," Lan Xichen pointed out. "Right now, all we can do is keep watching."

On the main street of the town, numerous people strolled leisurely in the afternoon light. Watching them, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji walked through the street, traveling in the general direction the demonic cultivator had pointed them towards.

“It’s actually quite crowded at Qinghe,” Wei Wuxian observed, glancing around the marketplace.

Realizing the location’s closeness to a certain castle, Nie Mingjue stepped back and gritted his teeth, wondering what to do next. On one hand, maybe they weren’t actually going to that castle and saying anything would reveal their weakness to ~~Wen Ruohan~~ the other clans.

On the other hand, had the simulation ever showed them anything unimportant?

A large number of people were traveling in every direction, their bustling somehow creating a wide gap around the tall, intimidating man dressed in all white robes. The obvious conclusion was that the citizens were just nervous about offending a young master. However, soon enough, two of the passing men paused and turned to Lan Wangji, acknowledging him with a bow and a respectful, “Hanguang-jun."

None of the townspeople were surprised by the greeting.

“Wow, Wangji-xiong, you’re really famous,” Nie Huaisang gaped in awe. Outside of their own territories, he wasn’t sure *anyone* would be recognized by an entire town of people. Then again, the future Jiang Cheng had mocked him for always being “where the chaos is,” so maybe it wasn't quite as surprising as he had-

“Huaisang,” Nie Mingjue spoke out.

Suddenly, a powdery, artificial fragrance attracted Wei Wuxian’s attention and he spun around.

“Da-ge?” Nie Huaisang asked.

Nie Mingjue hesitated for a moment, before shaking his head and forcing himself to look up. He refused to be a coward; not in this. Not now, when all the people around him had already gotten their secrets revealed.

“What comes next might be about our clan,” he forced himself to bite out. “Just… prepare yourself. You might not like it.”

A cold dread began to sink into the Sunshot Campaign watchers. Nie Huaisang and Lan Xichen made eye contact with each other, wondering why Nie Mingjue thought whatever he was talking about would be more scaring than his *death*.

Unaware of that concern, Wei Wuxian frowned: ‘*Recently, I’ve become used to the mild sent of sandalwood from spending so much time with Lan Zhan. Comparing to that, this new scent is unbearable!*’

Grimacing, he located the source of the smell.

“What are you selling?” he blurted out, glaring at the owner of the stall.

Lan Wangji knew consciously that whatever Sect Leader Nie had meant should probably be occupying his attention. Unfortunately, when compared against Wei Wuxian’s repeated

thoughts on the *smell of sandalwood*, fear and logic stood no chance.

The stall was owned by a charlatan, who wore the robes of a cultivator and had the word 'deceiving' plastered all over his face. He carried a chest full of items to sell to passerbys.

Seeing that someone had asked, he beamed, "I sell everything! The rouge and powder here are both cheap and fine. Young masters, is there anything you want?"

"Sure, I'll take a look."

"Alright. For your wife?"

"For myself."

As most of the kids laughed and Jiang Cheng gave a heavy sigh, Lan Wangji sat frozen. He really shouldn't. He should have more discipline — he *knew that* — but, after Wei Wuxian's comment about sandalwood….

Suddenly, without his consent, his mind conjured up an image. It was Wei Wuxian, his cheeks flushed with skillfully-applied rouge. Then, a moment later, he shifted into the Yiling Patriarch — hair down, eyes red, but cheeks just as rosy pink and lips just as plump-

'Come back to Gusu with me,' Lan Wangji could hear his other-self say.

And the Yiling Patriarch looked away, expression falling in submission as he caved into Hanguang-jun's request. The red dusting across his face become even darker with genuine blush, so Lan Wangji reached forward and cupped his face and then-

He stepped back, beyond ashamed at his own thoughts and ears bright red with humiliation.

(As Jin Guangshan watched Lan Wangji's reaction, he couldn't help but think that the boy's resulting fantasies were probably much more tame than his own had been.)

"Do not bother him if you have no plans to buy it," Hanguang-jun ordered, making the charlatan's befuddled 'are you messing with me?' face relax at last. However, a moment later, he tensed up again. The charlatan was a fake cultivator, but he still knew a few things about that world. Just like the men they had passed in town, Hanguang-jun was a person who all could recognize.

(And who no one wanted to mess with.)

He began packing up his chest.

Noticing that, Wei Wuxian protested, "Hey, what are you running away for? I really wanted to buy it!"

"Do you have any money?" Lan Wangji asked.

"I'll use some of yours."

Then, before Lan Wangji could react to those words, Wei Wuxian had pounced on him and groped around until he found the desired money pouch (ignoring the aghast look forming on the charlatan's face).

"It's like you're married already," Lan Xichen teased with a misleadingly kind smile despite his evil, *evil* words. Lan Wangji's already flushed ears turned an even darker shade of red.

However, when Wei Wuxian pulled the money pouch out, he was forced to stop and stare for a while. He hadn't actually expected to find anything, and the bag's pink and flowery design was even more surprising.

It seemed somewhat familiar.

"Wait, isn't that… MianMian's?" Jiang Yanli realized with a gasp.

Wen Qing lifted an eyebrow towards the second jade and recited, "Emperor's Smile, the rabbits, and now this. I get that you two were constantly arguing before he died, but you think he'd make the connection."

Lan Xichen sighed in agreement, "MianMian was quite some time ago, but he did manage to realize the rabbits were from him. Why is he so skilled at deducing everything except this?"

"Well, considering everything that's happened," Jiang Fengmian's smile fell. "I doubt he's had much time to think about romance — or even having allies in general. Maybe he just needs a bit of time to adjust to the possibility."

(And Wei Wuxian hadn't trusted even *Nie Huaisang.* After that, how could this be a surprise?)

"Hey, Huanguang-jun, let me borrow some," Wei Wuxian requested. "I'll pay you back in the future, when I have money."

"Mn."

Jiang Cheng nodded, thinking, '*Once my future self gives him back his position in the Jiang Sect, he'll have all the money he needs.*'

"Well then, since this young master is so generous… Owner, give me two of your rouge please!"

"Got it!"

'*I've already gone so far. I can't believe Lan Zhan can still endure it!*'

"Here," the stall owner said.

"Ah, thank you!"

"I can't believe he's actually buying it," Jin Zixuan muttered.

“Actually, A-Xian’s quite good with makeup,” Jiang Yanli explained. “A few years ago, I hurt my hand and he wanted to help me out until I recovered. It was a little messy at first, but he ended up becoming quite good at it.”

“...Wow,” Jin Zixuan responded, almost having trouble believing someone like Wei Wuxian could exist.

(‘*And then you let father get away with saying something like* that *about him,*’ a voice inside his head whispered.)

As Jin Zixuan felt the black dye of guilt seep into his soul, Wei Wuxian continued pondering over the mystery of the changes in Lan Wangji.

‘*At this point, if it wasn’t for the fact that Hanguang-jun’s reputation is still impeccable, I would have thought he and Mo Xuanyu had a helpless, chaotic entanglement!*’

“Foolish, Wei-xiong,” Nie Huaisang tsked. “Lan-er-gongzi has never wanted anyone but you!”

“Huaisang!” Nie Mingjue shouted.

“The Yiling Patriarch!” a voice called out. “Five coins for one and ten coins for three! Come here and take a look! You won’t regret it! Buy the Yiling Patriarch!”

“...Who?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Unable to help themselves, the watchers joined Wei Wuxian in walking towards the source of the sound.

(No matter how many times he saw it, it still astounded Wen Ruohan that Wei Wuxian’s relevance in day to day discussion had lasted so long after his death.)

“Such a low price won’t cost you anything! I recommend you buy three! One for your front door, one for your hall, and one for your bedroom!” the fake cultivator had put away his jars of cosmetics and switched them out for sheets of paper.

Door guards, it seemed.

“Yiling Laozu Evil-Suppressing Portraits! The dense evil energy fights poison with poison, and makes sure no evil beings can come near you!”

“Huh, that’s actually not a bad idea,” Nie Huaisang mumbled.

Wen Qing raised an eyebrow, “I highly doubt they actually work.”

“Of course, of course, But think about how beautiful Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong look together!” Nie Huaisang pointed out, causing Lan Wangji to do a double take. “I certainly wouldn’t mind putting up a painting of the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun in my house!”

Just then, the charlatan held one of the portraits up for prospective customers to see.

“What is *that?!”* Nie Huaisang shrieked.

“Uh, Huaisang-”

“How *dare he?!*” the Nie heir added on, too enraged to listen to Nie Mingjue’s poor attempts at placating him. “Why that’s… that’s… *an insult to everything art stands for!*”

Nie Huaisang had never been so offended in his life.

Similarly, as Wei Wuxian stared at the bug-eyed, hairy, unkempt figure before him, he found himself unable to accept that the person in the painting was meant to be himself.

“This portrait harnesses the Yiling Patriarch’s power, and will keep monsters of all levels away from your homes!”

‘*If it was really that powerful, you wouldn’t be selling them for five coins, would you?*’

Either way, Wen Chao couldn’t understand why anyone would want a reminder of *that being* inside their house at all times. Just the thought of it left him shivering.

Snatching the poster from the man’s outstretched hand, Wei Wuxian shouted, “Wei Wuxian was a man famous for his good looks! What’s this drawing?!”

“I — have *you* ever seen Wei Wuxian before? How would you know what he looks like?!”

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli laughed helplessly, amused by her brother’s affronted pride. However, both Nie Huaisang and Lan Wangji simultaneously and indignantly nodded in agreement:

‘*That looks nothing like him! He has every right to be angry over that!*’

“How dare you?!” a young boy’s voice shouted. In the next instant, the charlatan was kicked back by a teenager wearing golden robes with a Sparks Amidst Snow motif on the front.

“"Jin Ling?!”” Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan shouted in unison.

‘*Jin Ling?*’ Wei Wuxian thought, copying them. ‘*What is he doing here?*’

A moment later, Jin Ling began a rampage and crushed everything in the charlatan’s stall.

“Hey, what are you-”

“The fact that you dared to mention Wei Wuxian in front of me means you should be grateful I haven’t killed you already!”

The charlatan wanted to shout back, but, seeing that the person who had destroyed his stall was the young master of a Great Sect, he held his tongue.

“Not to mention selling these portraits on the streets!”

Seeing that, Jiang Yanli found herself frowning minutely. It was true that the man profiting off Wei Wuxian was a grave insult to both his victims and Wei Wuxian himself, but attacking a defenseless civilian wasn’t something that felt warranted given the situation (especially since it seemed like everyone in this world couldn’t go five minutes without bringing up the Yiling Patriarch). Actually, now that she was taking the time to think of it, hadn’t his introduction been like this too?

“The spirit nets,” Jin Zixuan muttered, thinking along the same line as her.

The rogue cultivators — middle aged men, women, and even teenagers like himself — had begged to be let down. In response, Jin Ling had turned his anxiety over not having found the prey at them.

‘You guys should just stay here. I don’t want you messing around and getting in my way again!’

And, after that, Jin Ling had been merciless in his shouts against the person who he thought was Mo Xuanyu. “Crazy guy.” “Lunatic.” “Damn gay.” Jin Ling was still a child — he would surely grow out of such behavior — but seeing it now made it extremely apparent that Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan hadn’t been there to raise him.

They made slow, hesitant eye contact.

‘*We’ll be there for him,*’ they both promised. ‘*We’ll help raise him. We won’t die and leave him an orphan. Not him; not our son.*’

Similarly, as he watched, Wei Wuxian thought, ‘*This child isn’t like Shijie at all.*’

“You’re seeking your own death!”

‘*Proud, headstrong, condescending — he’s learned all of his father’s and uncle’s bad qualities, and none of his mother’s good ones!*’

“Honestly,” Madam Yu huffed. “I’m sure LanlingJin did just as much to raise Jin Ling, but I still expected better from you, A- Cheng.”

Her son flinched and looked away.

“He’s behaving absolutely disgracefully — causing a scene like this in the middle of town-”

“San-niang,” Jiang Fengmian began warningly.

‘*This arrogant, selfish, rude behavior… if I don’t teach him better, he’ll definitely suffer a lot in the future.*’

“What, you disagree? I thought you were against cultivators who threw around their names like this. Isn’t that why you always rejected my suggestions regarding the patrol formations?

And now look at how those common folk are judging my grandson. If A- Cheng had just raised him correctly-"

"You have *no right* to say that."

Madam Yu cut off completely, unable to even continue arguing in her shock. That had not been the usual request to move into a different room when she started an argument around their children; *that* had been an accusation. She almost couldn't believe his insolence. She had already admitted her hatred of Wei Wuxian was somewhat unearned, what else could that man possibly expect from her?

(*'An apology*,' her mind whispered, but that thought was locked away easily enough.)

Angered, it seemed like Jin Ling was about to walk a few more steps toward the man on the ground when Wei Wuxian interrupted.

"Jin Ling!"

"Mo Xuanyu?" the young Jin heir checked. "You still haven't run away? Ha, fine."

"Aiyo… I wonder just who was lying on the ground unable to get up last time."

Despite the amusing words from Wei Wuxian, no one laughed. The growing tension between Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu filled every watcher with either apprehension or excitement (in the case of Wen Ruohan, Wen Chao, and Jin Guangshan).

And Madam Yu was *seething.*

Her glare sharpened, '*Who does he think he is, to tell me I can't give parenting advise to my own children?! And here I thought he was finally coming around. He apologized to A-Cheng and A-Li, or did he not really mean it when he promised to be more open with them?! Is he going to pick Wei Wuxian again?*'

Yes, after everything that had happened, Madam Yu had learned enough to admit she was wrong (to herself, at least). She had constantly singled out Wei Wuxian, and she had punished him specifically on the most minor of infractions whenever they came into contact. The little time she spent at Lotus Pier was regularly consumed by giving out such punishments, which, in hindsight, was a bit of a waste of time.

So she would stop — or try to, at least. And then all the fights that had constantly divided their family would be over.

Or so she had thought.

But, after Jiang Fengmian's words, she wasn't so sure. Was he accusing her of parenting *her children* improperly? It was true she wasn't around as often as she could be, but at least they had never doubted that she cared for them. Unlike Jiang Fengmian, their children had always known that they were her priority.

(So why couldn't she get Jiang Fengmian's words out of her head?)

As the stare off between an enraged Jin Ling and an amused Wei Wuxian continued, it became clear that not even Jin Ling's rank was enough to intimidate "Mo Xuanyu." Seeing that, Jin Ling's rage increased and, when Wei Wuxian raised a questioning eyebrow, he sneered and whistled.

A moment later, there was a bark in the distance.

"Oh, no," Jiang Fengmian whispered, focus immediately pulled away from his wife.

Wei Wuxian glanced in the direction of the noise, and his eyes widened in fear.

"Lan Zhan!" he shouted, sprinting behind the other man. "Help! Help me! Lan Zhan! Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan *save me!* Help!"

All Lan Wangji had to do was narrow his eyes slightly, and the large dog instantly whimpered and lowered its head, backing up in fear. However, a moment later, Lan Wangji froze.

Terrified, Wei Wuxian had switched his grip from Lan Wangji's shoulder to a better hiding spot. He had ducked down, wrapping his arms around Lan Wangji's waist and burying his head in Lan Wangji's back.

The real Second Jade promptly felt his mind shut down.

"H-Hanguang-jun?" Jin Ling asked. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

'*Normally, when people hear that my dog is from the Chief Cultivator they back off, but Hanguang-jun… is a different story.*'

Lan Qiren nodded once at his (frozen) nephew, pleased that the future Lan Wangji was known to enforce righteousness, even in cases as minor as this. Hanguang-jun's actions around Wei Wuxian had made Lan Qiren uncertain, but it seemed as if his nephew had continued to be worthy of his title even so many years later.

After taking a moment to calm his racing heart, Lan Wangji glanced up, "...Your spiritual dog is causing trouble."

"I'll take her away immediately!" Jin Ling responded, spinning on his heel and ordering, "Fairy, let's go."

"...Fairy?" Jin Zixuan checked.

"What's wrong with that? It's a perfectly good name!" Jiang Cheng shouted back, feeling certain that his own names would be judged as soon as they were found out.

They turned back to the simulation, joining everyone else in staring as Wei Wuxian hung onto Lan Wangji body like it was a lifeline. Hanguang-jun glanced back — face blank to all except Lan Xichen — and waited for Wei Wuxian to finally notice that he'd literally crawled on top of the second jade of Lan.

Two seconds passed. Then, with a surprised yelp, Wei Wuxian jumped off. His eyes were wide, and his breathing heavy.

"Wait… was he *actually* scared?" Madam Jin gaped, not believing her own eyes.

'It's just the dog comment,' Jiang Cheng explained, having just watched Lan Wangji bite Wei Wuxian inside the Xuanwu cave. 'He hates them. He can't stand even tiny little puppies!'

"I thought you were exaggerating!" Nie Huaisang declared with a disbelieving laugh, to which Jiang Cheng just rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Seriously? The dreaded Yiling Patriarch is scared of *dogs?*"

Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen made eye contact, equally shocked looks on their faces.

"That dog was so scary!" the stall owner declared. "Disciples from prominent clans these days really are unbelievable! Unbelievable, I say!"

Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan both wilted at the words, a bit of an embarrassed flush forming on their cheeks despite the fact — or perhaps *because* of the fact — that they hadn't been the ones to raise Jin Ling.

"Uh, that's right!" Wei Wuxian laughed, trying desperately to regain his cool. "It's getting worse day by day! Men are not what they were in the past."

The charlatan glared down at his disturbing Yiling Patriarch posters and hissed, "These bring so much bad luck! I'm not selling them anymore! Ah, Brother, thank you so much for earlier. I'll give you these 10 Yiling Patriarch Portraits as a sign of my appreciation. If you sell them for 5 coins apiece, you can earn fifty coins for a meal!"

"What kind of gift is this?!" Wei Wuxian protested. "If you really want to show your gratitude, make them look prettier!"

Rolling his eyes, the charlatan turned away.

"A-ah, wait, don't go!" Wei Wuxian rushed forward. "Brother, look, there's a tea booth over there. Why don't I treat you to a cup of tea for the shock earlier?"

A laugh, "That's sounds great!"

"And how exactly are you going to pay for that?!"

"I would assume Hanguang-jun will be paying," Wen Qing answered with a small, indulgent smile.

Nie Huaisang gave a dreamy sigh, "Wei Wuxian can do the talking, Lan Wangji can back him up. Don't they make such a perfect team?"

"Please stop," Lan Wangji requested, his earns burning red despite his stone-cold face.

After exchanging a glance with Lan Wangji to make sure it was okay, Wei Wuxian brought the stall owner over to the tea shop and sat down, treating the man like they were old friends.

“Owner!” he called out.

“Coming!”

As the owner began to pour their tea, Wei Wuxian leaned close to the fake cultivator and gave an inviting smile, “Brother, may I ask you about something?”

“Ask away.”

Despite all the time they had spent in the past, they had never gotten to see Wei Wuxian leading a simple night hunt. Now that they had, the combination of him and Lan Wangji became all the more impressive.

“You’re right,” Lan Qiren turned to Jiang Fengmian. “Perhaps we should try to arrange something like this when we get out.”

Lan Wangji stubbornly remained blank, but Lan Xichen could tell just how ecstatic the prospect made him.

“You’ve been doing business here for a long time. Have you ever bumped into anything strange or seen anything odd?”

“Something strange?” a laugh. “You asked the right person. I stay here most of the year. They call me the Qinghe know it all!”

“...Do they?” Wen Qing muttered skeptically.

“What kind of strange things?” the man asked.

“For example… hauntings of evil creatures, events like dismembered corpses. Oh, and on the way over we heard about a mysterious castle. Do you know anything about it?”

Sensing the growing stress in Nie Mingjue’s body, Lan Xichen moved close to his friend to offer some silent support.

“Hm… there’s nothing like that over here, but if you walk about two miles that way there’s an area of a mountain called the Xinglu Ridge. They also call it the Man-Eating Ridge.”

Nie Mingjue cursed, and Nie Huaisang turned to face him, staring desperately. He had no idea what was making his brother react in such a way, but, whatever it was, it couldn’t be good.

“Is there a monster there that eats humans?”

“That’s right,” the man smirked, embellishing his story with a terrifying voice. “They say that there’s a Man-Eating castle in that ridge. Inside, there’s a monster that eats humans. Anyone who enters will be devoured until there’s not even a bone left behind. You won’t be able to find a single corpse left inside! There are no exceptions!”

As Nie Huaisang squeaked in fear, Nie Mingjue frowned deeper, wondering where on earth the man had gotten information like that.

“Scary, right?’

“So scary!” Wei Wuxian agreed. “But… if no bones are left behind and no corpses could be found, then may I ask how people are so sure the victims were eaten?”

Wen Ruohan’s lips cracked up into a smile at the question. He had already been fairly sure based on the boy’s intelligence, but it was nice to get confirmation that Wei Wuxian was an experienced investigator as well.

“I — someone saw it, of course!”

“But didn’t you say that people who enter that place are eaten until there are no bones left behind, without exception? Then how could someone have gotten out to spread the legend?”

“That’s… that’s just how the legend goes. How would I know?”

“Then may I ask if you know how many people were eaten and where it happened?”

“Age?” Lan Wangji added on. “Gender? Name and surname? Where do they come from?”

“N-no.”

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow, “Qinghe’s know it all, huh?”

“The legend doesn’t say anything about that!”

“Ah, Wei-xiong, you’re truly a terrible audience member.”

“Huaisang, they’re not there for fun,” Nie Mingjue lectured. “Perhaps you could learn something from their example!”

Lan Qiren nodded, “Wangji and Wei-gongzi’s older selves should be inspiration for you all. Try to follow what they do when you conduct an investigation on a night hunt. These are the sorts of questions you need to ask.”

JIn Zixuan, who had always had people to investigate for him and therefore had never gotten the opportunity, nodded with a near-religious devotion.

Annoyed, the man stood up, “I really can’t have a conversation with you-”

“No, no, no, no, no,” Wei Wuxian grabbed the man’s hand and sat him back down. “Don’t be mad. Let me ask one more question! That Xinglu ridge should still be in the Qinghe region, right? Isn’t Qinghe under the protection of the Nie Sect? If there’s really a man eating monster at Xinglu ridge, why aren’t they doing anything about it?”

“The Nie Sect? If it was the old Nie Sect of course they wouldn’t ignore it! But the former Sect Leader died of a qi deviation. The current leader of the Nie Sect….”

Numerous eyes turned Nie Huaisang’s way.

“Well, there’s a reason he’s known as The Headshaker.”

A loud, mocking laugh escaped Wen Chao’s throat, the first gleeful sound he’d made since watching his own death. Hearing that, rage filled Nie Mingjue’s body and he turned to the hated Wen heir with burning eyes.

“What?” Wen Chao laughed. “It’s *him*. We all knew this was going to happen.”

And no one could deny that.

“The current Sect Leader is Nie Huaisang, right?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Why are you calling him the Headshaker?”

“...If I have to be straightforward, the current leader really is hopeless. Whenever he’s asked a question, all he can say is ‘I don’t know.’”

Wen Chao’s smirk increased in arrogance.

All of the watchers were well aware of who Nie Huaisang was. In fact, this was probably the expected outcome. But still.

“It took all your sects *and* the Yiling Patriarch to take us down, but Nie Huaisang was all it took to destroy the Nie Sect all on his own, it seems,” Wen Chao laughed again. “And to think you were so proud of a victory you got only by luck-”

“You say that as if you wouldn’t have destroyed the Wen Sect in half the time if you had become Sect Leader,” Nie Mingjue growled. “Or have you forgotten how many times Wei Wuxian was able to beat you?”

“You damn-”

“Is Wei Wuxian supposed to be indicative of your side?” Wen Ruohan asked, cutting his son off. “After all, you all took part in a siege against him, and were merely ‘allies’ during the Sunshot Campaign.”

“Regardless, he was on our side at the time,” Lan Xichen pointed out. “Just like Wangji was on our side during the archery competition. And like Mingjue was on our side when he took out Wen Xu.”

Wen Ruohan’s smile turned arctic cold.

Nie Mingjue laughed, “And besides, if you think a single one of you Wen dogs is worth *half* of what we are-”

“I hope that phrase isn’t meant to be all-inclusive,” Wen Qing bit out, halting all conversation. Every pair of eyes in the room swung her way, but her eyes were focused only on Nie Mingjue.

The simulation continued, and the man went on to describe the way any attempts to ask Nie Huaisang questions would go. The three “I don’t know”s were especially exaggerated by the man, but the watchers were all too preoccupied to pay it any mind.

Normally, Wen Qing wouldn’t be so stupid as to directly antagonize Nie Mingjue and ask him to make a decision. Normally, she would have allowed them to argue amongst themselves until they finally came to their own conclusions. However, over the past few days, the ice between her last name and Nie Mingjue had been chipped away bit by bit.

Now, she needed to know where she and her family would stand once this was over. Was she just a “Wen dog” to him, or….

“A-Qing,” Wen Ruohan spoke. “Can I take that to mean you intend to completely separate from your family?”

“My *family* will always have my loyalty,” she responded. “However, I will not kill, and I will not allow them to be put in danger. So, why don’t you tell me, Your Excellency: *do* I need a complete separation from the sect?”

“Not at all,” Wen Ruohan responded instantly. “You’re a Wen, after all. We won’t kick you out.”

For the loyalty she could inspire in Wei Wuxian, if nothing else.

Now, every eye was being turned on Nie Mingjue, including an internally cursing Wen Qing. She had miscalculated slightly, and had assumed Wen Ruohan would agree to the division. Instead, he had increased the ties between them, and left the final decision up to Nie Mingjue. Wen Qing wouldn’t become an direct enemy of the Wen Sect if she had a choice — it had too many people she loved for her to do that — but she wouldn’t help them either.

(But, if Wen Ruohan’s claim on her stopped the Sunshot Campaign from offering any support, then-)

“...It was not,” Nie Mingjue finally acknowledged.

“Not *what*?” Wen Qing snapped.

“Not inclusive,” he continued. “So long as you personally don’t take up arms against us, the Qinghe Nie Sect won’t take up arms against you. I swear on my honor.”

The two of them made eye contact, and the mountain of pressure Wen Qing had been carrying since the simulation started suddenly seemed to lift off her shoulders and vanish.

Nie Mingjue had made his choice.

And he'd picked them, over his hate.

Finally, they could turn their attention back towards the simulation.

"Then, brother, can you tell us where we can find that Xinglu ridge?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Are you two planning on going?"

"Mmhm."

The man clicked his tongue as though he was speaking to a disobedient child, "That's so brave. Alright, you just need to follow that path for about two miles."

"Thank you," Lan Wangji said, giving the man a respectful nod.

"Your adult self seems fairly honorable, doesn't he?" Lan Xichen whispered to his brother. "Maybe you don't need to worry so much about him."

"No," Lan Wangji disagreed, not even trying to deny the worry he was feeling. "No, he's crafty and shameless and audacious and-and *insane.*"

"But Wangji-"

"No," he shook his head. "I'll *never* become like him."

Leaving Wei Wuxian at the end of the Yiling Patriarch's return was clearly the right decision. He had no idea why his older self was acting in such a manner, but keeping Wei Wuxian captive was not an option. He refused to become like the adult version of Hanguang-jun.

~~Or like his father.~~

~~Except Lan Wangji couldn't be sure of that, because he still *didn't know* what had happened between his parents. He didn't know which sides were willing, and he didn't know which sides were right. Somehow, that made the unknowns regarding his other self's behavior even more terrifying than before.~~

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wanji stood up to go, and, watching them, the fake cultivator sighed, "You guys are going to such a dangerous place, why don't you take a few portraits of the Yiling Patriarch as a protective amulet?"

"I think I'd rather have the real Yiling Patriarch," Nie Huaisang laughed. Although he smiled slightly at Nie Huaisang's comment, Nie Mingjue didn't add anything either.

(He had just sided with Wen Qing. He sided with someone who had *benefited* from his father's death. The research materials she had were brought with the blood of minor sects, and he had *supported her*.)

(What was he supposed to do now?)

“We get along so well,” the charlatan held the posters out. “How about just three coins for each?”

Wei Wuxian coughed out a wheezing laugh, unable to believe that the fake cultivation was truly that shameless, and responded, “No, thank you. Let’s go, Hanguang-jun.”

“Mn.”

And with that, he and Lan Wangji began their journey towards the mysterious castle.

“Well, if there’s one up side to having seen the Yiling Patriarch’s power, it’s that we don’t have to worry when he goes to do things like this. Nothing he encounters could possibly be a bigger monster than him,” Madam Yu mumbled.

Three pairs of shocked eyes turned to stare at her, and she glared back at her family until her children flinched backed off. At that, Jiang Fengmian’s gaze turned disapproving.

She internally fumed. What was that look supposed to mean? She was practically praising Wei Wuxian, wasn't she? And why were her children so quick to lose eye contact with her, it wasn’t like she would actually hurt them!

(But knowing that hadn't been enough to stop Jiang Cheng from trembling every time she shouted at Wei Wuxian in front of him.)

The scene switched to a large cedarwood forest where Fairy sprinted forward, leaving a panting Jin Ling behind.

“Stupid dog! There’s no meat over there!” he shouted.

Jin Zixuan snorted, happiness reluctantly bubbling up in them. Despite the fact that the current Jin Ling was a bit of a brat, he was still Zixuan's son. Seeing Jin Ling with a dog so much like his own....

Jin Zixuan’s conflicted gratitude for his half brother seemed to be growing by the hour.

“Why are you running so fast?” Jin Ling complained. Despite his young age, Jin Ling was still a cultivator. For the spiritual dog to have been that much faster was a testament to its high worth.

After panting for a few seconds, Jin Ling straightened up and forced himself to follow Fairy deeper into the forest. Crows cawed in the trees, and clouds moved to cover the sun again.

“Sect Leader Nie?” Jiang Yanli spoke up. “You… you have an idea of what the simulation might be building up to, right? Is it… likely to be dangerous?”

After a moment of thought, Nie Mingjue responded, “It shouldn’t be. So long as he doesn’t recklessly destroy-”

He cut off, realizing who he was talking about. Would the boy who had dared the goddess statue to show him a soul-eating monster hesitate before destroying something dangerous?

“Well, it’s possible nothing will happen,” Nie Mingjue muttered, somewhat hesitant. In response, Madam Jin gave a long, tired sigh.

Luckily for the Jin and Jiangs’ growing nervousness, the next transition brought them to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, walking through the same forest Jin Ling had just entered.

’No wonder Jin Ling came,’ **Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*He couldn’t catch that Soul-Consuming Goddess Statue, so he must have come here for the monster of Xinglu Ridge.*’**

Somehow, it seemed that the insecurities plaguing her brother had passed down to her son as well. Squeezing her hands together, Jiang Yanli glanced over at Wei Wuxian and silently requested his help. If anyone could bring Jin Ling away from that, it was her shidi.

A sigh, ‘*We’ve been walking around for a while now, but we haven’t seen even a shadow of the monster yet. Not that it was likely from the beginning.*’

“Huh?” Jiang Cheng tilted his head.

‘*If frightening legends in any area are true, there is always detailed information. At Dafan Mountain, it was easy to find where the victims lived and their personal information. But, as the charlatan was unaware of the details, this is most likely a case of exaggerated hearsay.*’

“...Oh. Duh.”

The more he saw, the more Lan Qiren kept thinking that his nephew and Wei Wuxian made an excellent team. He could only hope that the latter’s lack of knowledge of the simulation wouldn’t prevent the real versions from having this once they got out.

‘*Has the Nie Sect really not sent anyone to check this out? From what I remember from our time in the Cloud Recesses, Nie Huaisang wasn’t an unkind person. And it’s not that he’s not smart either, it’s just that his heart was set on other things. He’d rather use his intelligence to paint fans, search for birds, skip classes, and catch fish, rather than practice cultivation. And now, it seems, he has to go around asking everyone for help, especially his brother’s two sworn brothers.*’

With each word, the tension which had been growing in Nie Mingjue lessened slightly. Yes, the other Clan leaders were probably about to find out the Nie Sect’s most carefully hidden secret, but at least he was here to take care of that. In the future being shown, the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun were most likely going to find out and confront Nie Huaisang about it.

With this — those surprisingly kind words that had left the real Nie Huaisang gaping for several seconds — Nie Mingjue felt assured that Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian would treat his brother fairly.

Though it did make him happy that his sworn brothers were helping out as well. Perhaps he and Lan Xichen could try to find Meng Yao once this was over and get to know him.

'*Oh, well. Qinghe seems to be doing well enough, and I'm sure the other sects will help out if anything major-*'

Wei Wuxian cut off, seeing seven or eight figures staggering towards him.

"A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked. Those figures in ragged clothing were slow and thin — the weakest level of fierce corpses. Even a non cultivator wouldn't feel especially threatened by them.

"Wei Wuxian can't possibly be scared of them too, right?" Wen Qing asked. It felt a bit silly to do so, but she would never have expected him to be scared of dogs.

(And besides, hadn't they all seen fierce corpses similar to these ones fighting to tear him apart in the Burial Mounds? Even if Wei Wuxian was scared of them, she wasn't sure she could judge him for that.)

Worry instantly spreading across his expression, Wei Wuxian ducked behind Lan Wangji.

"Wei Ying?" the real one asked, clenching his fists and subconsciously preparing for a fight.

Then, the walking corpses wobbled about twenty meters from the pair. As soon as they laid eyes on Wei Wuxian, they shot away in terror, nearly climbing over each other in their haste to retreat.

Wei Wuxian laughed nervously, "Wow, Hanguang-jun, you're so cool! They were so scared when they saw you that they ran away at once!"

For the first time, both the simulated Hanguang-jun and the real watchers were rendered speechless. Not even the adult Lan Wangji could have expected Wei Wuxian to be *this* shameless.

"...I've never seen low leveled corpses move so fast," Wen Ruohan commented, watching their still retreating forms. Though, in all honestly, he couldn't say he was surprised.

(Even now, they could all feel the all-encompassing power lurking beneath Wei Wuxian's skin. All the low leveled spirits in the area would instinctively know better than to cross him.)

Seeing that Hanguang-jun was still speechless before the Yiling Patriarch's weak excuse, Wei Wuxian laughed and pushed Lan Wangji's shoulder, adding, "Let's go, let's go. Let's get off this ridge. Those are probably the only monsters there were. The people here are so gossipy that a few useless walking corpses became ruthless monsters in their mouths. Their so-called 'man-eating castle' must have been the same, don't you think?"

After a few more shoves from Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji finally started walking. Wei Wuxian was about to continue the conversation when he suddenly heard a bark in the distance.

With a high-pitched squeal, Wei Wuxian darted behind Lan Wangji again.

Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, Nie Mingjue, and Wen Qing all snorted at the dramatic reaction.

"I… is he serious?" Lan Qiren checked. When the Jiangs all nodded without hesitation, Lan Qiren's nephews frowned deeply. No matter how silly it seemed, Lan Wangji wouldn't be able to view something that caused Wei Wuxian distress with humor.

After a moment of silence, they stepped next to his virtual self and the simulated Wei Wuxian, wishing there was some way for Wangji to transfer the comfort he was trying to offer.

(In the back of his mind, some part of Jiang Cheng was trying very, very hard not to be smug. He had no right to be — Wei Wuxian was *terrified* — but he couldn't help but think that if Wei Wuxian had gone with him instead of Lan Wangji, he'd be there to chase the dogs away for him.)

After a few seconds without the dog getting any louder, Wei Wuxian hesitantly peaked out from behind Lan Wangji. Despite that, his arms were still hanging onto Hanguang-jun's torso for dear life, and his whole body was racked by shivers.

"It's still far away. What are you hiding for?"

"I-I-I-I-I-I-I'm gonna hide first then see. Where is it? *Where is it?*"

After listening for a moment, Lan Wangji observed, "It's Jin Ling's black haired spiritual dog."

Worry seeping into her heart, Jiang Yanli began to look around desperately.

Similarly, having heard Jin Ling's name, Wei Wuxian straightened up at once, only to collapse into hiding again when the barks resumed. Seeing that, Lan Wangji frowned and continued:

"If his spiritual dog is barking in such a way, something must have happened."

"Then go check on him!" Jin Zixuan snapped, worry boiling over. "It's just a dog, it won't hurt you!"

Agreeing, Wei Wuxian said, "Th-then… then we'll-then let's… let's g-go and see."

Despite that suggestion, the pair remained still.

Growing impatient, Madam Jin and Madam Yu glared. Despite Wei Wuxian's obvious terror, they weren't feeling a call or reaction from the nearby resentful energy. They knew that even Wei Wuxian's control wasn't perfect, so they could be fairly sure that Wei Wuxian was just playing up his reactions to disgust Lan Wangji again.

~~Right?~~

Finally, Wei Wuxian realized that Lan Wangji wasn't planning on taking initiative. Fear raising his voice at least three octaves, he began to shout:

"Hanguang-jun, walk! Start moving! If you don't move, how am I going to?!"

"You… let go first," Lan Wangji requested, unable to think clearly with Wei Wuxian hanging on. After a brief, reluctant pause, Wei Wuxian forced himself get off, and the two of them began to walk.

Lan Wangji glanced back.

"You… fear dogs?"

"...Yes," Wei Wuxian responded, glancing down. "I've… had a few nasty experiences."

Snow fell from the sky, and the world shifted again to reveal a winter in Yiling, an unknown amount of time ago (though presumably before Wei Wuxian's death). A thick blanket of white covered the ground, so heavy that footprints nearly half a meter deep were imprinted there.

"Those below, move out of the way!" a man's voice shouted. "Firecrackers are going off!"

"...What?" several people asked, looking around. Some turned to the Jiangs for answers, but they could only shake their heads in equal confusion.

"Happy New Year!" someone in the crowd shouted.

"Wishing you happiness and prosperity!"

"All the best! May all things go well for you!"

"Happy New Year!"

The excited shouts continued, and the large crowd scampered this way and that, phasing through the watchers as they went. There was so much chaos and noise and light that it was hard to make out anything in the crowd.

Then, the simulation shifted, and focused their attention on a beggar boy in an unlit street alley.

"Who's that?" Jiang Cheng asked, frowning in distaste upon seeing the boy's state of dress. Jin Guangshan also unconsciously stepped back, well accustomed to needing to look out for street rats and thieves on his trips through Lanling.

Other than his unusually-attractive features, there was nothing that separated this boy from any other homeless child. He had messy hair, dust-covered cheeks, and limbs so thin it looked like they would snap under the slightest force. There was some fat rounding his cheeks into an adorable shape, but the rest of him might as well have been made out of twigs.

Wen Chao scoffed, scooting away from the disgustingly dirt-drenched boy, and everyone else wondered what this child could have to do with Wei Wuxian's fear of dogs. Had he seen the child get hurt by them?

"Steam buns!" a shopkeeper shouted. "Freshly made steam buns! Steam buns! Fresh and hot steam buns! Ay! Have a look! Freshly made steam buns! Steam buns!"

Frowning in concern, Jiang Yanli found herself wishing she could buy some for the kid. Similarly, Lan Wangji and Wen Qing were overcome with a thick layer of worry for the boy. They sincerely hoped his story would not end in tragedy.

"Hey, kid!" the shopkeeper called out, noticing the boy despite the latter not saying anything. "Say, do you want a hot steam bun?"

In response to the man's question, the boy's stomach gave a pitiful sound of agreement.

Jiang Yanli seemed to shine with happiness at the offer, and Jin Zixuan mentally promised to give that shopkeeper a year of the man's earnings in exchange. Now the boy would be able to eat-

"It's fine. I'm not hungry," the boy responded.

His stomach whined in protest.

"Well, that's-"

"*Obviously* a lie!" Wen Qing finished, glaring down at the boy. Given the state of his appearance and the malnutrition of his body, it was undeniable that the boy didn't have the luxury of refusing such a gift.

"You're not hungry?" the man repeated, laughing. "I can hear your stomach growling all the way over here! Here, the bun will be a gift. What filling would you like?"

"...R-really?" the boy's eyes lit up in hope. "I-"

"Hey!" the shopkeeper's wife shouted, stepping out from behind another stall. "Do you think our household is so well off that we can do this? Xiao Bao is going to school next year, and we haven't earned enough money for that yet!"

Somehow, despite how unrelated it seemed, the Jiangs couldn't help but remember themselves at those words. And the comparison was not one they liked.

'*You damn brat, I hate you!' the simulated Madam Yu had shouted. 'Look what our sect has turned into because of you!'*

'Why did you have to save Lan Wangji?!' Jiang Cheng agreed. 'Why did you do that? I don't care if Lan Wangji or Jin Zixuan dies! Just let them die! What's their deaths got to do with us?'

The situation was very different. The shopkeeper was being practical for a small issue, Jiang Cheng had been reacting in grief to a large one. However, and despite their best attempts, no one could resist drawing the connection between them.

“Where did this little beggar come from?” the shopkeeper’s wife continued. “Aiya, so dirty! Shoo! Don’t get in the way of our business!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the child said, picking himself up off the ground and running off.

“Oh no!” Jiang Yanli gasped out.

“Hey, hey! Kid, wait!” the shopkeeper called out. “Wait!”

“Huh?”

“Here, a bun. I said I’d give you one. Go on, eat it.”

“What are you doing?!” his wife exclaimed.

“Thank you, it’s okay. I’m not really hungry,” the boy repeated, smiling brightly and running off.

Watching him go, the shopkeeper sighed, “Aiya, it’s New Years. The kid is quite well behaved; it’s not like he’s bothering anyone for food. What’s wrong with giving away a bun?”

However, under his wife’s steely gaze, he didn’t run after the boy either.

Seeing that, Jiang Fengmian had to look away. The situation was much more complicated at the Jiang manor — and Jiang Fengmian had *succeeded* at bringing Wei Wuxian back — but how many times had he backed off in about the same way? How many times had he allowed Wei Wuxian to stop kneeling for the crime of “speaking too loud,” without ever confronting Madam Yu about the punishments she gave?

Yes, he was trying to change now, but he could help but feel that it was too little, too late.

However, as that parallel entered his mind, he looked over at the retreating child again.

“I can’t walk anymore,” the boy sighed, slowing down to a barely-there stumble and panting heavily. He was trembling all over from the fatigue of sprinting away when he hadn’t eaten in days, but there was no resentment or hate in his expression.

“...A-Xian?” Jiang Fengmian asked, staring at the young boy.

Several people glanced over, “...What?”

“I’m too full to eat any more of this,” a lady complained, holding a delicious-looking steam bun and gazing at it with a heartbroken expression.

“If you can’t, then don’t force yourself to eat any more of it! We don’t want to make that child in your belly uncomfortable,” her husband laughed, then glanced over at the boy. “Hey, little begger over there! Come, come!”

The lady smiled as well, “Come over here, little boy. You can have this bun.”

“Thank you!” the boy smiled brightly, scarfing down the bun hungrily. With a smile like that, it was hard to imagine that the boy had ever felt even the slightest inconvenience — so innocent and warm that it seemed to banish all troubles and evil from the worldly earth.

They had only ever seen one other smile that looked like that.

“Wait, A-Die,” Jiang Yanli looked back and forth between her father and the simulated child. “Do you mean… is that-”

“Wei Wuxian?” Jiang Cheng asked. “No. No, it can’t be. He’s not — I mean, I know he was on the streets for a while, but he’s not… he’s a….”

He’s a member of the gentry, Jiang Cheng was trying to say. He’s a young master like the rest of us — fourth ranked in terms of desirability. First in terms of archery. One of the best of our generation. That *can’t* be him.

Lan Qiren looked over, “...He spent four years on the streets, didn’t he?”

Lan Wangji flinched.

Pursing his lips together, Jiang Fengmian nodded, “His parents died when he was five. I didn’t find him until he was nine.”

Even the Jiang children had only been introduced to Wei Wuxian after he had been taken back by their father. He had been cleaned and dressed and fed when they’d met. Yes, he’d been somewhat small, but-

As the couple walked off, they began to whisper to each other happily, the wife mentioning, “I wonder if the one in my belly will as handsome as they boy.”

“Good looking or not, it’s still our child, right?” the man responded. “It’s fine as long as they can grow up safely. As parents, what else can we ask for?”

Hearing that, Wei Wuxian seemed to wilt slightly and paused in his eating.

‘*Father*…’ he thought. ‘*Mother*….’

The shock in their expressions quickly made way for pity. Wei Wuxian deserved silence as he mourned his parents.

(It must have been nicer before Madam Yu started accusing his mother of betraying his father and sleeping with Jiang Fengmian. No matter how much she tried to ignore it, bile crept up in her throat at the thought.)

Then, in the distance, they heard a dog bark.

Wei Wuxian *froze.*

"No," Lan Wangji whispered, suddenly remembering what had prompted the flashback. "No, no, no, no-"

Silent as a snake in the grass, a large, drooling dog stepped out from behind a corner. Its pitch black fur made it stand out against the snow, leaving no doubt as to what it was.

"Stay away…" the little, tiny, weak, six year old Wei Wuxian shook his head. "Stay away!"

The dog *pounced.*

"*Help!*" he screamed, and the dog bit into his fragile arm. "Help! Go away! It hurts! I'll give you the bun, stop!"

Blood dripped down from where the teeth sank in to ivory flesh, painting it a violent red. It was so, so much bigger than Wei Wuxian. It tugged him this way and that without resistance, flinging the young boy around and ignoring the cries of pain in its battle to establish dominance.

Lan Wangji sat frozen on the ground. It was one thing when it was the Xuanwu, or the Wens, or the Burial Mounds. Then, it was an unstoppably powerful force that Lan Wangji could only barely imagine taking on.

But this was a common *dog*. Even someone without cultivation could help. If Lan Wangji was there, it could be dealt with using a single glare.

And yet there was still. Nothing. He. Could. Do.

"Wei Ying," he whispered, and-

A laugh broke off his train of thought. He glanced back, and saw Wen Chao snickering to himself about the helplessness of the dreaded Yiling Patriarch before a single dog.

Wei Wuxian was slammed into the ground, and he cried out in pain. The dog — so much bigger and stronger and heavier than him — growled as it crawled on top.

"Da Huang!" the dog's owner called out, finally finding it and moving to pull it off Wei Wuxian's body. "*Da Huang!*"

"Thank god," Jiang Yanli whispered. "Thank god. Thank god."

Jin Zixuan was frozen. Wei Wuxian was his peer — had been his *enemy* when they fought at the Cloud Recesses. He was Jin Zixuan's equal — his better, even, in terms of cultivation.

So, somehow, it had never occurred to him or Nie Huaisang or Lan Xichen or Lan Wangji or even *Jiang Cheng* what "Wei Wuxian lived on the streets" meant. They had never been able

to see any traces of it in his personality.

But if he was still scared of dogs to this day-

“Help me!” Wei Wuxian cried out.

Wen Chao snorted in glee.

“Let go!” the man shouted, and finally — *finally* — the owner managed to pull his dog off Wei Wuxian. Big, fat tears fell down Wei Wuxian’s face, and he trembled in his spot on the ground.

The man paid him no mind.

“Aiya, really,” the owner sighed. “Go back now, Da-Huang! I stop watching you for a second and you go and cause trouble for me! Good thing it’s just a little begger. If you’d bitten someone’s kid and their parents came over to make trouble, what would you expect me to do?”

He pulled the dog away, leaving Wei Wuxian trembling on a blood-soaked spot of snow.

“That-that doesn’t…” Nie Huaisang was speechless. “That doesn’t make it *okay!*”

Wen Chao opened his mouth, about to speak up, and instantly felt his soul leave his body as Lan Wangji, Jiang Cheng, Nie Mingjue, and Jin Zixuan glared, just *daring him* to speak up.

Wei Wuxian sniffed, then wiped his tears and glanced back:

“Oh, the steam bun!” he realized, grabbing it and taking another bite.

Grateful that it had been left, rather than upset at what had happened because of it.

“It’s good!” he cried out, another smile forming on his face.

This time, when Cangse Sanren’s words rang in their heads, neither Jiang Fengmian nor Lan Qiren could view it positively.

‘Remember the things others do for you, not the things you do for others. Only when people don't hold so much in their hearts can they finally feel free.’

But that didn’t mean ‘don’t get upset,’ or ‘don’t focus on the negatives at all.’ After this, how could Wei Wuxian not be angry? How could he not desire retribution?

How could he keep smiling to matter what?

The seasons changed, and the snow disappeared. It was now mid-summer, still in Yiling, and still with an orphaned, abandoned Wei Wuxian. A watermelon seller spoke out to the crowd:

“Watermelons! Freshly picked watermelons! Big and sweet! Come have a taste!”

A merchant who had bought some from the man gave a pleased hum as he bit in.

Right then and there, Lan Wangji promised that he would shower Wei Wuxian with so many piles of pork buns and watermelon slices that Yunmeng's head disciple wouldn't be able to see past them.

The merchant smiled, "You grow the sweetest watermelons after all! This year's summer is so hot! Just one trip pulling a cart and I'm already covered in sweat!"

He grinned.

"Hey, hand over another slice!"

The watermelon seller did, then leaned closer to say, "Hey, when you're done eating, don't just throw the peel away. Put it over there. There's a kid who often collects them to eat."

While recounting stories about Lan Wangji to Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian had mentioned 'It's fun to think of him. You have no idea — he's just way too amusing. I told him 'Your sect's food is disgusting. I'd rather eat stir fried watermelon peel than eat your food!''

Wei Wuxian was a young master. He had truly and honestly seemed unaffected by his past on the streets. And yet, the closer they looked, the more clues seemed to appear.

(It was four years of his life. *No one* would be unaffected by that. And yet they'd never asked.)

The merchant, who had looked over to where the watermelon seller had pointed, finally turned back and asked, "A kid?"

"Yeah, a little street urchin. Well behaved and likes to smile."

'*Well behaved?*' Lan Qiren wanted to scoff, but felt the grim humor in his mind instantly die. After all, he had seen time and time again that Wei Wuxian knew how to hold his tongue.

And when he did, it was always out of desperation, rather than respect.

"Oh, look, he's here."

And indeed, Wei Wuxian was scampering along — older now, but his clothes just as dirty as before. Upon closer inspection, the watchers realized another difference: the scars of bite marks on his body seemed double the number that had been there before.

"Here," the watermelon seller said, offering out a few of the rinds.

"Thank you!"

'*Huh, he really does like to smile,*' the merchant thought. '*Born with a nice face too. If I'd known about that, I'd have left a few more bites for him.*'

Hearing that, Lan Xichen stepped closer to his brother, hoping to provide some comfort with, "At least all this implies that it wasn't as bad for him as it could have been. He had food; he had some people to help him out, and-"

"Xiongzhang, please," Lan Wangji shook his head. "I just… I need a moment."

Understanding instantly, Lan Xichen backed off.

Winter came again, the snow covering the ground in a field of blinding white.

Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang had always associated snow with fun. It was snowmen and rolling down powdery hills and throwing snowballs at Nie Mingjue and getting new clothes from Madam Jin. It was less training for Nie Huaisang, and more challenging training for Jin Zixuan. It was exciting.

Now, all they could wonder was how much harder winter made it for Wei Wuxian to survive.

The simulation brought them forward, past the bundled up merchants and shoppers, and into a much more desolate part of town. In the back of an alley, four large, wild dogs towered over a quivering child.

"...A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked.

The dogs loomed above the shivering nine year old, barking fiercely and slowly cornering him, their mouths watering in hunger. The sight made Wei Wuxian whimper and try to scoot farther away, but he was too paralyzed by fear to move. In a moment of desperation, he grabbed a small rock and threw it at the dogs.

It landed on the floor at least a meter away from the wolf's snout.

Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan were frozen as they watched the wolves approach. They loved dogs — they truly did — but, now….

As they looked over at the narrowed eyes, the dark, mangled coats, and the warning growls, all they could focus on was how large the dogs' teeth were, and how easily they would be able to snap a weak child's leg in two.

The largest dog took another step closer, and Wei Wuxian's shaking legs kept him chained to the ground.

Wei Wuxian's first year in Lotus Pier, he had been meek and hesitant. Never taking too much, never asking for anything, and always on the lookout for something that would get him kicked out. When he had finally started to relax — to realize that his placement there *wasn't* a temporary state of things — Yu Ziyuan had taken it as proof that Wei Wuxian was just as arrogant ~~and fearless~~ as his mother had been.

But now, remembering the muted way he had always carried himself in her presence, she wondered whether he had actually been as confident in his place as she'd thought.

(And whether *this* was what he imagined returning to every time she got angry at him.)

The largest dog pulled back in a growl, then yelled out a vicious bark. Two more approached from behind an alley, until there were six dogs all staring the boy down.

Lan Wangji flinched in synch with Wei Wuxian.

“Are those *all* bite marks?” Wen Qing asked, looking down at the boy. If she had thought there were a lot when he was getting watermelon, then the number now was as endless as the stars. Bile rose up in her throat as she stared at the constellations of red dots on Wei Wuxian’s pale, thin, twig-like legs. And arms. And side. And-

The dogs jumped forward, and Wei Ying looked away, covering his face with his arms. A moment later, however, the dogs’ growls were replaced with whimpers, and a person’s shadow covered Wei Ying instead.

“A-Die!” Jiang Cheng gasped out, relief spreading across his face.

Wei Ying hesitantly looked up, and found Jiang Fengmian’s kind face smiling down at him. The Jiang clarity bell on his waist swayed lightly as he knelt before Wei Wuxian.

“Calm down,” he whispered. “Don’t be scared. It’s alright now. You must be A-Ying.”

'*A-Ying?*' Wei Ying thought. '*My name had a 'Ying' in it... right?*'

“Who….”

“Ah, my name is Jiang Fengmian. I was a friend of your parents.”

“You.. know my parents?” he asked, hope sneaking into his expression.

How had he felt, Madam Yu wondered, when she first accused her husband of Wei Wuxian’s true origin?

‘Both my parents are real people!’ Wei Wuxian shouted. ‘I won’t let anyone assign me to other Clans!’

“I do. Your father was Wei Changze, right?’

“Right!”

Jiang Fengmian smiled, and held a hand out for Wei Wuxian to take.

“Come. Let’s go home.”

It took less than a second for the fear on Wei Wuxian’s face to make way for a blinding joy. With the brightest smile any of them had ever seen, Wei Wuxian nodded and took Jiang Fengmian’s offered hand.

Wen Ruohan could only curse that Jiang Fengmian had gotten to the boy first. It had been so easy to convince Wei Wuxian to go back with him. Life on the streets was paramount to torture for someone that young, of course he would take the first hand offered to him.

~~And then he got to Lotus Pier, and met Madam Yu. Life with them was still better than life on the streets, but, now, she couldn't help but wonder how much better it actually was.~~

The memory faded away, returning them to the forest with Wei Wuxian in Mo Xuanyu's body. A moment later, there was another, even louder bark, making Wei Wuxian squeak and grab on to Lan Wangji's arm tightly.

His eyes were bloodshot and terrified, and his breath came out in panicked little gasps.

And suddenly, every time Jiang Cheng had teased him about dogs seemed much less funny.

"W-well, maybe we should look on the positive side of things," Nie Huaisang suggested.

Jiang Cheng glared and snapped, "*What* positive side?!"

"Er… you know… if he hadn't had this experience of having little to no food and still running from things trying to bite him… maybe even he wouldn't have been able to survive the Burial Mounds. Or maybe not. I don't really know anything about this and-"

As Nie Huaisang continued to ramble on, an even more solemn air fell over the Sunshot Campaign warriors.

Another loud bark, and Wei Wuxian flinched again, battling a long trained fight-or-flight instinct. Breathing heavily, he seemed to curl in on himself as he hid behind Lan Wangji, scanning their surroundings warily.

"H-Hanguang-jun," he began. "I think we've passed this place twice already."

Looking around, the watchers were forced to admit that it did look suspiciously similar to an area of the forest they had walked through before. Then again, *every* section of the forest looked pretty similar, so it was hard to tell.

"And-" another bark made Wei Wuxian flinch and duck behind Lan Wangji again. "Why does the dog keep switching between sounding close and far away?"

Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian made eye contact.

"Do you think there's a maze array here?"

Should Lan Wangji be grateful that Wei Wuxian had gotten just used enough to the barking to not stammer, or should he be enraged that his other self was letting Wei Wuxian listen at all?

(Why did his other self get all of Wei Ying's time and presents and attention? What had he done to deserve that? Why wasn't there a Wei Ying here for the real Lan Wangji?)

Lan Xichen glanced over and had to stifle a smile at the barely-visible pout on his brother's face.

After a pause, Lan Wangji stepped forward and reported, "The spiritual dog sounds the loudest here. That's most likely where it is. Let's go."

They marched forward.

Despite the very-real fear Wei Wuxian had of dogs, he was walking forward. Jin Zixuan couldn't help but feel like the debt he owed his 'to-be pseudo brother in law' was growing and growing.

"What's that?" Wei Wuxian asked, narrowing his eyes at the space before them. It had at first appeared to be an empty grotto in the forest, but, upon closer inspection, the light around it bent oddly, lighting Wei Wuxian's instincts on fire.

In the privacy of his mind, Nie Mignjue began a string of the most violent, dirty curses he knew.

After a brief instant of eye contact, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji stepped through the barrier, allowing them to see the silhouette of a large stone castle.

Every other sect had already gotten things revealed. Lan Wangji's love, the Jiang family's issues, Jin Guangshan's cause of death, and Wen Ruohan's failure were all details they wouldn't want the other clans to know. In all honesty, Nie Mingjue had no right to keep this from them.

Still, it wouldn't be fun.

"So there really is a castle," Wei Wuxian muttered, surprise apparent on his face. "Then the legend isn't based off nothing. Though it's hard to say if it's a 'Man-Eating' castle…."

He pursed his lips, the never-ending barks sending his nerves tingling in fearful anticipation.

"Why isn't it going away?" Wei Wuxian whined pitifully. "Where is its owner? Why isn't its owner here?"

Biting his tongue nervously, Jin Zixuan began to twiddle his fingers, fear for Jin Ling rapidly consuming his mind. If it weren't for the fact that Jin Ling was responsible for the simulation (and therefore going to be fine), Jin Zixuan was sure he or his fiancee would have fainted from the stress by now.

Then, from behind a wall of the mysterious castle, the large dog entered their line of sight.

"...Spiritual dogs are loyal guardians," Lan Wangji commented. "It wouldn't leave its master's side. He must be nearby."

Wei Wuxian flinched back, "Why is it coming over here?!"

And indeed, the dog had sped through the watchers and pounced, shocking many into jumping back.

Its powerful jaws snatched onto the ends of Wei Wuxian's robes.

“Lan Zhan!” he shouted, squeezing tighter. “Lan Zhan Lan Zhan *Lan Zhan!*”

Fairy pulled, dragging a terrified Wei Wuxian, who himself dragged an outwardly impassive Hanguang-jun, back in the direction Fairy had come from. When they finally stopped, they were greeted to the sight of the massive hole Jin Ling had presumably blasted open in the wall.

“Stupid brat!” Nie Mingjue cursed, and the Jins and Jiangs were too much in agreement to oppose the statement. After a moment of standing frozen in terror, Jiang Yanli glanced over.

“Uh… Chiheng-zun, what do you… think will happen to him?”

The Nie Sect Leader pursed his lips together, then bowed:

“I apologize. He is in danger partly because of the Nie Sect. However, it would have killed without injuries if it worked, so I am certain that the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun found him in time.”

Seeing that Nie Mingjue’s words of assurance had done little to calm the others’ nerves, Lan Xichen silently moved beside him. After a moment of hesitation, Wen Qing followed as well, making sure Nie Mingjue didn't stand alone.

“Why does that brat keep trying to take on things he isn’t ready for?” Jin Zixuan grumbled, then shot his to-be wife a look. “I know he was dead for thirteen years, but I swear to god that’s Wei Wuxian’s influence *somehow!*”

Bichen unsheathed on its own by an inch, the cold glow it gave off illuminating the dark castle. After giving everything a quick look-over, Lan Wangji stepped inside.

Wei Wuxian skittishly followed after him.

Luckily for Wei Wuxian’s sanity, when Fairy tried entering as well, it slammed into an unknown force. There was a barrier blocking its entrance, forcing it to impatiently sit down outside. The relief that spread across Wei Wuxian’s face was vibrant enough to light up the whole castle.

‘*Do not look at it. Do not look at it. Do not look at it,*’ Lan Wangji told himself, heart beating at three times its usual speed.

The second Wei Wuxian stepped deeper inside the stone corridors, and he was immediately greeted by an ear-piercing *shriek*.

“Ah!” Jiang Yanli cried out, covering her ears tightly. She was far from alone in her discomfort.

However, neither Lan Wangji nor Wei Wuxian reacted to it beyond a slight wince from the latter. They continued to walk, and soon they could no longer see the light from the door. A chilly wind swept through Wei Wuxian’s bones, making him shiver. The walls were suffocating and top of the castle was spherical, making it resemble a tomb.

Worst of all, the shriek they could hear was gradually becoming louder and louder.

"How is your other self so disciplined?!" Jin Zixuan complained, shouting so that he could be heard over the laughter. By now, Wei Wuxian's brows were furrowing and even the real Lan Wangji had to cover his ears, but the simulated Hanguang-jun remained impassive.

Like with most things regarding his older self, Lan Wangji had no answer to give.

The further into the castle they went, the more excruciating the sound became. It was sharp and high — like a novice playing on a broken flute — and was accompanied by hundreds of cackling voices. The further they went in, the more unbearably loud the noise became.

Finally, even Wei Wuxian couldn't take it anymore and winced, covering his ears. The laughter found his attempt amusing and the shrieking wail rose again and-

"What's wrong?" Lan Wangji asked.

"It's just — it's so loud."

Lan Wangji frowned.

'*I don't hear anything.*'

"Huh?"

"Wait, so this isn't a this-place thing, it's just another Wei Wuxian thing?"

"It's definitely just another Wei Wuxian thing," Nie Mingjue, the only one who had been to the castle before, confirmed.

"It's just the voices of dead spirits," Wei Wuxian finally explained, forcing himself to continue moving. "It's too noisy. I can't figure out where it's coming from."

"I'm not the only one who thinks it's a little weird that he can hear something no one else can, right?" Nie Huaisang checked, glancing around. Several people nodded in agreement, now understanding how the spirits which had put together the memories had gone unnoticed for so long.

No matter how spiritually sensitive they thought they were, it seemed like even the best cultivators had nothing on Wei Wuxian's ability.

After a moment of thought, Wei Wuxian pulled out an intricate compass that the watchers recognized as the kind they had seen in the second segment: the Compass of Evil. The arrow pointed to the left, then swung over to the right, then simply began spinning counter clockwise too fast for an untrained eye to follow.

"Wei Wuxian can't figure out where everything's coming from, and his compass can't either…" Lan Qiren turned to look at Nie Mingjue. "What exactly is this place for?"

Nie Mingjue paused, warring with himself on how much to say. This was a secret he had been told to keep at all costs — one which his ancestors had hidden as well. It was his duty to remain silent.

But there was nothing he could do to stop everyone from finding out.

(And, presumably having decided that the watchers got the point, the spirits had artificially lowered the volume of the laughter in the simulation, so it wasn't like Nie Mingjue could pretend he hadn't heard the question.)

"...It's not malicious," he finally grit out. "It's not intended to hurt people. If that kid hadn't broken down the wall, it wouldn't have bothered anyone. It's just…. It's a burial grounds, of sorts."

And Jin Ling had just smashed it open.

Unlike the watchers, Wei Wuxian had no one to quiet the laughs and giggles and whispers and shouts, which had instead continued to grow in volume. Luckily, apparently well-accustomed to things like this, the Yiling Patriarch was able to keep going without complaint. Pressing a hand to his temple and moving it in a soothing gesture, he finally acknowledged that the compass wasn't going to work and put it back in a guqin pouch.

"Jin Ling!" he called out, worry evident in his expression. "Jin Ling!"

As expected, there was no response.

"Don't worry so much," Lan Xichen whispered, leaning close to his soon-to-be sworn brother. "We saw him in the future, didn't we? I'm sure the Jin heir is fine."

"I know, I just…" Nie MIngjue tsked. "I wish I had gotten more time to prepare Huaisang before leaving him alone."

"A trap door," Hanguang-jun reported, and Wei Wuxian looked up to see part of the wall slowly slide open, revealing a previously hidden passageway. He and Lan Wangji stepped forward and watched as the torches lining the wall blazed with fire, lit by the talisman in Lan Wangji's hand.

They walked forward.

Nervous and apprehensive about the other clans' reactions to whatever his Da-ge was hiding, Nie Huaisang began to step close again, resuming his previous habit of phasing inside his brother's body to hide.

At the end of the hallway was a large coffin made of deep black wood and carved with skilled craftsmanship. Giving the coffin an appreciative look, Wei Wuxian reached forward and knocked against it twice.

Seeing that, Wen Ruohan couldn't help but wonder how being near coffins would make Wei Wuxian feel. After all, he had no doubt that Wei Wuxian had never gotten a coffin of his own.

(He had been torn apart, after all. Even if someone was willing to, there was nothing left to bury.)

At that thought, an unfamiliar sour feeling spread through Wen Ruohan's body, leaving him quite confused.

"Don't tell me Jin Ling is inside," Wei Wuxian muttered.

"We'll know after we open it."

Nodding at each other, the two pried open the lid.

And the screams *doubled* in volume.

"Gah!" Nie Huaisang jumped, covering his ears. The sound of the screaming was much lower than whatever Wei Wuxian was experiencing (thanks to the spirits), but even they could tell how unbearable it was.

As she watched her shidi cover his ears and wince in pain, Jiang Yanli found herself wondering why he would keep using demonic cultivation after the Sunshot Campaign. Even if it wasn't as inherently corruptive as they thought, it clearly wasn't pleasant.

Finally, however, the noise faded slightly, and Wei Wuxian was able to look into the coffin. He had prepared to defend himself in accordance with the frenzied sound going on in his head, but, surprisingly, nothing had happened. He looked over. Within the coffin, there was only a large, unsheathed saber.

Every gaze swung questioningly towards Nie Mingjue, and he shifted awkwardly in his spot. Combined with the grumpy expression on his face, no one bothered to voice their questions.

They would likely be answered soon enough.

"What?" Wei Wuxian frowned. "I've never seen a coffin for a blade before."

He spun on his heel and entered an adjacent room, finding another coffin. He opened it, but the contents were the same. And yet another, and another. They all held blades.

Not a single coffin had Jin Ling.

"Why can't you just *show us* where he is?! Why keep it a secret?!" Jin Zixuan shouted, anxiety building. The mystery was even worse than an answer.

(Then again, what had ended up happening to Wei Wuxian in the Burial Mounds was beyond their wildest nightmares, so maybe that wasn't always true.)

"Where's Jin Ling!" Wei Wuxian demanded, worry growing.

Lan Wangji joined back up with him, eyes narrowed in determination, and answered, "We'll know soon."

With a graceful flourish, the guqin Wangji was removed from his back and placed across his lap. With an elegant flick of his wrist, Lan Wangji strummed, and the first notes of Inquiry were played.

“I suppose, if there’s any positive side to all this, it’s that Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Patriarch are the ones looking for him,” Madam Jin commented. No one disagreed; if *they* couldn’t find Jin Ling, no one would be able to.

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Lan Wangji stepped forward, watching his other-self with wide eyes. He had been labeled as one of the best guqin players in the sect, despite his young age. Even his teachers could barely match him now, and the other sects had no one who could compare. It had been years since he’d met so much as an equal.

So it had been even longer since he’d heard someone whose skill completely *eclipsed* his own.

And this, unquestionably, did.

At Wei Wuxian’s request, Lan Wangji set out to ask the found spirit what the castle was, and who had built it. After only a few seconds of playing, the strings began to vibrate on their own, signifying that the spirits were responding. Wei Wuxian, like many of the watchers, did not know the qin language, and so could only ask:

“What did it say?”

“I do not know.”

“Huh? But-”

“What?”

Lan Wangji glanced over and responded, “It said, ‘I do not know.’”

Nie Mingjue snorted, and soon joined Lan Xichen, Nie Huaisang, and Jin Zixuan in their slack jawed laughter. Lan Qiren simply stared in open-mouthed shock at his nearly unrecognizable nephew.

“What?” Lan Wangji asked. “He-but that — *shameless!*”

Hearing that, Wei Wuxian recalled their conversation about ‘Whatever’ as they were fighting the abyss. With that, he smiled.

‘*What a person Lan Zhan has become. He’s even learned how to make me speechless!*’

“Oh my god, you two are perfect for each other!” Nie Huaisang laughed out, making Lan Wangji’s shocked face turn a beautiful shade of pink at the ears. He deeply envied his other-self’s ability to maintain a blank face in all situations.

Lan Wangji played another question, and got the same response.

“What did you ask this time?” Wei Wuxian wondered.

“How it died.”

“...Maybe it was secretly killed while it was distracted. Ask if it knows who killed it.”

Lan Wangji did, and yet the answer was the same.

“What a useless spirit!” Jiang Cheng grumbled.

“...Then ask it if it’s a man or a woman. There’s no way it doesn’t know that.”

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“A man,” Lan Wangji translated.

“We finally know something, huh,” Wei Wuxian sighed. “Then ask it whether or not a boy of fifteen to sixteen entered this building recently.”

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“Yes.”

Jin Guangshan had to admit, the idea of keeping Wei Wuxian around as a Wen Zhuliu-esque guard dog for his heirs was seeming more appealing by the second. Even without Jin Guangshan’s involvement, the Yiling Patriarch clearly had plenty of personal motivation to protect Jin Ling.

“Alright, then where is he now?”

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Lan Wangji paused, not translating for a moment, and Wei Wuxian asked, “What did it say?”

“It said, ‘Right here.’”

The watchers looked around, but they couldn’t see Jin Ling anywhere. If the answer was ‘right here,’ then it couldn’t be far, but there was no sign of him. Nie Mingjue held his tongue, unwilling to voice anything that might be wrong during such a tense situation.

“It can’t lie, right?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“I am here, so it cannot.”

“That’s so cool,” Nie Huaisang muttered, sending Lan Wangji a somewhat starstruck look. Although Nie Huaisang wasn’t interested in nighthunting, following along with the Yiling

Patriarch and Hanguang-jun while knowing that nothing here could hurt him was genuinely enjoyable. 10/10, would do again.

(Besides, it was helping him find out about the apparent library worth of secrets his Da-ge had decided to keep from him.)

Curious and increasingly desperate under his perfectly blank expression, Lan Wangji began again. This time, after he got a response, he froze.

"What?" Lan Xichen breathed out, and Lan Wangji turned towards Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan, eyes wide.

"What did you ask this time?"

"How old it was, and where it was from."

"And?"

"...Fifteen, from Lanling."

"No," Jiang Yanli whispered. "No, no, no. He can't — he *can't*, he-"

Jin Zixuan swayed on his feet, looking nauseous. Yes, Jin Ling's behavior was far from perfect, but he was a child. He still had room to grow. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had changed so much throughout the simulation, Jin Ling could too.

Except he couldn't because if he was *dead* then their son-

"Jiang-guniang, Jin-gongzi!" Lan Xichen shouted, hurrying over. "It's fine, he might not be dead. Inquiry will still pick him up if he's near death and-"

"I know!" Jin Zixuan snapped. "We saw him; we know he can't be dead. Shut up!"

Although Lan Qiren frowned at the disrespect towards his nephew, he didn't bother to raise his voice. The simulation was quite good at pouring gallons of stress into the watchers and letting them flounder like fish on land.

Closing his eyes — a grim expression on his face — Wei Wuxian began to listen. The cries, whispers, and shouts of the spirits, on closer inspection, contained a familiar voice. It was faint, and hard to hear, but it was undeniable that there were muted shouts coming from Jin Ling.

"So, Hanguang-jun can talk to them and Wei Wuxian can hear them," Nie Huaisang muttered, excitement building despite the tense situation. "Can you imagine a more perfect-"

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue shouted. "Now is *not* the time."

"Sorry, sorry! I didn't realize. I'll stop," Nie Huaisang rushed to say, holding his hands up in surrender and reminding many of his future self's title of the Headshaker.

(Though, if pressed, Wen Ruohan would say he had trouble believing Nie Huaisang had *genuinely* become that incompetent. Then again, he knew Nie Huaisang had never cared about the rank his sect held, so maybe it wasn't entirely faked either.)

(It was hard to tell with that one.)

Meanwhile, Hanguang-jun had begun playing the guqin again, asking Jin Ling for a precise location. This time, the answer came a bit slower, each note being played one by one rather than a short song like it would usually be.

"Stand where you are," Lan Wangji ordered. "Face southwest, and listen to the strings. After each note is played, walk forward one step. When the sound stops, he will be in front of you."

Wei Wuxian complied. Seven times, he heard notes from the guqin, so seven times, he stepped forward. When the sound completely ended, he was standing in front of one of the walls. It was made of grey-white rock bricks, and was pieced together tightly.

At the confirmation of what had happened to Jin Ling, Nie Mingjue used his full willpower to resist the urge to curse the boy out for his stupidity. Yes, Jin Ling was only a child, but still. At his age, Wei Wuxian had been a valiant rescuer of bunnies and predictor of the Wens' eventual attack.

(Then again, comparing *anyone* to Wei Wuxian wasn't fair for them, so maybe the simulation had just warped Nie Mingjue's sense of normalcy.)

Frowning, Wei Wuxian raised a hand and let it light up with the red sparks of resentment. With a flick of his wrist, the resentment sprang forward and carved out pieces of the wall. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji then reached forward to remove the bricks, finding a sheet of black dirt behind them.

"What's even the *point* of a double-layered castle made of dirt?" Madam Jin hissed, annoyed at the danger her grandson was constantly ~~putting himself~~ in.

Reaching forward, Wei Wuxian scooped away the dirt with his bare hands as fast as he could. A few seconds later, a face was revealed from behind the rubble.

The body fell forward, and a coughing — *alive* — Jin Ling landed in Wei Wuxian's waiting arms.

Nearly collapsing on the ground in relief, Jiang Yanli squeezed her hands together and mumbled, "Thank you, A-Xian." It was true that being an orphan had likely contributed to the kind of person Jin Ling had become, but, even if that was Wei Wuxian's fault, that didn't erase the fact that he had saved her son's life two times in the past week or so.

"...He'll be a great martial uncle for Jin Ling," Jin Zixuan told her, blushing as he said it.

Smiling lightly, Jiang Yanli responded, "Then I suppose you'll have to get to know each other once we get outside."

The world faded to black.

As light returned them to the in-between zone, everyone hesitated, having far too much to say. Gratitude, fear, nervousness, understanding, and callous annoyance (on Wen Ruohan's part) swirled within the watchers, making them all hesitant to speak.

Seeing that no one was moving to get anything done, Wen Qing stepped forward.

"Why don't we go chronologically," she suggested, glancing over to Lan Wangji. "What happened when the Concealment Zone activated for the rest of us?"

"Not much happened," Lan Wangji repeated. "Wei Ying tried to disgust me, but my other self knew he wasn't serious so he — *I* — continued to reject the advances."

"Are you sure he isn't serious?" Madam Jin asked. "I know he's trying to get away because he thinks you're going to punish him, but his feelings for you are obviously more complicated than...."

She trailed off, noticing the weight of the look on Lan Wangji's face.

"I'm sure. My other self knows as well."

Sorrow coated Lan Xichen's expression, which Lan Wangji resolutely ignored. Despite all the ways Hanguang-jun had surprised Wangji, there was one thing they completely agreed on: Wei Wuxian did not want a relationship with them.

(And yet his older-self was still forcing Wei Wuxian to stay with him.)

As Lan Wangji felt despair and self-hate boil over within himself, Jiang Cheng felt relief spread through his chest. After leaving the Jiang sect, Wei Wuxian had gotten himself killed. It was clear that Hanguang-jun wasn't about to start anything with Wei Wuxian, so maybe Wei Wuxian being brought back to life was an opportunity for Jiang Cheng's other-self to do better.

However, not everyone agreed.

"Maybe your other self just isn't interested anymore?" Nie Mingjue suggested, raising an eyebrow at Lan Wangji.

"I can assure you that's not the case," Jin Guangshan interjected. "I know interest when I see it. Something else is keeping the future's Lan Wangji from taking what's offered to him."

Lan Qiren glared at that comment, while Wen Ruohan huffed in amusement. All the while, his father's words simply rang in Jin Zixuan's head.

'I know interest when I see it.'

Had he recognized the 'interest' in whoever Jin Guangyao's mother was? Was that all it had taken for Jin Guangshan to turn away from them? Why? Why did he keep doing that? What

was so bad about Jin Zixuan's mother that Jin Guangshan needed to sleep with people who were practically strangers? What was so awful about their family that Jin Guangshan couldn't be satisfied? Why did he have to keep creating new ones?

~~What had Jin Zixuan done wrong?~~

He was shaken out of his thoughts when his mother asked, "And after that was Qinghe?"

"Well, there was the demonic cultivator before that," Lan Qiren reminded, frowning deeply. "He just… he just *admitted it.* To Wangji, even. I don't… why would he just…."

"It seems demonic cultivation is significantly less rare than we expected," Lan Xichen agreed. "Given that and the fact that Wangji's future self has no problems with Wei Wuxian's continued use of demonic cultivation, I think it seems likely that it is far less corruptive than we feared."

"But then why would Wei Wuxian go back to normal after his death?" Nie Mingjue asked. "His soul wasn't severed, but it's not as though he *lived* those thirteen years. Not like a normal soul, anyways. How could he possibly go from killing Jiang Yanli-"

"Supposedly," Nie Huaisang pointed out.

"...Right. Supposedly killing Jiang-guniang. Regardless, doing things so awful that the four great sects had to lead a siege against him. He 'supposedly' massacered the cultivators at Nightless City too. While a thousand is clearly an exaggeration, it seems likely that *something* happened there."

"Something bad enough that he's still spoken of regularly over a decade later," Wen Ruohan agreed, making Nie Mingjue scowl. The two of them made eye contact for several seconds, but Nie Mingjue was forced to concede to his point.

When they first started watching, their goal had been to figure out why Wei Wuxian fell to demonic cultivation. With the quivering mess Wen Chao had turned into, none of them would ever forget what Wei Wuxian was capable of or how he'd become that way.

Then, after the demonic cultivator, the watchers had seen fragments of Wei Wuxian's childhood. Luckily, the only ones willing to talk about that were *un*willing to face the wrath they would generate if they tried to do so, and thus remained silent.

"Anyways, next was Qinghe," Jiang Cheng commented, trying to hurriedly move past the subject of Wei Wuxian's childhood. "And Jin Ling. Who, of course, decided to fight a castle."

"He's already tried to fight a goddess statue," Nie Huaisang pointed out. "Maybe he thought a castle was the next logical step."

"He *lost* to the statue and had to be bailed out by Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng pointed out. "Honestly, how does he keep getting into these situations?"

However, as soon as he asked that, he felt certain that he knew the answer. His future self's angry words echoed in his ears:

'Why are you still standing there? Are you waiting for prey to walk into your blade? If you can't capture something presentable tonight, don't bother coming back!'

"Stupid boy," Madam Yu muttered, too low for anyone else to hear. "Honestly, don't you have any sense of responsibility? Why aren't you offering Jin Ling more support? It's disgraceful."

Especially in comparison to what Hanguang-jun had said to the Lan juniors immediately after. It was like he was *trying* to embarrass the Jiang sect. How dare they do that? And it didn't help Yu Ziyuan that her own mind seemed to be working against her now.

No matter how hard she tried to ignore it, Madam Yu couldn't stifle the voice in her head (one that sounded a lot like Jiang Fengmian) from whispering to her, "A-Cheng's probably learning to parent by example. It's not as though *you* ever helped him with that. All the insecurities you put in him, he's now putting in Jin Ling."

But that wasn't true. She loved her children — unlike with her husband, they had never doubted that of her. *She* wasn't the one who had made her son insecure; that was Wei Wuxian, however unintentionally. Her children knew she loved them, and she knew they loved her. And with Jin Ling — her grandson clearly knew Jiang Cheng loved him. It was fine.

(How dare Jiang Fengmian suggest otherwise?)

And-

"Clan leaders, Madams, young masters," Wei Wuxian greeted, a nervous tension in his voice instantly setting the watchers on edge.

"A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked.

"Yup! And I brought friends!"

"Hello Sect Leader, young master."

"Lan-xiansheng. Lan-gongzi. Lan-er-gongzi."

"Uncle!"

"Father."

"Zhonghui?" Nie Mingjue asked, doing a double take towards the ceiling (where the voices were coming from). Similarly, the Jins, who had recognized Jin Zixun, and the Lans, who had recognized Lan Ziming's voice, froze.

"Xu-er," Wen Ruohan smirked. "Update me on the situation."

“Of course, father. The Wen Sect hosted a conference to make sure the Great Sects were all up to speed on the simulation. The claims that Wei-gongzi was making were a little hard to believe, so he suggested that we contact you directly. Have your fears been assuaged, Jin-gongzi?”

“Ah, y-yes,” Jin Zixun responded.

Those words allowed Jin Guangshan to instantly understand what was happening. Nodding at Wen Ruohan in thanks for the tip, he stepped forward and spoke:

“A-Xun.”

“Yes, Uncle?”

“We’re all trusting Wei-gongzi to help us with any problems that might occur. I expect you to give him the Jin Sect’s full support, am I understood?”

By the silence on the other side, he was pretty sure the answer to that was ‘no.’ Nevertheless, always the dutiful follower, Jin Zixun eventually forced himself to agree.

“Yes, Uncle.”

Jin Guangshan doubted Jin Zixun would actually follow through with that, but at least now Wei Wuxian would know Jin Zixun was not indicative of the whole Jin sect.

Sensing that everyone else needed some time to process the orders Jin Guangshan had just given, the one who spoke next was Nie Zhonghui:

“Sect leader, you described the information being presented to you as important, correct? Can I take that as confirmation that you want to be left inside?”

“Yes,” Nie Mingjue responded. “It’s important enough that we can’t afford to miss any of it.”

“I see,” was the easy acceptance. The Nie Sect’s head disciple had complete faith in his sect leader, and accepted the request without complaint, even as the Lan and Jin representatives took in a shocked intake of breath.

So, although probably not saying it outright, Wei Wuxian had implied that they might need to be taken out. Good, that meant they could explain once and for all that they had to stay.

“I expect you to leave us in here as long as possible,” he concluded.

“Of course, Sect Leader.”

“Lan-xiansheng,” Lan Ziming spoke, trying desperately to remain calm despite the nervousness wracking her body. “Is it truly so important that all of you have to stay? I… surely at least one more person can come out.”

Instantly, the Jiangs, Lans, Nie, Jin Zixuan, Wen Qing, and Madam Jin turned to look at Wen Chao, brainstorming as fast as possible for some way — *any* way — to force him to leave.

Eventually, Wen Ruohan spoke up, “There’s no way for you to force a specific one of us to leave, correct?”

“Correct.”

Silence.

“...So, Lan-xiansheng?” Lan Ziming asked.

“Ah, no-”

“I’m afraid we’ll all be staying. Apologies, Wei Wuxian,” Wen Ruohan concluded.

‘*But… Lan Ziming is the one who asked,*’ Nie Zhonghui, Lan Ziming, Jin Zixun, and Wei Wuxian thought simultaneously. Despite himself, Wei Wuxian was somewhat pleased that everyone except Wen Xu was just as confused as him. If nothing else, it was an assurance that he wasn’t the only one who thought the sect leaders may or may not be going crazy.

Clearing his throat, Wei Wuxian spoke again: “Well, I think that’s everything. I’ll check in with you soon, okay?”

“Alright,” Jiang Fengmian agreed. “Be careful out there. Don’t push yourself too hard, and don’t… don’t allow anyone to punish you unjustly-”

“Oh, because that’s what *I* always do to him?” Madam Yu snapped, tension finally boiling over.

“I don’t… think he meant it that way, Madam Yu?” Wei Wuxian interjected in an attempted appeasement.

“Oh, of course. Because *you* know my husband better than I do-”

“San Niang!” Jiang Fengmian interjected, but didn’t deny what she’d said either. Because it was true, wasn’t it? Wei Wuxian understood the Sect’s motto. Wei Wuxian would be selfless. Cangse Sanren wouldn’t have looked at an orphaned child who had been bitten by dogs and decided that child was her enemy.

“Ziyuan,” Madam Jin whispered, making Madam Yu glance over. After Madam Yu’s ‘you should have left Jin Zixuan to die’ comments, their friendship had been fractured. However, they still understood each other better than anyone else could, and Madam Jin’s meaning was clear.

(You consciously understand that you were wrong. You know he doesn’t deserve it. You want to change. But you’re still treating him the same way, Ziyuan.)

Like she’d been slapped, Madam Yu flinched back and looked away.

“Right, well…” Wei Wuxian took a deep breath. “We’ll be going then.”

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli spoke up.

“Shijie?”

“You… you have to eat a lot, okay? As many steam buns as you want. Use Yunmeng’s money — as much of it as you want. You have to eat, okay. I don’t want you getting… hungry.”

As though the starving five year old Wei Wuxian had been could be described as simply “hungry.” And he had *still* rejected the stall owner’s bun to save the man some trouble.

“Lots of protein,” Wen Qing added on. “And bread; simple sugars will help.”

She knew it was silly to tell that to the teenage version of Wei Wuxian, but he had been eating watermelon rinds and *fighting dogs* for his bun. She wouldn’t allow that to happen again.

“...Okay?” Wei Wuxian agreed. “Sure… I will. Thanks?”

“Good,” Wen Qing and Jiang Yanli nodded at him, temporarily appeased with his promise.

“Great. Um… bye?”

And with that, they left.

Chapter End Notes

To anyone wondering, the first scenes in the simulation are from the Audio Drama Extras, “Escape” and “Sleep Together.” Shortly after that is the extra “Eating Melon.” They were recommended to me, and then I thought they were too cute (or sad) to not include! Hope you enjoyed!
:)

Unfortunately, Rumors are Occasionally True

Chapter Notes

Once again, beta read by the lovely Tintin!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three hurried knocks disrupted Lan Xichen's meditation, instantly replacing his earlier sereneness with worry. It wasn't that he disliked such interruptions — in fact, he quite enjoyed them. With Lan Qiren at a diplomatic negotiation, the person outside could only be Wei Wuxian or Lan Wangji. Every time he visited, Wangji had been as courteous, considerate, and respectful as he always was, and the more recent visits from Wei Wuxian had been shockingly pleasant. He supposed that shouldn't be a surprise (Wei Wuxian *had* been the 4th most sought after young master largely on the basis of his personality), but it was such a large divergence from Lan Xichen's memories of him as the Yiling Patriarch that it surprised him every time.

(Then again, Lan Xichen wasn't too arrogant to not admit that his opinion of Wei Wuxian during that time might have been slightly colored by how Wei Wuxian's actions had affected Lan Wangji.)

Regardless, it wasn't the knocking that concerned him, but rather the frantically fast pace at which the knocking happened. No matter how severe the situation, Lan Xichen couldn't imagine Wangji ever knocking in such a manor. That left only Wei Wuxian, who could either be excited over an invention working, or worried about someone's safety.

Lan Xichen opened the door.

The first thing that occurred to him was that he had been right: the person who had been doing the knocking was Wei Wuxian. The second was that, in his deeply meditative state, he hadn't noticed two additional presences: a pair of people who were now waiting out of sight behind a large hill.

Lan Xichen sent a questioning look Wei Wuxian's way.

"Hi, Zewu-jun," Wei Wuxian greeted, giving a chipper smile.

'*Don't be so formal. You can call me, Da-ge, if you want,*' Lan Xichen tried to say, only to find the words already dead by the time they reached his mouth. After everything Wei Wuxian had done to help him — after all the talks they'd had and all the times Wei Wuxian pulled him away when he got lost in a maze of thoughts — Lan Xichen knew it was the least he could do. However, no matter how much he wanted to, he didn't think he'd ever be able to think of anyone other than Nie Mingjue when someone said that.

“Zewu-jun?”

“Ah, my apologies,” Lan Xichen cleared his throat, annoyed at himself for becoming lost in thought for what seemed to be the thousandth time. “Is something wrong?”

“Sorta,” Wei Wuxian shrugged. “A bit of an issue came up, and I was wondering if you felt up to getting involved. You don’t need to leave seclusion, of course. And you don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

That was very little information, but Lan Xichen couldn’t bring himself to blame Wei Wuxian. If it was about the simulation, then the sensitive nature of the information justified the secrecy. If Lan Xichen wanted to no more, all he’d have to do is say ‘yes.’

And it was Wei Wuxian. If there was one thing Lan Xichen had come to understand about him, it was that he wouldn’t ask Lan XIchen for anything he wasn’t willing to do.

“Thank you, I… I would be honored to help however I can,” Lan Xichen finally answered, and some of the tension that had been building in Wei Wuxian’s shoulders vanished at the offer.

“Okay, great. Here’s the issue,” he clapped his hands together. “Nie Huaisang may or may not have found out that you want to help Jin Guangyao. Lan Zhan and I managed to convince him to at least talk about it before he sped off to make plans, and I thought you would maybe want to be involved?”

His body tensed again when he realized that Lan Xichen had stopped moving entirely, but the first jade was too distracted to respond.

Nie Huaisang knew?

‘Er-ge, behind you!’

‘Yes! You said so! But did I move?’

“Zewu-jun.”

Lan Xichen snapped out of the memories, turning at once to face his brother in law. Wei Wuxian had raised his voice to attract Lan Xichen’s attention, and yet the tone had remained astonishingly calm. Despite his concerned expression, he hadn’t stepped closer or tried to reach out to Lan Xichen.

“Breathe, Zewu-jun. You’re okay.”

(When Wei Wuxian and the juniors went inside the simulation to see if Wen Ruohan was actually there, he had come out screaming. A tearful verbal report from Sizhui had given Lan Xichen a general idea of what had sparked that reaction.)

(Exactly how much had the cultivation world at large wronged the man in front of him?)

"...Are you alright?" Wei Wuxian asked. "We can hold this off for another day, if you'd prefer. No one would judge if you backed out now."

Then, slowly, Lan Xichen shook his head, "It's fine. It… isn't a surprise that he'd have objections to my plan. I don't mind speaking with him about it."

As soon as he said that, the two figures who had been waiting from behind the nearby hills stepped out. A clearly concerned Lan Wangji faced him, but Lan Xichen only had eyes for the nervously fidgeting Nie Huaisang to Wangji's right.

"...Please," he said at last. "Come inside."

Somehow, the silence of Lan Xichen sitting alone in seclusion was *less* oppressive than the not-quite-silence of sitting with Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and Nie Huaisang. They all knew what they had to talk about, but none of them knew where to start.

That didn't mean Wei Wuxian wasn't going to try regardless:

"So," he clapped his hands together and forced a smile. "Let me start with a summarization. Feel free to correct me if I'm wrong, but if I'm understanding correctly, Sect Leader Nie doesn't think leaving Meng Yao alive is worth the risk, and Zewu-jun thinks that, since he hasn't technically done anything yet, he should be given another chance. That sound good?"

Lan Xichen nodded, and Nie Huaisang laughed nervously before responding, "I-I guess."

"Okay. I feel like I should first mention that little-me still doesn't trust me right now, so I don't actually have a way to interfere with the parallel dimension the Píngxíng gateway created."

"Don't worry about that, I'm sure you'll figure it out," Nie Huaisang assured him, snapping a fan open. Despite the nervous demeanor he used, Lan Xichen, Lan Wangji, and Wei Wuxian all heard Nie Huaisang's words as a promise: if it started going south, Nie Huaisang would *make* it happen.

"Alright," Wei Wuxian allowed. "...Alright. Zewu-jun, I think it goes without saying that — whether we kill Jin Guangyao or not — we probably don't want him to do the same things he did in our world, right?"

"Of course," Lan Xichen answered instantly. Wei Wuxian had (naively) hoped that Xichen's answer would calm Nie Huaisang's invisible rage.

If anything, that only seemed to make it grow.

"If you think that, then why are you trying to help him?" Nie Huaisang asked. "I mean, I could be wrong, I guess, but wouldn't the safest and most reliable method of dealing with that be to just… remove him?"

"To punish someone who hasn't done anything is inhumane!"

"But this is someone we know *will* do something."

“Not necessarily,” Lan Wangji spoke up. “What we do to Meng Yao is not isolated. The world created by the Píngxíng Gateway is a form of chaos theory: a scenario with hundreds of different factors. So many things have changed that it’s difficult to predict how anything we do will impact that world. The Wen Sect might not even start the war.”

“And if they don’t,” Wei Wuxian continued. “Meng Yao will have no way of jumping up through the ranks. He’s already… what, sixteen in that world? Far too late to get a strong core.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re the last person who can say that, Wei-xiong,” Nie Huaisang laughed, glancing over at the Yiling Patriarch with a raised eyebrow. And he had a point; Mo Xuanyu’s initially pathetically weak core had been turned into one that was *above average* for a man Mo Xuanyu’s age (thanks to the continued diligence and love Lan Wangji had turned his way).

Giving a forced cough, Wei Wuxian continued, “Regardless, unless I find a way to erase their memories without being able to go into that world — which, believe me, I’ve looked into; not gonna happen — then they’ll make different decisions. Little-me isn’t responding right now, so all of the watchers are probably still inside. I just finished something that’ll make it easier for me to talk to little-me, so let’s assume we’re about to make second contact. What do we want to do?”

“That depends on how much they know,” Lan Wangji pointed out. “If they don’t know him at all we can make something up, but if they know he kills Wen Ruohan….”

“Then he’s either killed or protected, depending on who finds him first,” Lan Xichen finished, frowning grimly.

Looking as calm as can be, Nie Huaisang fanned himself lightly and wondered, “If they do learn he kills Wen Ruohan, then do you think he’ll be accepted into the Jin Sect immediately?”

Wei Wuxian cursed, “And brought right back under Jin Guangshan’s influence.”

Paling instantly, Lan Xichen thought for a moment before asking, “What about the Nie Sect? Would Da-ge have any chance of taking him in instead?”

Nie Huaisang shook his head, “Meng Yao was raised hearing thousands of lies from his mother about how brilliant and perfect his cultivator father was. He’d never be satisfied not being a cultivator, and he’ll never be content at the Nie Sect.”

“Besides,” Wei Wuxian added. “Chifeng-jun’s trust was broken when he realized how far Meng Yao could go. To get out of going to trial for a murder he carefully and maticulously planned, he pretended to commit suicide and tricked the former Sect Leader Nie. I have trouble believing he’d be accepted again.”

“What if they don’t know that yet?” Lan Wangji asked.

“It wasn’t too long after I came back from the Burial Mounds,” Wei Wuxian pointed out. “With how long they’ve been in there… no, Sizhui said it wasn’t necessarily in chronological order, didn’t he?”

Hanguang-jun nodded.

“Wouldn’t that be confusing?” Lan Xichen asked. “Maybe they won’t be able to follow along with any of it.”

“I really — I mean, I don’t think we should assume that,” Nie Huaisang suggested, laughing awkwardly. “Best to prepare for the worst, rather than have trust and hopes that ruin everything.”

Lan Xichen flinched, registering the carefully-hidden barb despite Nie Huaisang’s cheery voice, and saw Lan Wangji frown as well. The only one who seemed unaffected by the statement was Wei Wuxian, who had expected something like this to happen.

“So, does that mean you think a sixteen year old is impossible to change?” Wei Wuxian asked. “I’d say it’s likely that working under Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan left him a worse person than he came in as.”

“Do we know that?” Nie Huaisang wondered. “Or are you just hoping for an idealistic solution? It’s not like Meng Yao didn’t have other choices once things started going south in the Jin. He could have become a rogue cultivator, or gone back to my sect, or joined a temple, or joined a smaller sect, or even started his own. His mother’s stories mean he feels he’s entitled to a position in the Jin Sect, specifically.”

“You can’t possibly know that,” Lan Xichen disagreed. “Just because that’s what *happened* doesn’t mean it was inevitable. He had no-”

“Choice?” Nie Huaisang suggested, eyes darkening to a steely gray. “Of course, that’s always the case with him, isn’t it? He had ‘no choice’ but to kill his Jin supervisor. ‘No choice’ but to send Jin Zixuan after Jin Zixun on the off chance that one of them might die. ‘No choice’ but to kill my Da-ge. ‘No choice’ but to kill his own *son*-”

“That isn’t what I meant,” Lan Xichen protested.

“Then what *did* you mean?”

“That he’s a product of his upbringing. We can help him! He’s a human whose actions are impacted by circumstances around him. You saw for yourself just how quickly people turned on him because of his mother. If he had just been safe-”

“There is nothing that will cause that to happen,” Wei Wuxian shook his head, then smiled and shot Hanguang-jun a flirtatious wink. “Even my darling Lan Zhan over here experienced everyone turning against him when he sided with me at Koi Tower. He wasn’t *vilified*, but there is no position in the world that would make Meng Yao completely safe, and I think I speak for everyone when I say I want him as far away from a position of power as possible.”

Pleased at the support, Nie Huaisang nodded and added, “So, are you agreeing to killing him?”

“Lan Zhan and I think we should stay uninvolved,” Wei Wuxian corrected.

Hanguang-jun nodded, “It’s their lives on the line. We can tell them what happened, but we should allow the residents of that dimension to decide what to do with him.”

“And if that results in that Jin Guangyao doing the same things he did in our dimension?”

“Then that’s what happens. It’s not our choice to make.”

“But,” Lan Xichen paused, then sent an apologetic glance Wei Wuxian’s way. “...Sect Leader Nie, considering the trust you placed in my brother and Wei Wuxian to solve your mystery, would I be correct in saying that you trust them to be righteous?”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about?” Nie Huaisang denied. “But… yes, I think we can all agree on that.”

“Then, have you read the reports on what Wei Wuxian did to Wen Chao?”

“*Xiongzhang!*” Lan Wangji snapped, stunned that his brother would bring that up.

“Lan Zhan, it’s fine,” Wei Wuxian said, smiling reassuringly. “Let him finish.”

“...I have,” Nie Huaisang answered. “Da-ge got them from you, didn’t he?”

“He did. And if even Wei Wuxian could be driven to that point, can you really call what A-Y… Meng Yao did during the Sunshot Campaign inhumane? He was a spy.”

Making eye contact with Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji decided he couldn’t let that go:

“Wei Ying never went so far again,” Lan Wangji reminded him. “And he only did that after Wen Chao had killed his Sect Leader, destroyed Jiang Wanyin’s core, and thrown him into the Burial Mounds. It wasn’t a lack of capabilities that prevented him from doing the same to Jin Guangshan; he knew better by then.”

“And besides, what he did during the war isn’t the part we’re concerned about,” Wei Wuxian nodded. “It’s what he did when he was part of the Jin Sect that really worries me. His loyalty to any one person has always seemed relatively… fickle. Though, you know the most about how he was while working in the Wen Sect. What do you think?”

“About what?”

“Would he have chosen our side if we weren’t winning already? The Jin Sect had remained fairly neutral and probably would have survived even if the Wens won. He barely knew you when the war started; if you’d stopped being useful-”

“He would never hurt me.”

“Oh, so killing Da-ge didn’t bother you at all?” Nie Huaisang snapped. “And even ignoring that, he was willing to do plenty to Hanguang-jun without considering how you’d feel! Or does emotional damage not count?”

“Those were extreme situations. When pressed, we’ve all done things we may regret-”

“Enough,” Lan Wangji shook his head, furious at the way Lan Xichen kept using Wei Wuxian as an example. “It was different.”

“I don’t know, Lan Zhan. Your brother might have a point.”

“Wei Ying?”

Wei Wuxian leaned back, allowing himself to more easily observe all three of his conversation partners at once. He didn’t regret killing Wen Chao — he never would — but the torture he did to the various Wen Officers on the way was not his most justifiable plan of action.

(Ironic, then, that Lan Zhan was the only one in the great sects who criticized him for that.)

Wei Wuxian cleared his throat, “Sect Leader Nie, we’re not asking whether it was wrong to kill him in our world, we’re asking if it’s necessary over there. You’re right, he had other choices, but thousands of people worked for the Wen and did all sorts of terrible things. I don’t think we’ll be able to hunt them *all* down.”

“They were on the wrong side of a war. I find that to be a much more justifiable motivation than what Jin Guangyao and Xue Yang had,” Nie Huaisang disagreed.

“Xue Yang?” Lan Xichen asked. “I… I never said anything about a plan for him. What does he have to do with this?”

“Oh, didn’t you hear?” Nie Huaisang asked, tilting his head in faux surprise. “They did quite a bit together. So much that it’d be weird to justify one and not the other. Off the top of my head, I there was Jin Guangyao recommending Xue Yang as a guest disciple, protecting him, Jin Guangyao and Xue Yang reconstructing the Sygian Tiger Seal together, and Jin Guangyao offering up the whole Tingshan He clan for Xue Yang’s *experiments*. I believe the reason was ‘the He clan had grown worried about how much influence Jin Guangshan was getting as Chief Cultivator.’ You’re right. He truly had ‘no choice’ in the matter.”

“Nie Huaisang,” Lan Wangji spoke warningly, sternly requesting that the conversation be steered back to more diplomatic terms. As he looked back and forth between Lan Xichen and Nie Huaisang, Wei Wuxian began calculating whether letting the pair speak would do more harm than good.

“The immoral actions he has taken cannot be justified,” Lan Xichen admitted. “However, I think the fact that he has people he loves — people he cares for — shows his potential to… change. If he was truly irredeemable, he would have killed Sisi and left no one to report on his crimes. Doesn’t it say something that it was his acts of love that became his downfall?”

“Being human is not the same as being redeemable,” Wei Wuxian shook his head. “You’re right that he has people he cares about. He bought Jin Ling fairy; he cared for you; he spared Sisi. However, that wasn’t enough to make him stop taking actions that would, even if indirectly, hurt those people.”

Hanguang-jun nodded, “Remember, we won’t be able to physically go there. Any changes done will need to be through our younger selves. I would rather keep the younger version of you away from him.”

Lan Xichen turned, about to protest, only to cut himself off. Could he deny the damage Meng Yao could inflict while sitting here, in seclusion, as a result of the confusion and hesitance Jin Guangyao left him with? Could he truly ask his younger self to shoulder the same burden?

“Then again,” Wei Wuxian said. “Jin Guangyao spent a ton of time and energy making sure Zewu-jun never found out about his true self. Maybe, if we just inform your younger self, that won’t be an issue.”

“No,” Nie Huaisang shook his head. “I refuse to allow him anywhere near my Da-ge. It doesn’t matter how much they know, and it doesn’t matter how ready the watchers are. I won’t have them nearby.”

“It’s not as though Jin Guangyao attacked Da-ge indiscriminately,” Lan Xichen pointed out. “We all agreed that he genuinely cares about certain people. It wasn’t until Da-ge started-”

“Oh, so he deserved it?”

“He didn’t. Nothing Da-ge did was inherently wrong. It just… they weren’t actions that would lead to the best result. There were better ways to deal with the situation than to push Jin Guangyao down the stairs.”

“Don’t you *dare*,” Nie Huaisang snapped his fan closed against his hand. “What exactly are you suggesting? That everyone will always need to never say anything against him, no matter what he does? There’s no way to make a world like that. He’s too volatile and snaps at too little-”

“He can change! His personality was influenced by what he went through. He had such a harsh time growing up…. But if we reach him-”

Lan Xichen cut off, seeing a shift in the look on Lan Wangji’s face. After waiting for a moment, Lan Wangji looked up and made eye contact with Wei Wuxian, a stern gaze meeting a curious one.

“Wei Ying, the three of us don’t have room to talk about his upbringing,” Lan Wangji acknowledged. “What do you think? Is the person he ended up becoming to be expected?”

For all the problems between the Lan parents and Sect Leader Nie’s murder, no one could deny that Wei Wuxian had by far the worst childhood. Even Meng Yao had never had to worry about starving overnight or freezing through the winter.

“It’s hard to say,” Wei Wuxian responded. “Jin Guangyao went on to do far worse things for far worse reasons than most people would, but that doesn’t mean there’s nothing we can do. People who lived through the same things as him wouldn’t necessarily become as corrupted as him, but he might change if he receives different help. Honestly, we mostly need more information. None of us know what he was like at sixteen.”

“So you’re still voting to wait a bit longer and see?” Nie Huaisang asked, watching Wei Wuxian nod through narrowed eyes. “Do you really think that’s worth the risk? Right here and now, we have a chance to change things.”

Lan Xichen glared, “Just give him a chance-”

“He’s *had* all his chances already! He wanted to move up in the Jin, so he killed his supervisor and then realized he might be punished for it. He escaped that, and went to the Wen. He ended that, and went back to the Jin and even after he became Chief Cultivator he never stopped. He had your trust, and Qin Su’s love, and even my love, at one point. You don’t need to look farther than his *son* to know all he’s ever cared about is himself-”

“And that’s now a crime worthy of death?” Lan Xichen responded. “He hasn’t *done* anything yet.”

“It means he won’t change!”

“You can’t know that!”

“He isn’t worth my Da-ge’s *life!*”

“Alright,” Wei Wuxian spoke up. “I think that’s enough for today.”

Three pairs of bewildered eyes turned his way.

“Wei Ying?”

“Come on, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said, tilting his head towards Lan Xichen. “We talked about a lot, and we can talk about it more later, but I think we all need some time to calm down after that and think this through. Sound good?”

Without waiting for an answer, he hooked his and Nie Huaisang’s arms together and forcefully directed the Nie Sect Leader out. Meanwhile, Lan Wangji began putting away the untouched tea set Lan Xichen had laid out, realizing that his brother was too stunned to make a move.

“Wait, you’re kicking me out?” Nie Huaisang whined, wondering what he’d done wrong.

“Not permanently,” Wei Wuxian assured. “I’m the one who’ll actually be putting whatever we do into effect, and I need some time to think over what you’ve both said. Besides, we’ll be able to make more concrete plans once I try out your ‘how to get little-me to trust me again’ plan. We can meet up again after that. Sound good?”

“...Alright, I guess.”

”Jin Ling!” Wei Wuxian shouted, tightly clutching the boy who had just fallen into his arms. “Jin Ling, wake up!”

The fact that they’d seen Jin Ling’s older self alive and well would be much more reassuring if that same assurance hadn’t been such a catastrophic failure in regards to Wei Wuxian.

“Can you hear me? Jin Ling!”

Still no response.

Frowning deeply, Wei Wuxian reached to the side and grabbed the Jin heir’s wrist, checking his pulse. The steady (if quick) beat reassured him instantly. He let out the breath he’d been holding.

If it had taken them even a minute longer, Jin Ling would have already suffocated.

A piercing look directed his way cut through Nie Mingjue’s composure, but he desperately tried to outwardly maintain it. Wen Ruohan’s curious and opportunistic gaze was resting on the Nie brothers, looking to capitalize on the first sign of weakness.

Nie Mingjue would not let that happen.

Glancing back, Wei Wuxian saw what had made Jin Ling’s fall stutter slightly. The moment the Jin heir had been removed from the dirt, the sword on his back had been caught by something else and consequently dragged it out. Upon a second glance, it was clear what the mysterious object was.

The skeleton of a human arm.

Nie Huaisang paled and stepped closer to his brother, wondering what kind of insane person could possibly have thought putting this horrifying castle together was a good idea.

Setting Jin Ling on the ground next to Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian grabbed Bichen’s sheath and started to poke around in the dirt, revealing more and more of the remaining bone.

Lan Qiren clicked his tongue, annoyed at the lowly use of his nephew’s sheath despite understanding the reason behind it. Like always, Wei Wuxian was prioritizing getting results over showing the proper respect to sacred objects.

After everything that had happened, Lan Qiren found that he couldn’t blame him.

Just like Jin Ling, the skeleton had been buried into the wall in a standing position. Ghastly pale bones covered in pitch black dirt — the contrast was distinct yet grating to the eyes. Curious, Wei Wuxian dug a bit deeper, and, soon enough, found yet another skeleton nearby.

Unlike the other one, this one wasn’t completely decayed yet. There was still some flesh on the bone, and long, messy hair jutting out of the scalp.

Jiang Yanli turned away, nausea beginning to rise up within her, and heard Nie Huaisang gag from the left. When she glanced over at him, she made eye contact with Wen Qing, whose unfaltering gaze silently asked if she was alright.

After a moment of hesitation, Jiang Yanli nodded.

(And yet, the thought of how close to death Jin Ling had to be to respond to inquiry — how close he had been to becoming just another one of those rotting corpses — left her shaking in her seat.)

When further digging proved that yet another corpse was buried inside to the right, Wei Wuxian decided to stop. He rubbed his head, still trying to work past the tidal wave of turbulent shouts and screeches ringing in his ears.

A reminder of how many spirits there were here.

And how close Jin Ling had been to becoming one of them.

Seeing the way his fiance was trembling in her seat, Jin Zixuan kneeled next to her and attracted her attention. Now didn't seem to be a good time to say anything out loud (especially with the countless questioning gazes being sent a stubbornly silent Nie Mingjue's way), but he hoped his presence would offer her some reassurance.

He tilted his head toward the simulated Wei Wuxian, reminding Jiang Yanli that she didn't need to worry so much; the Yiling Patriarch would take care of their son.

(At this point, Jin Zixuan almost didn't care how he died. This revived Wei Wuxian was someone his family now owed a lot to. From the tentative, sheepish smile that appeared shortly after, Jin Zixuan knew his fiance agreed.)

At that moment, Jin Ling abruptly sat up.

"Jin Ling?" Jiang Fengmian asked, frowning in confusion as his grandson stood.

Curious, Wei Wuxian sat back and allowed Jin Ling to move. Hobbling slowly, Jin Ling did a loop around them until he reached the spot he had just been pulled out of. Without hesitation, he climbed back in.

"What?" Wen Qing raised an eyebrow, turning to Nie Mingjue for answers. He sighed, and looked away.

(He couldn't tell them. His father had warned him to never tell anything about this to anyone. And he *definitely* couldn't tell his father's murderer about it.)

(But if they were going to find out anyways….)

Wei Wuxian reached forward and pulled Jin Ling out of the wall again, huffing a laugh of amusement until he heard a sound that froze him in his tracks.

Fairy was *barking* again.

“So the screeching of departed spirits is fine, but a few distant barks are enough to terrify him?” Jiang Cheng scoffed, rolling his eyes and shaking his head in disbelief.

“Well, we understand why now, A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli softly pointed out, making her brother flinch at the memory.

When they had left, Fairy had been obedient, wagging its tail as it sat before the entrance. However, the ferocious and fierce barks now couldn’t be further from the pitiful anxiousness it had exhibited before.

And Wei Wuxian was *terrified*.

But there was no resentful energy. The watchers couldn’t feel any commands to attack or defend. Surely, if Wei Wuxian was genuinely scared, they would feel something, wouldn’t they?

(Madam Yu looked away, wondering when she had gotten so weak as to be worried over one of Wei Wuxian’s foolish acts.)

“Something is wrong outside the castle,” Lan Wangji observed, reaching forward to take Jin Ling. Before he could, however, there was a tremendous rumble in the castle and dust began to fall from the ceiling.

An earthquake.

Giant blocks of stone fell from the walls, and the ground tumbled like turbulent water. Wei Wuxian looked towards Jin Ling, only to see a thick vine wrap around the Jin heir’s bruised left leg. Before anything could be done, the vine had snapped tight and yanked Jin Ling away.

“*A-Ling!*” Jiang Yanli screamed.

Wei Wuxian reached forward, only to be cut off by Hanguang-jun.

“We need to leave,” the second jade observed. “Let’s go.”

“What on Earth-”

“It’s the castle!” Nie Mingjue responded, shouting to be heard over the battle (and the still-screaming spirits). “Making the Jin boy walk back inside didn’t work, so it’s trying other ways!”

In the next second, a flash of white cut across the ground, Bichen slicing the vines into ribbons. Wei Wuxian ran forward to grab Jin Ling, red light circulating around his feet.

He jumped.

And shot *ten meters* into the air.

Wen Chao squealed in terror when a bit of red light got too close to his leg.

A vine that was closer to a *tree* appeared — at least two meters in diameter — and pounced after Wei Wuxian. The Yiling Patriarch was undaunted, however. Even with Jin Ling in his arms, he managed to dodge the vines coming after him from every direction without rest. A moment later, Lan Wangji ran forward as well and sliced the vines in half, rendering them powerless.

They were a pair, fighting as one without needing to exchange words.

Despite the tense situation, Lan Wangji couldn't help the warm glow that spread throughout his chest.

Dancing around the vines grabbing at their heels, the three men managed to escape, Jin Ling carried in Wei Wuxian's arms. The vines, seeing that their prey was nearly out of their reach, zoomed forward and covered the door to the outside.

A streak of white shot forward, instantly clearing the hallway. The pair followed the path Bichen had made and finally escaped the castle.

Jiang Yanli was far from the only one who let out a sigh of relief at that.

However, it was only once they reached outside that Wei Wuxian remembered what had prompted them to leave. A growl cut through the air, followed shortly after by a bark that made Wei Wuxian jump. They traveled toward the outer gate, where the sound was coming from. When they reached it, they saw Fairy facing away from them, growling at something. As soon as he laid eyes on the dog, Wei Wuxian paused and stepped back.

He forced himself to step forward again shortly after, knowing that they had to keep going-

A growl made him jump back again.

'*He's terrified, and yet he's forcing himself to move regardless. Look at him. Look at everything he's doing for your son,*' a voice in Jin Zixuan's head screamed out. '*And yet you couldn't even stand up to your father in his defense. After everything you've seen, you know that Wei Wuxian is far more scared of dogs than you are of Sect Leader Jin. But you-*'

Jin Zixuan glanced to the side, where his beautiful, bright, perfect fiancee shook in worry for her son and martial brother, and wondered when he'd become such a coward.

Slowly and unsteadily, Wei Wuxian continued to force himself to approach the outside. When the dog heard their approach, it turned around and saw Jin Ling in Wei Wuxian's arms.

It instantly leapt forward.

The scream Wei Wuxian let out as he hid behind Lan Wangji hammered a nail of guilt into Jin Zixuan's heart over and over and over again. On the other hand, Jiang Cheng sighed.

‘*I can’t believe he thinks this is more scary than the vines that were literally trying to kill him,*’ he thought, then, remembering the cause, amended, ‘*I better make sure to keep dogs away from him.*’

Terror gripped Wei Wuxian’s mind, and he scrambled for *anything* that could keep the dog away. Luckily, as Lan Wangji had stepped in front and stopped the dog with a glare, Wei Wuxian managed to keep a hold on Jin Ling (who he had been about to drop, justifying that Fairy wasn’t going to hurt its owner). It was at that moment that Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian noticed that Fairy had something inside its mouth.

Frowning in confusion, Lan Xichen left his brother behind (as Lan Wangji was currently preoccupied with staying as close to the simulated Wei Wuxian as possible) and knelt down next to the dog to get a better look.

It was a segment of fabric — most likely a ripped off piece of clothing.

Seeing that the fabric looked to be in the Nie Sect’s colors, Nie Mingjue gave a long, tired sigh. He wasn’t really expecting to be able to keep it a secret, but he could at least hope that the simulation explaining it would be less painful for him than trying to explain it to the watchers himself.

“Someone came here,” Wei Wuxian realized. “They must have been suspicious, to make the dog react like that. They haven’t gone far yet. Let’s go after them.”

“No need. I know who it is.”

“I do too,” Wei Wuxian agreed.

“...You do?” Jiang Cheng asked, turning to his sister for answers. She could only shake her head, equally confused, and turn to Jin Zixuan, who sent a blank look to Nie Huaisang, who turned to a heavily sighing Nie Mingjue. Intrigued, Lan Xichen and Wen Qing joined them in looking at the Nie Sect leader as well.

Nie Mingjue sighed again.

Wei Wuxian smirked, “Fairy must have found the person who spread the rumors about Xinglu Ridge, let out the walking corpses, set up the maze array, and built the stone castles. And those sabers. But if we don’t catch them now, it’ll be too annoying to try and find them later.”

‘*Ah, that explains it,*’ Nie Mingjue thought. ‘*I was wondering how that charlatan knew so much. Huaisang must have had to spread those rumors.*’

Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes, then glanced between the Nie brothers. Given Nie Mingjue’s hesitation, it seemed likely that the incoming answers would reveal a critical weakness in the Nie Sect for others to exploit.

“I will go after them,” Lan Wangji decided. “What about you and Jin Ling?”

“I’ll take him down Xinglu Ridge and settle somewhere in Qinghe, around where we met that charlatan. Let’s meet up there, okay?”

“They’re splitting up?” Lan Qiren gaped, and Lan Wangji felt the same. Was his older-self not worried that Wei Wuxian would run away anymore? Shameless or not, Hanguang-jun was supposed to be intelligent, wasn’t he?

And yet he appeared to be right; if Wei Wuxian was planning on running away, they would most likely have been informed that through his thoughts.

But why wasn’t he? Hadn’t Wei Wuxian wanted to leave no matter what? Now that he had the chance, why would he stay? He’d said he thought Lan Wangji was going to punish him. Had Hanguang-jun’s actions proven that wasn’t the case?

But this had all started with a talk between Lan Wangji and Jiang Wanyin. Someone who had gotten their core (temporarily) destroyed to save Wei Wuxian wouldn’t do something like that, so there would have been no need for Wei Wuxian to disgust them both. Were the attempts to escape just some sort of inside joke?

The watchers were very, very confused.

Seeing the way Lan Wangji was hesitating, Wei Wuxian rushed, “Go! Any later and they’ll have run away. I’ll be back.”

Upon hearing ‘I’ll be back,’ Lan Wangji nodded and began walking away.

They were actually going separate ways-

“Wait! Wait-wait, take the dog with you! Take it!”

Hearing that, Lan Xichen gave a light chuckle. There were many unknowns in place, especially regarding Hanguang-jun’s strange insistence on not expecting a relationship from Wei Wuxian no matter how many opportunities he got. However, for the time being, Lan Xichen felt he could safely say that the concerns the Lans had initially had were quickly proving to have been needless.

Hanguang-jun was everything the future said he was, and Lan Xichen couldn’t be prouder.

With a backward glance, Lan Wangji intimidated the spiritual dog into following after him (though, reluctantly, seeing as it turned to look back at Jin Ling every once in a while). Finally at peace, Wei Wuxian wiped some sweat from his forehead and, after glancing back at the castle once last time, picked Jin Ling up again and walked off.

By now, it was nearly dusk. As the dirt-covered Wei Wuxian walked through town with Jin Ling on his back, quite a few people turned to stare. Ignoring them, Wei Wuxian quickly bought a few new clothes for both himself and Jin LIng using the money he’d taken from Hanguang-jun.

Jiang Cheng fidgeted in his seat, hoping his older self would appear soon. If it wasn’t for Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, Jin Ling would be dead by now (two times over, if you counted the

Goddess Statue as well). And now it was *Lan Wangji's* money buying Jiang Cheng's nephew and head disciple new clothes.

Noticing the frown on her brother's face, Jiang Yanli reached over and placed her hand next to Jiang Cheng's, the fingers phasing through each other thanks to the 'no-touch' feature of the simulation. Once he glanced over, Jiang Yanli smiled at him, offering what little reassurance she could muster.

After a few minutes of searching, Wei Wuxian found an inn to rest at and got a room. In the dim light of the fading sun, he set Jin Ling down on the ground and brushed some hair out of the boy's face.

Unable to watch, Jin Zixuan looked away, while Jiang Fengmian closed his eyes. Both Jiang Fengmian and the Jin heir were forced to realize the same thing: this scene, before them, went beyond the relationship between a martial uncle and a younger disciple. Partially because of worry that it would spark even more rumors, Jiang Fengmian had always avoided interacting too intimately with Wei Wuxian. When Wei Wuxian was unjustly punished by Madam Yu, Jiang Fengmian would try to stop the individual incident, but never put a permanent end to it. Wei Wuxian had defeated the *Xuanwu of Slaughter,* and all Jiang Fengmian had said was 'well done.' The Wens attacked, and Wei Wuxian's life was in danger; all Jiang Fengmian had cared about was Jiang Cheng's.

(And Wei Wuxian had accepted that — had *expected* that.)

But this, right here, truly made Wei Wuxian look like Jin Ling's uncle.

Wei Wuxian began to peel off Jin Ling's dirt-stained robe.

'*This Patriarch is personally changing your clothes for you,*' he thought. '*Don't you dare say I don't spoil you.*'

And if Wei Wuxian was Jin Ling's uncle, that made him Jin Zixuan's family, didn't it?

And if they were family, then Jin Zixuan didn't even have the excuse of remaining filial to justify staying silent about his father's thoughts. His father's plan to chain Wei Wuxian up and force a bond between him and a sect.

And if he didn't have that excuse….

'*Pathetic, useless,*' both Jiang Fengmian and Jin Zixuan mentally cursed. '*Coward.*'

However, it was at that moment that Wei Wuxian pulled off Jin Ling's boots and froze. He quickly rolled up Jin Ling's trousers, and found a black bruise trailing up all of Jin Ling's leg.

And not just any bruise, but a curse mark.

"Can he not have *one day* of peace?!" Madam Jin snapped, annoyed at the seemingly countless life-or-death events her grandson was being put through.

Curse marks signified that the bearer had offended something containing extreme malice. If it left such a mark, it would be able to find the bearer no matter where they were or how long it took. The consequences ranged from having the associated body part removed, or just death.

"Are curse marks usually that big?" Nie Huaisang quietly asked, staring nervously at the gargantuan mark stretching up the entirety of Jin Ling's leg, continuing endlessly as Wei Wuxian raised Jin Ling's pants higher and higher. In response to the question, Lan Xichen, Wen Qing, and Nie Mingjue shook their heads.

Jiang Cheng sighed, "Nothing in this stupid show is ever normal, huh?"

Sweat dripped down Jin Ling's forehead, and he shifted this way and that in his sleep.

'*Some curse marks cause hallucinations,*' Wei Wuxian thought, placing two fingers on the center of the mark. '*The stronger the hatred, the greater the hallucination…. Jin Ling, what are you seeing?*'

"...A-Die," Jin Ling muttered. "A-Niang."

The pair flinched back, and Madam Jin sucked in a gasp of air. They might have agreed to not kill the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian, but the fact that he would ~~supposedly~~ go on to kill the couple had never left their minds.

Then, before the watchers could see Wei Wuxian's reaction to those words, the world faded to black. For a moment, they wondered if the simulation was over already. Then, a child's voice appeared.

"Orphan!" the boy shouted. "Orphan!"

As the shouting continued, it soon began to echo as multiple voiced overlaid on top of the first. The crowd of kids began to chant the word "orphan," scorn and mocking clear in their tones.

"Orphan! You're an orphan!"

The chant was replaced by a yelp as light brought them to a hallway in Koi Tower, and the child's voice cried out, "Ow! Why did you hit me?!"

"A-Ling," Jiang Yanli gasped out, covering her mouth with a hand.

And, before them, was a trembling eight year old Jin Ling, who could only shake as the kids shouted at him.

"Your mom was no good!" the retreating child continued. "Even your dad didn't like her!"

As Jiang Yanli flinched, Jin Zixuan felt his heart momentarily stop. Both Madam Yu and Madam Jin drew themselves up, fully prepared to break the laws of physics if that was what it took to slap the simulated children.

“What do you know?” Jiang Cheng glared. “Stupid kids.”

Unwilling to engage in an actual fight, the children turned on their heels and began to run, shouting over their shoulders, “Maybe that’s why they abandoned you!”

The child Jin Ling could only throw a stick of tanghulu after them, and watch as it broke into pieces upon contact with the ground.

“A-Ling,” Jin Zixuan whispered, moving to kneel beside his son with his fiancé. They knew it was just a simulation, but they couldn’t help but hope that, somehow, the boy would be able to feel their presence.

Unfortunately, unable to sense them, Jin Ling could only continue to shake and cry alone, his broken tanghulu rolling across the ground. One of the pieces stopped, making contact with an adult’s black boot.

“Wei… Ying?” Lan Wangji asked.

An elegant hand reached down and picked the ball up, raising it to eye level so that Wei Wuxian could take a closer look. This wasn’t the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian, who the watchers had grown to know, nor was it Wei Wuxian in Mo Xuanyu’s body, who they had learned to connect with the younger version.

This was the Yiling Patriarch, eyes silver rather than the malicious red the watchers had come to identify with him.

(Which shouldn’t be a surprise. It was quickly becoming clear that resentful energy was nowhere near as corruptive as they’d once assumed it was.)

Wei Wuxian glanced to the left and laid eyes on the crying child, pity and mourning clear in his expression.

Wen Chao flinched and darted back, unable to face even this calm version of the Yiling Patriarch after what he had seen. On the other hand, Madam Yu felt her burning anger freeze.

The expression on Wei Wuxian’s face could best be described as sympathetic. And why wouldn’t it be? How many times had Madam Yu said the exact same thing to him?

No, that wasn’t a fair comparison. No matter how cruel children were, they simply didn’t have the knowledge or power to leave the same impact Madam Yu could. How many times had she called Wei Wuxian a bastard child and the son of a servant in the same sentence? And how many times had she made a nine year old boy feel like he genuinely had to hide food in case he was one day kicked out? How many times had she called his mother not just “no good,” but a “slut” and a “whore” and a “vixen” and a “beast?”

(Except that first one didn't make any sense, so it would be silly of him to be bothered by it. And she hadn't actually kicked him out, so maybe that was fine. They had all seen first hand just how resilient he could be.)

Except Wei Wuxian's resilience didn't stop him from getting hurt. As she watched Wei Wuxian gaze down at the child Jin Ling, she couldn't help but ask herself what she had actually gained from doing all that.

'Mind the master behind the dog you're trying to mess with!' Madam Yu hissed, glaring down at Wang Lingjiao. There was nothing those words would help her with, and she had no reason to say them.

She had just believed it, and therefore wanted to.

Frustrated and desperate to hide his tears, Jin Ling sat down in a small gazebo, facing a large portrait. In it, adult versions of Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli gazed at each other, warmth clear in their smiles.

Seeing that, the real Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan made eye contact, copying the portrait.

Hearing someone approach, the young Jin Ling glanced back to see a man with long, flowing black hair standing beside him. A look of confusion crossed the boy's tear-stained face.

"Who are you?" he asked.

With a graceful swish of his robes, Wei Wuxian knelt beside the boy and thought for a moment before smiling and gently responding, "I'm your Shishu."

'*My son's martial uncle,*' Jin Zixuan thought again. '*Who I didn't do anything to help.*'

"Shishu?" Jin Ling repeated. "Then, do you know my father and mother?"

"Of course."

The softness in Wei Wuxian's voice was completely at ends with the watchers' current understanding of the Yiling Patriarch. It was more than a little strange to see. However, remembering the joy the nine year old Wei Wuxian had felt upon meeting the gentle Jiang Fengmian, no one could say they were surprised, either.

(It really wasn't appropriate considering the current situation, but Lan Wangji couldn't help but think that Wei Wuxian's voice while he was speaking to kids was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard.)

"Really? You've met them?"

"Mn."

After a moment, the elation that had spread across Jin Ling's face collapsed into sadness.

"They said my mother was a bad person-"

“Jin Ling,” Wei Wuxian raised an arm to pat his nephew’s head. “Ignore them. Your mom was very kind.”

Lan Wangji truly and honestly had no idea how Wei Wuxian’s voice could possibly be so lovely. And, with that thought, came another, far more sinister one:

‘*I would be able to hear that voice every day if we raised a kid together.*’

As soon as he thought that, he flinched back, blushing, and cursed his own shamelessness. He would not be his older-self; he would not give in to temptation; Wei Wuxian did not want him. He would never forget that.

Then, Jin Ling shook Wei Wuxian’s hand off his head and asked, “And my dad?”

A pained expression crossed Wei Wuxian’s face as he turned toward the painting, answering, “Your A-Die… loved your mother. More than anything.”

His current relationship with his fiance had already made Jin Zixuan fairly sure that was true, but to hear that — to receive confirmation that he’d learned to love his wife — reassured him more than words could describe.

“He hadn’t always, however,” Lan Jingyi explained.

Jin Zixuan’s smile crumbled.

And with that, a memory formed.

Jin Zixuan — young enough to look identical to the real one watching the simulation — slammed his hand against one of the Cloud Recesses’ doors and demanded, “Wouldn’t it be better to ask what about her I *could* be satisfied with?!”

Neither Jiang Yanli nor Jin ZIxuan could resist flinching again, and Jiang Cheng turned to hiss at a quietly snickering Wen Chao.

On the boats of Caiyi town, Jin Zixuan glanced away and said, “Just make sure the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng stays away from me.”

Madam Jin released a frustrated huff of air.

A bowl of soup crashed against the ground.

“Wait, what was that?” Nie Huaisang blinked.

“I… I’m not sure,” Jiang Fengmian responded, looking around.

“If one were to ask why Wei Wuxian hated Jin Zixuan so much, it would require a lengthy explanation.”

“Hey, you don’t have to say he ‘hated’ my father!” Jin Ling protested. “They just… weren’t friends.”

Said boy flushed and sank in on himself, unable to deny the words but nonetheless annoyed that they were spoken aloud. He really, really wished he could interfere with the simulation.

(Though, some small part of him couldn't help but feel childish when he thought that. After all, no matter how embarrassing watching this was, it was still better than watching fierce corpses fight to tear Wei Wuxian apart in the Burial Mounds.)

"Don't look at me, Little Mistress! It's not like I'm the one who wrote the script; Zizhen did!"

"Hey, it's not my fault!" said boy protested. "I just wrote down what Sizhui said!"

There was a suppressed laugh from Sizhui:

"I'm sorry, Jin-gongzi. I was just translating what the spirits said through inquiry. If it makes you feel better, you can read the rest of this passage."

Lan Qiren nodded in approval.

"Fine," Jin Ling finally decided, and there was a shuffling of papers, and then a cough to clear his throat. "Anyways, the question of why Wei Wuxian was not best friends with my father would require a lengthy explanation. My grandmothers used to be close friends. They promised each other in their youth that if both their children were boys, they'd become sworn brothers; if both were girls, they'd become sworn sisters; if one was a son and one was a daughter, they'd of course become husband and wife."

As the reasoning behind the engagement was read aloud, the people involved shifted awkwardly. Arranged marriages weren't necessarily uncommon, but their knowledge of all the pain it caused made those excuses quite awkward — especially given the Madams' now fractured friendship.

How different would things have been if they hadn't tried to force those two to be together? Allowed Jin Zixuan to become friends with Jiang Yanli, Jiang Cheng, and Wei Wuxian first? If that had happened, maybe those two wouldn't have died so young.

"The mistresses of the Jin and Jiang Sects had a good relationship, and their family backgrounds aligned as well. Almost everyone called the pair a match made in heaven, but the two involved felt… differently."

Although they continued listening to the narration, most of the watchers found themselves distracted by what was occurring in the simulation around them. Cultivators armed to the teeth sat in groups, and a large field was covered with the unconscious bodies of soldiers who had been injured in battle.

"Is this…" Nie Mingjue looked around, eyes wide. "The Sunshot Campaign?"

Withholding a curse, Wen Ruohan memorized every detail of the scene around him.

Unaware of what was being shown to the watchers, Jin Ling continued his narration: "Ever since he was born, my father was… he had been… 'a moon worshiped by the

stars' — are you serious?"

"Hey, I spent a lot of time on that line!" Ouyang Zizhen protested.

"It's quite nice," Lan Sizhui assured him.

"Let me finish!" Jin Ling snapped. "Fine; ever since he was born, my father had been a moon worshiped by the stars. He was born fair skinned and delicate. With a mark of vermillion on his forehead, along with his elite background and exceptional intelligence, he was loved by almost everyone he met."

Although he was quite used to such praise, the smile Jiang Yanli sent him as those words were said left Jin Zixuan a puddle of embarrassed goo.

"Madam Jin had brought him to Lotus Pier several times. Neither Wei Wuxian nor Jiang Cheng wanted to play with him, so it was only my mom trying to connect and feed him the food she'd made. Jin Zixuan, however… didn't really like paying attention… to her."

"...Sorry," Jin Zixuan muttered as quietly as he possibly could.

Jiang Yanli just shook her head, "I understand. You're not obliged to fall in love with me just because we're engaged. Though I'm… I'm happy you've changed... your mind?"

"I have," Jin Zixuan instantly agreed, ~~for once~~ leaving no room for misunderstandings.

Jin Ling cleared his throat, "This made Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng furious on quite a few instances. Therefore, when Jiang Fengmian dissolved the engagement after Wei Wuxian's actions in the Cloud Recesses, both boys were pleased. They only realized afterward that mom was feeling quite dejected on the inside!"

With every word, Jin Ling's tone became happier and happier, and Jin Zixuan's face became lighter and lighter.

"Then, in the middle of the Sunshot Campaign, the Yunmeng Jiang Sect headed to Langya to assist the Lanling Jin Sect."

Several annoyed looks turned his way in regards to the lack of help, but Jin Guangshan paid them no mind. Instead, his thoughts were consumed by the narration which had just occurred.

Only the Yunmeng Jiang Sect was sent over. Only a sect that was already nearly destroyed was sent over. Even the few Jiang disciples who hadn't been present at the massacre had their numbers dwindled further during Wen Chao's last attack.

Which meant the assistance being given by "the Yunmeng Jiang Sect" was most likely just another way to say help being given by the human weapon that was Wei Wuxian.

The more he saw, the more Jin Guangshan *hungered*.

“Because the Yunmeng Jiang Sect was short on hands, A-Niang went as well. She knew that her cultivation wasn’t high, so she did what she could, busying herself with the meals of the cultivators. In the beginning, neither Wei Wuxian nor JiuJiu — I mean, Sect Leader Jiang — agreed, but Mom had always been adept at cooking. She was happy, had good relationships with the others, didn’t force herself, and was actually quite safe. The two had to admit, it wasn’t a bad idea.”

‘*More positive reinforcement,*’ Jiang Fengmian reminded himself, turning to nod proudly at his daughter once they’d made eye contact. She smiled warmly and made glanced at Jin Zixuan, happiness clear in her expression.

“Due to the difficult conditions, the meals were very bland. To counter this, Mom began secretly making two extra bowls of soup for Wei Wuxian and Jiu-Sect Leader Jiang. Then mom-”

“You know, if you're referring to your Uncle as 'Sect Leader Jiang,' you should probably stop referring to Madam Jin as ‘mom,’” Ouyang Zizhen whispered.

“Shut up. You said you would let me handle this, and I will!” Jin Ling snapped, then hurriedly continued. “Anyways, she also made some for A-Die, and it… didn’t go over well.”

“...You sure changed a lot of the script.”

“I’m not going to call my father things like *that!*”

Jin Zixuan had a very bad feeling about this.

The narration vanished, allowing them to tune in to the words spoken by the people inside the simulation. One cultivator, dressed in the robes of Lanling, took a bite of the watery porridge being offered to them and groaned as that action strained a wound on his arm.

He turned to the cultivator sitting next to him and grumbled, “The Wen Sect’s offensive was very aggressive this time. Though, thanks to Young Master Zixuan’s apt command, we didn’t lose more people.”

A proud look came Jin Zixuan’s way from both his parents, but he had trouble smiling back. Not only was it clear that this was only the setup to something awful, but receiving praise from his father (something that had always brought him joy) suddenly left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Nodding, the female cultivator next to the man sighed, “And we have no way of knowing when this Sunshot Campaign will come to an end.”

“Yeah,” the first cultivator agreed, sighing as well.

Then, from within a nearby building, another person sighed.

“A-Li?” Jiang Fengmian asked, and Madam Yu narrowed her eyes.

“Okay,” Jiang Yanli stepped forward and, with a tentative heart, opened a door.

She froze.

“Young Master Jin!” she gasped, eyes wide.

“A-Li,” Jin Zixuan spreaked out. “B-before this starts, please… let me apologize.”

She gave him a shaky smile and a nod, before forcing herself to turn her attention back to the simulation.

“Jiang Yanli?” her former fiance asked. “Why did you come out of my room?”

“Oh! S-sorry. I went to the wrong place. I thought this was A-Cheng’s room.”

“Sect Leader Jiang is staying in the North Wing. This is the South Wing. How could you have gone in the wrong direction? It would’ve been more believable if you’d said you mistook it for Wei Wuxian’s room.”

“Ah, right, I misspoke. I’m actually here to find A-Xian.”

“Foolish girl,” Madam Yu grumbled, turning on her daughter and only belatedly realizing it would be impossible to pinch her while in the simulation. “Honestly, what were you thinking? You can’t just go into the rooms of unmarried men! Especially your former fiance!”

She shrank down.

Jin Zixuan scoffed, “Jiang-guniang, one moment you say you’ve mistaken it for Sect Leader Jiang’s room, the next you say you’re here to find Wei Wuxian. Who are you trying to fool? Just tell me; what were you doing in my room?”

“I… I…” defeated, her expression fell and she sighed. “Young Master Jin, that wasn’t my intention. I came to deliver soup. Right now, the Wen Sect’s offensive is aggressive and I can’t do much to help. I’ve been doing some support work in the kitchen, so I made some soup to deliver to everyone.”

Jin Zixuan just laughed.

Under a roll of her mother’s eyes, Jiang Yanli just shrank in on herself even more.

“A-Li,” Madam Jin said. “I appreciate what you were trying to do in looking after my foolish son, but sneaking around like that was perhaps not the best way to do so. Nor was lying so many times.”

Clenching her fists to stall her tears and ignore Wen Chao’s snickers, Jiang Yanli nodded.

That out of the way, Madam Jin turned to glare at her idiotic son, who was making this into a genuine disaster.

However, unable to hear his other self's frantic prayers to make him stop, the simulated Jin Zixuan continued, "Lady Jiang, you really don't think your lies through. You saw the soup in my room and immediately made up an excuse. You think I don't know who's been delivering the soup all along?"

"You know?"

"Of course. I've seen with my own eyes *Lady Song* departing from here after delivering soup. I asked her, and she didn't want to admit it, unlike some people… who try to steal credit for things they haven't done."

When Wen Chao snorted despite Jiang Cheng's furious glare, Lan Wangji found himself mentioning, "Regardless of who is actually lying, we can all agree that stealing credit for soup is less dishonorable than pretending you've single-handedly killed the Xuanwu of Slaughter."

Wen Chao's laughter cut off into a glare, and Jiang Cheng sent Lan Wangji an appreciative look.

"I don't know who Lady Song is, but I really did deliver the soup," Jiang Yanli objected. "I am not lying."

"Alright. If you want to claim you made it, then show me some evidence. Hm?"

Watching both the real and simulated Jiang Yanli flinch at those words made Jin Zixuan curse his other-self's line for generations.

(Then, he remembered that included Jin Ling, and quickly took the curse back).

"Young Master Jin… we've already had our engagement cancelled. I was afraid that people would find out about me delivering soup to you and spread slanderous rumors. So… so I haven't told anyone about this. If you want evidence, I… I really don't have any to give-"

"Enough! You don't need to continue."

'*Stop,*' Jin Zixuan mentally begged. '*I know you think you're right, but you're wrong. Please just stop.*'

"You know, when I'd heard about you following us onto the battlefield, I'd wondered why," he clicked his tongue. "Now, I finally understand. Everyone is bravely fighting bloody battles, yet you're here scheming for petty reasons!"

'*Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop-*'

"Well then, *Honorable* Lady Jiang, I hope you weren't planning on stealing credit and trampling on other people's efforts just because of your high status," he reached forward and snatched her wrist, pulling her close to hiss, "Some people have lowly backgrounds, yet their characters are much nobler! Please have some self respect."

‘*Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!*’

“Self respect…” Jiang Yanli looked up, her eyes watering with tears. “Jin-gongzi, we basically grew up together. After all these years… in your eyes… am I such a shameless, obstinate person?”

“*You-*”

Unable to withstand it anymore, Jiang Yanli began crying in earnest.

‘*I-*’

“Shijie? What’s wrong?”

But she was crying so much she *couldn’t speak* and then-

“Hey-”

Whatever Jin Zixuan had been about to say was cut of as Wei Wuxian flashed forward and punched him to the ground.

“Oh, thank god,” Jin Zixuan gasped out, collapsing in his seat. He could vaguely hear his mother raging a storm and shouting at him, but had been too distracted to pay that any mind. Everything had been spiraling downhill, and he had no one but himself to blame.

But now, it would be fine. Wei Wuxian was here. No matter what the Yiling Patriarch (supposedly) ended up doing, Jin Zixuan knew he could trust Jiang Yanli’s safety with him.

What had his other self said just a little while ago? That ‘some people with lowly backgrounds are much nobler than those of high birth?’ Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t imagine a better way to describe Wei Wuxian.

Glaring, the simulated Jin Zixuan sat up from where he had been knocked down to. The terrifyingly cold eyes of the Yiling Patriarch glared down at him, Wei Wuxian standing protectively in front of Jiang Yanli.

“Shijie, what happened?” he asked.

“A-Xian, I-I’m fine. Let’s go.”

‘It’s fine. I’m not hungry,’ the six year old Wei Wuxian responded.

Madam Yu sighed; Wei Wuxian’s and her daughter’s foolishness was truly unmatched.

“Jin Zixuan, how dare you bully my Shijie?!”

“No, I-”

“A-Xian!”

“You-” Jin Zixuan stood. “Don’t cross that line!”

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli tried again.

“You worthless dog!” Wei Wuxian shouted, jumping forward.

“Don’t fight!” she shouted, tears running down her cheeks. “A-Xian!”

But the two paid her no mind.

“I’m sorry,” Jin Zixuan whispered, voice trembling. “I am so, so sorry. I-I promise I won’t… I won’t ever hurt you in the same way. I promise. I-”

“A-Xuan, it’s fine,” she whispered back. “It’s… it’s like with MianMian. You were trying to help someone at a lower social class than yourself. I… I think that’s admirable-”

“Though the execution leaves a lot to be desired,” Nie Huaisang muttered. When Lan Wangji glared with a warning ‘let them talk to each other,’ Nie Huaisang held up his hands in surrender and walked away, giving them some privacy.

Finally alone again, Jin Zixuan cleared his throat, “I-I know this doesn’t excuse anything — and I’m not trying to say it does — but, at Koi Tower… someone doing what I accused you of just… it wouldn’t be a surprise. Anyways, what I’m trying to say is that, I think… I think you’d make the Jin Sect a better place. And me! I mean, I’d be a better person, not a better place. If you’re still interested. What I mean is-”

“I know,” Jiang Yanli laughed. “A-Xuan, don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

However, unlike their real counterparts, the simulated Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan didn’t understand anything about each other. As a result, Jiang Yanli was still crying and trying to break up the fight, and Jin Zixuan was still battling Wei Wuxian.

“What’s going on?” a nearby cultivator asked. “Why are they fighting? What’s wrong?”

Her friend took a closer look and exclaimed, “It’s Young Master Wei and Young Master Jin!”

“Lady Jiang is there too! Quick, stop them!”

Right as a cultivator shouted that, Wei Wuxian slammed Jin Zixuan into a nearby wall. The entire compound shuddered on impact.

“Hey-”

“The building is going to come down!”

“Stop fighting, stop fighting! Let’s resolve this with words!”

But, no matter how many times they said that, no one stepped forward to actually stop them. Watching the expressions on the nearby crowd carefully, Wen Ruohan soon determined the reason why.

No matter how much they respected Jin Zixuan or how much damage the fight caused, they were too scared of the Yiling Patriarch to take action. Demonic cultivation was too useful for their leaders to refuse during a war, but people's nervousness remained. After all, for how long could they trust the son of a servant with that kind of power?

(If this was the terror Wei Wuxian could spark *without* a golden core, then Wen Ruohan would curse every day that that potential had been snuffed out so soon.)

With a powerful kick, Wei Wuxian sent Jin Zixuan flying once again.

"A-Xian-"

"Jin Zixuan! You're a fully grown man, and yet you have the gall to bully my Shijie?" Wei Wuxian shouted, too angered to concede to his martial sister's tearful request.

"Enough, A-Xian!"

"I didn't bully her!" Jin Zixuan responded, throwing a punch of his own. "She lied and falsely claimed someone else's merit. Am I supposed to just go along with that?"

"I did not!" Jiang Yanli pleaded, voice breaking as she spoke.

'*Beat him up, Wei Wuxian,*' most people, including Jin Zixuan, mentally requested.

"How dare you falsely accuse her?!" Wei Wuxian demanded, his eyes flashing a deadly red.

Wen Chao felt his soul instantly rise out of his body.

"You — how is this a false accusation? She was sneaking around here, so I asked her what she was doing. She evaded, not wanting to answer, then decided to lie, saying she was delivering soup!" Jin Zixuan explained, jumping back to gain some distance.

When he phrased it like that, Jiang Yanli could somewhat understand why her mother was mad. She had nothing but the best of intentions, but-

"I already know that the one who was delivering me soup was Lady Song! She falsely claimed Lady Song's-"

"Hey! You!" Wei Wuxian paused in his attacks, turning to address one of the cultivators on the side.

"Huh?"

"Drag that Lady Song or whatever here!"

"Uh, yes Sir!"

So, Wei Wuxian was still considered important enough for his commands to be followed and respected. Wen Ruohan wondered how long it took for that to change.

“Wei Wuxian, what are you trying to do?!” Jin Zixuan asked as the low-ranked cultivator ran off. “One should take responsibility for oneself. Whatever this is, come at me! If you’re a man, then don’t bully a weak woman!”

“Shut up! Isn’t my Shijie also a woman?! Yet you’re bullying her!”

‘*You tell him, Wei Wuxian,*’ Jin Zixuan thought, giving the Yiling Patriarch a mental cheer.

“You dared to accuse my Shijie of lying! I’ll bring the relevant parties over. Then we’ll see who’s telling the truth!”

Excited, gossipy mouths turned to each other and whispered, “Is this really Yunmeng Jiang’s eldest lady Jiang Yanli?”

“Look at how angry Young Master Wei is. There’s no doubt.”

Madam Jin could only sigh.

“Is the Lady Song they’re talking about the same Lady Song who was elevated to guest disciple status just a short while ago by Young Master Jin?”

“I think so.”

“I see,” Lan Xichen said, turning a sympathetic gaze on Jin Zixuan. “You’re trying to look past class prejudice and help someone at a disadvantage. That’s admirable.”

“Except you chose the wrong person and allowed it to blind you,” Nie Mingjue pointed out, sighing heavily (the exact same way he did whenever Huaisang ‘accidentally’ dropped his saber out the window). Considering Jin Ling had already confirmed that Jiang Yanli was the one who was sending him soup, Jin Zixuan had no response.

Then, following a patter of hurried footsteps, the cultivator who had left to grab Lady Song appeared from behind a nearby tent. A moment later, his companion appeared as well.

“Just what is happening?” a woman with sea green eyes asked. “Why did you call me here so urgently?”

“Lady Song, we’re here,” the cultivator explained. “Please go over there.”

“You’re never going to live this down,” Wen Qing muttered.

Jin Zixuan could only pout, “Why are my moments only the most embarrassing ones?”

Lan Wangji glanced back at him and nodded once, a show of comradery for a fellow warrior. Quietly, Jin Zixuan wondered if the two of them should make a club for ‘people whose crushes on Yunmeng children cause untold embarrassment to fall upon them.’

“What’s this?”

“You’re Lady Song?” Wei Wuxian asked, receiving a nod in exchange. “Lady Song, Jin Zixuan said the soup in his room was delivered by you. He also said that my Shijie has lied to falsely claim your deeds. Is that true?”

“That-I… No! This is a misunderstanding! Yes, a misunderstanding!”

Hearing her frantic insistence to that (obviously wrong) fact, Nie Huaisang felt his pity for Jin Zixuan double.

“A misunderstanding?”

“I-I also don’t know why he thought that. One day, I passed by Young Master Jin’s room and he suddenly asked me if I had delivered some soup to him. I told him I hadn’t, but he didn’t believe me.”

“Sorry,” Jin Zixuan mumbled, not even sure who he was apologizing to anymore.

“Anyways, this… this really is a misunderstanding,” she concluded.

Jin Zixuan, who had turned to glare back at Wei Wuxian, did a double-take: “It wasn’t you? Then why have you been appearing near my room so often?! And, when I asked you, why did you answer so vaguely, as though you were embarrassed to admit it?”

“That… that’s probably a coincidence?”

Nie Mingjue snorted.

“Young Master Jin, that day you interrogated me so suddenly that I….”

One of the watching support staff members abruptly straightened up, realizing, “Oh, wait, I remember now. I’ve seen Lady Jiang making soup in the kitchen before.”

A cultivator nodded, “That’s right. When I’m on my guard shift, I usually see Lady Jiang come by in the afternoon. It’s always around this time.”

Jin ZIxuan was astounded: “Could it be… that this is really all a misunderstanding?”

“A *misunderstanding?!*” Wei Wuxian’s eyes flashed an even darker red than before. “Jin Zixuan, you don’t think you can get away simply by saying that it’s a misunderstanding, do you?”

In the next second, Jin Zixuan crashed against the ground again, Wei Wuxian’s fist having nearly broken his nose.

Through the shame, embarrassment, and guilt he was experiencing, Jin Zixuan managed to muster up just enough thought to be grateful that Wei Wuxian was there.

“A-Xian!”

“Stop! Stop fighting!”

“Shijie, don’t stop me!” Wei Wuxian responded, tackling Jin Zixuan to the ground.

“Enough! A-Xian! Stop, A-Xian!”

Wen Chao was infinitely grateful that Wei Wuxian wasn’t angry enough to use resentful energy for this fight. Even now, the burning rage he felt was enough to make nearby spirits feel like static was running up their arms.

(Needless to say, it terrified the Wen heir.)

Wen Qing was just glad she had already mostly separated from the Wen. She wanted nothing to do with the the pathetic, broken mess that was Wen Chao.

“Sect Leader Jin and Sect Leader Jiang are back!” someone called out.

“Quick, get them to stop this!”

Jiang Cheng came around, pulling Wei Wuxian off Jin Zixuan by his arm, while Sect Leader Jin tried desperately to calm Wei Wuxian’s temper from behind his son.

Although Wei Wuxian backed off, his anger hadn’t faded one bit.

“Jin Zixuan, one day — one day I’ll make you die by my hands!”

Like a missing piece had suddenly clicked into place, the watchers froze and observed the picture being put together before their eyes. Yes, Wei Wuxian killing Jiang Yanli was unbelievable, and likely to be at least somewhat hearsay.

Wei Wuxian killing Jin Zixuan, on the other hand, was seeming more and more likely by the second.

(And Jin Zixuan couldn’t even say he blamed the Patriarch.)

“A-Xuan, stop that,” Madam Jin scolded, realizing what he was thinking instantly. “You behaved poorly and should have done a proper investigation first, but your heart was in the right place. You certainly don’t deserve death for this!”

“I know,” he assured her. “I just… it’s like watching a carriage crash in slow motion.”

“Don’t say that,” Jiang Yanli insisted. “Your response was understandable. I… I was trying to help, but there may have been better ways I could have gone about doing that.”

Finally, as the conflict came to an end and the crowd dispersed, Jin Ling’s narration returned: “Soon, the truth of the incident was fully revealed. Lady Song had seen Jiang Yanli delivering the soup, and followed her out of curiosity. It had only taken a few times for Lady Song to figure out what was happening.”

Despite her parents’ and brother’s gazes telling her not to blame herself, the revelation of how it had gone wrong left Jiang Yanli feeling more than a little foolish. She blushed an rosy pink and looked down.

“One day, after Jiang Yanli had brought the soup, Lady Song had waited outside of Jin Zixuan’s room and purposefully allowed him to see her shadow.”

Jin Guangshan wanted to sigh at his son’s foolishness. If Zixuan hadn’t allowed himself to get so emotionally invested in a random woman, he wouldn’t have had to face such a humiliating situation.

“Afterward, although Jiang Yanli continued to work in Langya, she kept to herself. Not only did she stop bringing Jin Zixuan soup, but she refused to give him even a proper look. Shortly after the crisis of Langya was solved, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng brought her back to Yunmeng.”

“How on earth did Jin Ling happen, then?” Madam Jin wondered.

Seeing the complicated look on his ally’s face, Lan Qiren turned to Jiang Fengmian and said, “Perhaps it’s all for the best. Given everything that had happened, their relationship was a bit unbalanced, with your daughter always feeling one-sided affection. This might be an opportunity for them to meet as equals.”

Agreeing completely, Wen Qing sent Jiang Yanli a reassuring nod.

“Nevertheless, Wei Wuxian never forgave him.”

“Of course not,” Madam Jin sighed, feeling like everything was clicking into place. They could all see where this was going to end, but, it being a simulation, there was nothing they could do to stop it.

When light returned to the blackened world, they were back in the future. Wei Wuxian (in Mo Xuanyu’s body) still had his arm outstretched over Jin Ling, Wisps of black traced their way in a maze across his hand, and a sheen of sweat had begun to cover his face from the exertion.

“It’s still there?” Madam Yu glared. “What’s taking so long?”

(‘*Ungrateful, ignorant fool,*’ Wen Ruohan thought in response. ‘*Even after all this, you refuse to appreciate the treasure you have at your disposal.*’)

“A-Xian,” a voice called out, and the watchers were pulled back inside the curse-based hallucination. The Yiling Patriarch looked around the lotus pond, trying to see where the voice had come from.

“A-Xian?” the real Jiang Yanli asked.

“A-Xian,” they heard again, and Wei Wuxian flinched.

“Shijie?” he asked. “Shijie, where are you?”

“A-Xian,” she said again. “A-Xian, look.”

He turned around, and saw a replica of the figures who had been in the painting Jin Ling looked at. Jiang Yanli — Madam Jin — held an infant Jin Ling in her arms, Jin Zixuan lovingly wrapping an arm around her.

"Well, it's… nice that they're assuring us it'll all work out at the end," Nie Huaisang supposed.

Wei Wuxian smiled and reached towards her.

The watchers flinched at the same time he did.

With shaking limbs, he slowly turned his hand around so that his palm would face him, and saw that it was drenched in blood. A shock of static striked at the watchers' heads, and when they opened their eyes again the waters were painted red. Wei Wuxian stood in the center, eyes wide and face frozen in shock.

He looked around, a lost child among a sea of death. Then, to his left, a hallucination of the adult Jin Zixuan collapsed to his knees.

There was a hole in his chest.

'Wei Wuxian is a monster! Yanli treated him like her own brother!' a man revealed.

Just a short while ago, they had been sure that, due to the lack of psychological damage resentful energy caused, Wei Wuxian *couldn't* have been the one to kill Jin Ling's parents.

But if he remembered this — if he'd been *there*-

"No," Wei Wuxian whispered, stepping back. "No-"

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli's voice whispered, and a drop of blood fell off a lotus petal.

Wei Wuxian's eyes were drawn in the direction of that voice just in time to see a blade pierce through Jiang Yanli's chest. Her hand fell, and her corpse collapsed onto the ground.

Now, suddenly, the watchers were a lot less sure.

Wei Wuxian stared in horror at the scene before him. He shook his head in denial, and tears of grief began to flow out of his eyes. Genuine reactions. Negative emotion.

Strong enough to manipulate resentment.

Wen Chao shrieked and jumped back as resentful energy *screamed.*.

"*No!*" Wei Wuxian shouted, sucking in the power only to blast it out in a tremendous shockwave. The force sent countless lotus petals flying into the air, but removed the lingering resentful energy as well.

The water had returned to a clear blue.

“Okay,” Nie Huaisang grumbled from where he’d been knocked onto the ground. “I have no idea what just happened.”

Were those Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan’s deaths? They’d barely seen any of it, so it was impossible to tell what had happened. The only things that were undeniable were this:

Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan had been killed.

They were speaking to Wei Wuxian when it happened.

They didn’t want to believe it, but would someone else really have been able to kill those two if Wei Wuxian was with them? He would have stopped any attempt, right?

Unless that was the outcome he’d wanted.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji whispered, stepping close.

Right before he could reach Wei Wuxian, however, another hand beat him to it. It was the child form of Jin Ling, who had grabbed Wei Wuxian’s finger with his own. Wei Wuxian flinched and glanced down, only to find the boy he had orphaned staring up at him.

“Shishu,” the child’s eyes watered. “Why did A-Niang and A-Die abandon me?”

Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath and looked away, but forced himself to respond, “They… they didn’t abandon you.”

“Then where are they? Why haven’t they come to me?”

Rushing forward, Jiang Yanli knelt down beside her son, wishing that she could help. As she saw this, Madam Yu couldn’t shake the feeling that, had she been allowed to live, Jiang Yanli would have become a much better mother than she ever was.

(Was she not already? Jiang Yanli had done far more than her to parent Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng, after all.)

(And now Wei Wuxian was repaying the favor.)

And, proving her point, Wei Wuxian smiled and knelt down before Jin Ling, answering, “They’re very far away. Come, I'll take you to find your family.”

After thinking it over for a moment, Jin Ling glared and ordered, “Don’t lie to me!”

“I won’t,” Wei Wuxian promised. “It’s dangerous here. Come, Jin Ling.”

He held a hand out. Jin Ling took it.

The hallucination faded away.

“Thank you, A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian whispered.

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes, and looked down at the unconscious Jin Ling. He frowned as he stared.

'*This is a complicated one,*' he thought. '*I got some of it, but the rest… I might not be able to unravel it. Should I-*'

Before he could finish that thought, Jin Ling opened his eyes.

"A-Ling!"

After taking a moment to blink away his exhaustion, Jin Ling realized three things. One, that he didn't know where he was. Two, that his insane uncle was leaning over him. Three, that he was mostly undressed.

"W-what are you doing?!" he demanded, immediately getting up.

"Oh, hey. You're awake!" Wei Wuxian grinned.

"That is *not* an appropriate response!" Wen Qing protested.

Jin Ling jumped back, straightening out his clothes and demanding, "What do you want? Where are my clothes? Where's my sword? And my dog!"

"I was just about to put your clothes back on you," Wei Wuxian explained, clearly far too amused by the situation.

"I'm not a cut sleeve!" Jin Ling protested.

Jiang Yanli frowned at the disgust in the tone, instantly reminded of the 'damn gay' Jin Ling had used to describe Mo Xuanyu upon their first meeting.

"What a coincidence," Wei Wuxian beamed. "I am!"

"*Wei Ying!*" Lan Wangji shouted, annoyed at such a tone being used on someone other than him.

Jin Ling snatched the sword that laid beside the bed in a manner so serious that Wei Wuxian couldn't help but laugh, "Why are you so scared? I'm just kidding! I spent so much effort digging you out of that wall, and you don't even thank me."

"Be polite to your Shishu, A-Ling," Jin Zixuan muttered.

Hearing that, Madam Jin turned a disapproving gaze on her son. Yes, it was true that she trusted the current and past Wei Wuxian, but the Yiling Patriarch was a different story. Considering him Jin LIng's "Shishu" before understanding what happened was naive at best.

As if in agreement, Jin Ling scrambled away and tried to fix his messy hair, threatening, "I-if not for the fact that you dug me out, you taking off my cl-clothes would have meant I'd have killed you a thousand times over!"

“Please don’t. Dying once was already painful enough.”

“Weren’t you trying to keep your identity *hidden?!*” Wen Qing lectured.

Smiling warmly, Lan Xichen leaned close to Lan Wangji and whispered, “It’s a good thing he now has you to look after him.”

After a moment of hesitation, Lan Wangji nodded in agreement.

“You-”

“There, there,” Wei Wuxian sighed, smile teetering the edge of patronizing. “No need for that. Go on, put the sword down.”

With a muddled look, Jin Ling did as he was told.

A warm smile crossed Jiang Yanli’s face. It wasn’t perfect — her son was still fairly rude, even if in a childish way — but it was, undeniably, progress. Although Jin Ling’s memories of his rescue were hazy, he clearly remembered the terror of feeling himself slowly begin to suffocate in the wall, and knew that the person who had saved him was the cultivator before him. To realize that his mysterious savior was “Mo Xuanyu” left him more confused than anything else.

But it was progress nonetheless.

Glancing outside, Jin Ling saw at once that it had become dark, with a few stars already appearing in the sky. Eyes wide, he immediately leapt out of bed and snatched his clothes out of Wei Wuxian’s hands, running outside. Wei Wuxian, who had expected Jin Ling to be exhausted after what had just happened, was completely blindsided.

‘*He still has the curse mark!*’ Wei Wuxian realized, eyes widening with horror. “Jin Ling, wait!”

Wei Wuxian gave chase.

“What number is this? It’s like the *fourth time* since Wei Wuxian’s come back that he’s had to go and save Jin Ling’s life! What is with that kid’s luck?!”

Outside, Wei Wuxian followed after the fleeing Jin Ling and shouted, “What are you running away for?! Come back!”

“Don’t follow me!” Jin Ling responded, hurriedly putting on his sect robe. Unfortunately, Jin Ling’s higher cultivation soon allowed him to pull ahead. Wei Wuxian had lost him.

Twilight approached, and Wei Wuxian continued to search. He walked through the streets and listened carefully to nearby conversations and even asked a few people if they’d seen the boy, but it was hopeless. The dwindling number of people on the street correlated with the latening hour, and Jin Ling was nowhere to be found.

‘*Jin Ling,*’ Wei Wuxian cursed. ‘*Where did that damn kid go?*’

Lan Qiren couldn’t help but think that Wei Wuxian absolutely deserved this after all the pain he’d put the simulated Lan Qiren through while in the Cloud Recesses.

“Jin Ling!” a voice snapped.

“A-Cheng?”

“You disappeared after I said just a few things about you! Are you a young mistress? Your temper has been growing worse and worse.”

Nie Huaisang made an “oh” sound, finally understanding the reason Lan Jingyi had called Jin Ling “young mistress” earlier.

Having recognized the voice of his former shidi, Wei Wuxian slid behind an alleyway to listen closely. A moment later, Jin Ling’s voice responded to his uncle.

“I’ve come back perfectly fine, haven’t I? Stop nagging!”

“‘Perfectly fine?’” Wen Qing parrotted, raising a judgmental eyebrow.

‘*So Jin Ling didn’t come to Qinghe by himself,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*Jiang Cheng had come to help Jin Ling at Dafan mountain as well. It makes sense that he’d be here now.*’

Jin Ling had almost died at Dafan mountain too, hadn’t he? With that in mind, Jiang Cheng mentally promised himself to make Wei Wuxian create a Compass of Evil that pointed at Jin Ling instead of spirits. As far as he could tell, that would be the only way to keep his absolutely insane nephew safe.

“Perfectly fine?” Jiang Cheng repeated, even more disbelieving than Wen Qing had been. “You look like you rolled around in a muddy ditch and you call yourself perfectly fine?! Aren’t you embarrassed to be wearing your sect’s uniform? Speak. What did you run into today?”

“I already told you: I didn’t run into anything!” Jin Ling lied. “I tripped, and it was a waste of time — *Ow!* Don’t tug me like that! I’m not three!”

“You think I can’t discipline you anymore? Let me tell you, even when you’re thirty I’ll still be able to do this! Next time, if you run around without telling anyone again, the whip awaits you!”

“I went alone *because* I didn’t want anyone to help or discipline me!”

‘*I don’t know about those other things, but Jiang Cheng had a point when he said Jin Ling’s temper was just like a young mistress’,*’ Wei Wuxian thought.

The longer Lan Wangji watched the amusing interaction, the more he wished they would be able to meet up with Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi again. Watching his older self’s teaching style would provide valuable inspiration for Lan Wangji to apply once he left the simulation.

Sighing, Jiang Cheng moved on and asked, "So? What now? What did you catch? Where's the spiritual dog your uncle gave you?"

Lan Xichen smiled and, along with Wei Wuxian, thought, *'It's been chased into a random corner by my broth-*'

Two barks came from the distance and Wei Wuxian shrieked, jumping out of the alleyway right as Fairy went barreling into Jin Ling's arms.

For a moment, everything paused, and Wei Wuxian made eye contact with Jiang Cheng, terror still clear in his expression.

Now, finally, Jiang Cheng could relax. It was true that Zidian hadn't worked, but now that the older Jiang Cheng had seen 'Mo Xuanyu's' fear of dogs, it would be obvious that this was Wei Wuxian.

At long last, Wei Wuxian could come home.

Except, when Wei Wuxian got over his shock, the first thing he did was turn and flee.

Jiang Cheng glared. There was a flash of purple light, and a *crack* of Zidian sent Wei Wuxian flying forward and tumbling across the ground.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli yelped, running over at once.

"Look who we have here," Sect Leader Jiang smirked, sending a line of purple lightning forward to hold Wei Wuxian in place. "What? Lan Wangji didn't tie you up in his home after Dafan Mountain?"

"*What* is he insinuating?" Lan Qiren gasped out. Everyone else was too shocked by the *glee* in Jiang Wanyin's voice to pay that any mind.

"Hey, Sect Leader Jiang, why did you hit me with purple lightning again?" Wei Wuxian grumbled, shifting to face his former shidi despite the lightning binding him in place. And he raised a good point; if Zidian hadn't expelled his soul the first time, it wouldn't the second either.

'*It doesn't mean anything,' the simulated Jiang Cheng had thought as 'Mo Xuanyu' got up after the strike from Zidian. 'I should first find an excuse to take him back and use every possible method to get information out of him. It's impossible for him to not confess anything or give himself away. I've done things like this plenty of times already.*'

They hadn't completely believed it then.

But now-

Jiang Wanyin walked forward and snatched the back of Wei Wuxian's collar, yanking him up and making him hiss as a few strands of hair got caught by Jiang Cheng's hand. Then, without another word, Jiang Cheng walked to a nearby shop and kicked the door open.

“A-Cheng?” Jiang Yanli asked, worry taking over. She made eye contact with her family, seeing equal amounts of worry on all of their faces. Yes, she could understand why her brother felt motivated to do that (Wei Wuxian had made his refusal to even *talk* to Jiang Cheng very clear) but this still seemed excessive.

In the back of her mind, she prayed that was all it was.

The shop owner squeaked in fright, seeing the obvious wealth and power of the man who entered.

(The expression on Sect Leader Jiang’s face certainly didn’t help. If you asked the shop owner, wouldn’t be surprising if Jiang Cheng disemboweled Wei Wuxian on the spot!)

It was a little funny to Jiang Yanli to see how much worse at expressing his emotions her brother had gotten. If she didn’t know him better, she would have thought he was actually going to hurt Wei Wuxian.

(Luckily, Jiang Cheng had run out to distract the Wens, proving his love. She didn’t need to worry.)

Then, even without prompting, a Jiang disciple went up and whispered something in the man’s ear, handing over a few pieces of silver. Trembling further, the owner nodded once and fled the building through a back door. Immediately after, the Jiang disciples spread out, preventing anyone from entering or exiting the building.

Lan Qiren frowned, “...Sect Leader Jiang?”

“They…” Jiang Fengmian paused. “They must be realizing how excited A-Cheng is. I’m not completely sure how they all knew to do that, but… they must just know A-Cheng really well.”

That made sense. The only other explanation was that this was something they did often, but Jiang Cheng shouldn’t have more than one family member who was unwilling to speak with him, so that didn’t make sense.

(Though, if you asked the snickering Wen Chao, he’d say it was clearly a trained response. After all, he’d taught his own Wen disciples to do the exact same thing.)

Meanwhile, Jin Ling stood on the side, looking completely lost.

“Uncle, why are you taking this damn cutsleeve?”

Instead of answering, Jiang Cheng kicked the restrained Wei Wuxian, making him whine pitifully.

Hearing the clearly-exaggerated act, Lan Wangji managed to calm momentarily. Yes, this was just like what was happening with the future Hanguang-jun: Wei Wuxian not wanting to talk to people who cared for him.

(And yet, he couldn’t keep himself from mentally praying for Wei Wuxian’s safety.)

“I’ll take care of you later. Stay here,” Jiang Wanyin ordered to his nephew. Without sparing a second glance, he walked up the stairs toward one of the rooms, dragging the captive Wei Wuxian with him.

The nephew he’d left behind stared up in horror.

‘*For as long as I can remember… has Jiuju ever looked like that?*’ he thought. ‘*Jiujiu’s led the Jiang Sect since he was young, so he’s always been… cold and dark.*’

Jiang Cheng flinched.

’But, right now….. He was trying to suppress his expression. And his face has always been clouded by arrogance and satire-’

‘*Unfilial brat,*’ Madam Yu mentally hissed.

(Had her own children thought the same things about her?)

‘*Right now, it looks like every corner of his face has come alive. I-I don’t even know what that was.*’

Vengeful wrath, fathomless hatred, or raving ecstasy.

Having seen the future Jiang Cheng’s expression for themselves, there was nothing the watchers could say in response.

“Jin Ling,” Jiang Cheng spoke again, having reached the top of the stairs. “Lend me your dog.”

It took at least three seconds for those words to register.

And in that time, a frozen Wei Wuxian was thrown into an inn room, Fairy following shortly after at Jin Ling’s reluctant whistle.

“...A-Cheng?” Jiang Yanli asked, staring blankly at him.

He could only gape, too shocked to speak.

Within the room, Wei Wuxian sat in a crouch, ready to flee at a moment’s notice. His eyes weren’t on Jiang Cheng, but rather the loyal dog waiting patiently by the door, guarding his only exit.

‘*Jiang Cheng really knows the best way to deal with me,*’ he thought, his eyes glued to the beast before him.

The words were said with a self-deprecating humor, but none of the watchers managed to crack a smile.

(No, that wasn’t quite right; Wen Chao was practically bouncing in excitement.)

Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng sat down at a nearby table and poured himself a cup of tea. For a moment, no one spoke. Then, Jiang Cheng glanced towards him.

"...Don't you have something to say to me?" he asked, his lips curling up into a cruel smile.

"I don't know what to say to you," Wei Wuxian replied sincerely.

"Say what?" Nie Mingjue asked, his eyes glued disbelievingly onto the scene before him. In the third segment, he had been shocked by their apparent closeness. Now, he was abruptly recalling the reason for that.

"Do you… want an apology?" Lan Xichen asked. And if Jiang Cheng was truly demanding something like that, then had Wei Wuxian actually been responsible for Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli's-

"You really don't learn, do you?"

"And I see you haven't made any progress either."

Jiang Cheng flinched. No matter how many times they fought — how many times they argued — how many times Jiang Cheng had mocked his fear of dogs — Wei Wuxian had always still had affection for him.

He had never sounded so cold.

Enraged, the simulated Sect Leader Jiang laughed: "We'll see who hasn't made any progress."

And, with a whistle, he made Fairy run forward.

"*Ah!*" Jiang Yanli shouted as she fell to her knees. And she was far from the only one; the piercing *shriek* ringing in everyone's minds made the earlier castle's spirits sound like a lullaby by comparison. The pressure of the energy slammed against them as well, preventing even the steady from speaking.

'Help!'* Patriarch's commands screamed. *'Help! Help! Get it away from me-'

'No, stop. Don't do anyth-'

'Help me!'

Their bodies numbed and their panic grew in synch with Wei Wuxian's.

'No, please, teeth, it's going to bite — help! I-'

'No! Stay still! Stay calm! Don't-'

'Don't touch me! Don't let it touch-'

'It'll bite and tear and rip and chew-'

'Don't! It's-'

'Help me!'

"What did you just say?" Jiang Cheng demanded, pulling Fairy back by its collar.

"Huh?" Wei Wuxian asked.

A sudden *lack* of terror appeared as the resentful energy abruptly cut off, making many of the watchers feel like a drunk lightheadedness. Nie Huaisang even laughed a bit as a bubbly sensation spread through his chest.

Lan Wangji turned to his uncle, "What… was that?"

"I almost forgot to ask," Jiang Cheng added on. "Since when have you been so close to Lan Wangji?"

"I… I…" Wei Wuxian heaved frightened, panicked breaths. "I called his name?"

After such a scene, not even Lan Xichen could be happy with the proof of the couple's growing relationship. It seemed like such a pathetically minor victory in comparison to the shock they had just received.

"And last time, on Dafan mountain… he went so far to protect you," Jiang Cheng thought aloud. "No, he wasn't necessarily protecting you. After all, Gusu Lan hasn't forgotten the people you killed with that loyal dog of yours. Someone so celebrated for his righteousness wouldn't tolerate the likes of you. Maybe he was just protecting the person whose body you stole."

"Watch your language," Wei Wuxian snapped, unable to tolerate the faux-politeness covering cruelty.

"No, Wangji knew," Lan Qiren shook his head, then abruptly flinched back.

That was the answer to everything, wasn't it? The reason behind Hanguang-jun's behavior, and even Wei Wuxian's reactions. If Lan Wangji knew that Jiang Wanyin was a genuine danger to Wei Wuxian — that he might kill him *again* — then bringing Wei Wuxian under his protection was no surprise at all, no matter what it took. And Wei Wuxian?

He'd continued trying to escape what he thought was a genuine punishment because that was what would happen if anyone else had found him. But Wangji had proven his desire to help Wei Wuxian time and time again, until the Yiling Patriarch had begun to trust him.

(Until Wangji's name was the one Wei Wuxian called out when scared.)

Jiang Cheng laughed, "You really have the audacity to tell me to watch my language? Back on Dafan mountain, which one of us didn't watch what they said while talking to Jin Ling?"

Wei Wuxian stiffened.

"Wei Ying, it wasn't your fault," Lan Wangji whispered.

Having regained the upper hand in the conversation, Jiang Cheng sneered and continued, "'I suppose you didn't have a mother to teach you?' Hitting where it hurts the most, huh? Have you forgotten who's the reason Jin Ling has had to face so many whispers behind his back? You're quite the forgetful old man. You've forgotten the things you've said, the promise you made…."

"Promise?" Jiang Cheng asked, unable to register anything else.

"But don't you dare forget how his parents died!"

"I haven't forgotten! I only… I-"

Jiang Cheng's untouched cup of steaming tea shattered against the wall behind Wei Wuxian, a few drops landing on his uncovered skin and making him wince.

"Only what? You can't say it?" Jiang Cheng laughed. "That's alright! You can say your excuses as you kneel before my parent's graves!"

It really was an apology he wanted. No, it was more than that: he wanted Wei Wuxian to admit that he'd been wrong.

(If he'd really killed Jiang Yanli, was this unjustified? And no matter the animosity between them, Jin Zixuan had done nothing to justify his murder.)

So this-

Wei Wuxian looked away: '*I've always wanted to return to Lotus Pier. But… not the tattered Lotus Pier of today.*'

"Tattered?!" Jiang Cheng stood up, then froze, unable to say anything while remembering the way Yunmeng Jiang's disciples had cut off the building's exits without needing orders to do so. And, despite all the screaming Wei Wuxian had done, had not come up to check.

Which meant they'd expected this.

Which meant-

Suddenly, a series of hurried footsteps approached.

"Uncle!" Jin Ling knocked furiously. "Uncle!"

"Didn't I tell you to stay where you were? Why are you up here?"

"Uncle, I have something really important to tell you!"

"Then why didn't you say it while I was scolding you? Why bother me now?"

“I couldn’t say it *because* you were scolding me! Are you going to listen or not? If not, I’m not going to say anything-”

“Just tell me!” Jiang Cheng commanded, finally opening the door.

Jin Ling immediately stepped inside and explained, “I actually did encounter something extreme today. I think I ran into Wen Ning!”

“What?” Wen Qing gasped.

“Where? When?!” Jiang Cheng demanded, his expression hostile.

“It was this afternoon. There’s a worn-down house about a dozen miles south of here. I went because I’d heard something strange had happened, and there was a fierce corpse inside!”

“But… he was at the castle… this afternoon.”

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?!”

“I wasn’t sure! I’d just seen a blurry figure! But I heard chain noises like the ones he made on Dafan Mountain! If you hadn’t scolded me like that, I would have told you earlier. Blame your bad temper, not me!”

Jin Ling tried to step further inside, but Jiang Cheng had become so angry that he slammed the door in his nephew’s face.

By this point, even Jiang Yanli was too mentally and emotionally exhausted to say anything about that.

When Jiang Cheng spun around, Wei Wuxian quickly arranged his face into a surprised ‘oh no, my secret was discovered.’ Jin Ling was actually quite clever, making an excellent lie given the limited information he had.

“Well, well,” Jiang Cheng glared. “You really bring that dog of yours everywhere, don’t you?”

“Don’t *call him that*,” Wen Qing demanded, now knowing full-well exactly what a “dog” meant to Wei Wuxian.

With a sigh, Wei Wuxian pointed out, “He’s been dead for years. I’ve died once, too. What more do you want?”

“So what? Even if he dies a thousand times my hatred will never fade! I’ll burn him right now, and scatter the ashes right in front of your face!”

‘*What has Wei Wuxian done to deserve this?*’ Jiang Cheng thought, staring in disbelief at his older-self. ‘*I can’t imagine… did he really kill A-jie? I….*’

“A-Ling,” he spoke. “Keep a close eye on the person inside. Don’t believe or listen to anything he says! Don’t let him make a sound. If he tries to whistle or play his flute, block his mouth. If that doesn’t work, just cut off his tongue!”

‘Break his legs? Haven’t I told you? When dealing with those without honor, just kill them and feed them to your dog.’

He’d meant that literally. And, unlike when they’d first heard those words, the watchers now had no doubt that everything being shown by the simulation was real.

“I know, I’ll watch him,” Jin Ling promised, unaware that those words had been said more as a threat to Wei Wuxian than anything else. “Uncle, why did you shut yourself inside here with this damn cutsleeve? What did he do this time?”

“Don’t ask. Remember to watch properly. If I return to see that he’s disappeared, I’ll break your leg for sure!”

That was a threat he didn’t mean. Like the A-Cheng Jiang Yanli knew, he was acting more angry than he actually was, and speaking threats he and the target knew he wasn’t going to follow up on.

But he had used a *dog* against Wei Wuxian. If Jiang Cheng told Wei Wuxian that he was going to send dogs to chew Wei Ying to shreds, he’d mean it. And both of them knew it.

“Let’s go!” Jiang Cheng ordered.

“Yes, sir!” his disciples responded, not a single one of them showing concern over the things he might have done to “Mo Xuanyu” (whose greatest crime, as far as they knew, was tripping Jin Ling when the boy attacked him).

The door slammed shut.

The Jiang parents had to look away.

After all, Wen Ning was the only reason their bodies’ hadn’t faced the same fate as what Jiang Cheng had just mentioned. Wen Ning had found their corpses and allowed them to get a proper burial. And now their son, who Wen Ning had saved, was going to try to scatter his ashes.

What had happened?

“Damn cutsleeve,” Jin Ling began.

Jiang Yanli sighed, now realizing that the phrase had become so ingrained into Jin Ling that he didn’t even think before saying it.

“What were you talking to my uncle about? Why didn’t he let me listen?”

“Adults were speaking, why would we involve a child like you?” the restrained Wei Wuxian responded, his smile shockingly teasing for someone being held captive.

However, a moment later, he frowned, watching Jin Ling dart his eyes around the room nervously.

A moment later, the Jin heir put a finger in front of his lips, walked forward, and whispered something.

Zidian disassembled.

"A-Ling?"

It reformed into a silver ring in Jin Ling's palm. He looked around one last time, then whispered:

"Let's go."

Genuine smiles warred with stunned disbelief in the watchers' expression. It was heartwarming that Jin Ling was helping Wei Wuxian. It was a level of bravery and righteousness that they honestly hadn't expected.

And yet any joy they might have felt for that was destroyed by the fact that it was *Jiang Cheng* who had prompted those actions. After all, and even if Wei Wuxian had saved his life, Jin Ling thought of Mo Xuanyu as a "damn cutsleeve lunatic," who he was embarrassed to have as an uncle. And yet he'd still thought Wei Wuxian needed to be saved.

"A-Cheng?" Jiang Yanli whispered, seeing the far away look in her brother's eyes. He didn't respond.

Several more people glanced over, and saw the denial clear in his expression. Everyone knew what he was thinking. That *couldn't* have been him. He must have been possessed or controlled by someone else, but….

No matter what the simulated Jiang Cheng did, Wei Wuxian hadn't been surprised.

(Like a twist on an already present knife, this realization stabbed deeper into the existing wound of Wei Wuxian's similar lack of surprise when Jiang Fengmian prioritized his blood child's life over Wei Wuxian's.)

And yet, could they be mad at Jiang Cheng for this? He had been just as surprised as the rest of them.

They wanted to. Consciously, many of them wanted to be mad. Lan Wangji especially wanted justice for what had happened. And yet, over time, the simulation had hammered into them time and time again how misleading the thirteen years later future was. The simulation had given them all proof that Jiang Cheng valued Wei Wuxian's life when he sacrificed himself to distract the Wens. Yes, *a* Jiang Cheng had set a dog on Wei Wuxian, but the one with them hadn't.

And the one with them *wouldn't*.

So, what were they supposed to do now?

Someone cleared their throat.

“Hi, Shijie, Jiang Cheng, Uncle Jiang, Madam Yu, sect leaders,” a chipper voice greeted them. “Is now an okay time?”

“It’s fine,” Jiang Cheng growled, discomfort at the situation tingling his nerves.

“Ah… welcome back, A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian responded. “Is something wrong?”

“Nah, it’s all fine. I just made it back from the conference and thought I’d check in with you. So, how’s it going? Is the information you’re getting still just as important as ever? Or are you like me, realizing that the information you wanted to know is actually really boring when told by a bunch of dusty, old-”

“*Wei Wuxian!*” Madam Yu snapped, furious that he would insult sect elders in front of so many people.

“I… sorry, Madam Yu.”

“Don’t apologize, you… I….”

She couldn’t finish.

The way Wei Wuxian had simply shut down as she spoke was unbelievable, especially considering how ~~brave~~ reckless he’d been while going up against Wen Chao. No matter how bad she was, he couldn’t possibly believe she’d throw him into the Burial Mounds. Why would he still react that way?

Why did his voice sound so much like Jin Ling’s had when the simulated Jiang Cheng started dragging Wei Wuxian upstairs? There had, for a moment, been genuine nervousness on Jin Ling’s face. And now….

(Perhaps her husband would like a prize. Jiang Fengmian had always made it very clear that he felt like their son had inherited all her worst traits. It seemed he was right.)

(Which was probably why he hadn’t wanted to get married to her in the first place.)

But it was different. Her son was (supposedly) torturing demonic cultivators and anyone who reminded him of Wei Wuxian. He was using dogs against Wei Wuxian, and even she’d never done that ~~aside from the few times she’d threatened to throw him back out onto the streets~~. The situations weren’t alike at all.

~~Though, given what Wei Wuxian had done to deserve it those respective times, she knew saying that they were different actually made her look *worse*, rather than better.~~

Her son cleared his throat, “...Wei Wuxian.”

“Jiang Cheng?”

“I… whenever you’ve slept in and I tell you that, like, dogs are coming or something, you know I’m lying, right? You’re an idiot, but you're not that much of an idiot.”

“Well, yeah. Of course,” Wei Wuxian answered, then paused. “Wait, are you feeling guilty over it? Aw, A-Cheng, I didn’t realize you cared. What, did something in the simulation make you think of it?”

“What? I… of course not! I was just wondering,” Jiang Cheng denied, relaxing greatly at those words.

“We were just worried,” Jiang Yanli confirmed.

“Whatever you say,” Wei Wuxian agreed easily. “Well, since Shijie’s so worried, can you make me something to eat when you get out of the Great Sleep? I’ve been really missing your soup!”

“Oh, don’t be such a baby!” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes. “You can survive without her soup for a few days!”

At those words, Lan Wangji and Wen Qing had to try very, very hard to not imagine the starving eight year old Wei Wuxian, who very nearly hadn’t.

“Doesn’t matter, Shijie loves me! Right, Shijie?”

Jiang Yanli laughed, “Of course, A-Xian.”

“My god, you’re so annoying,” Jiang Cheng glared. “You know, if you were more normal I might not have used Fairy to-”

“A-Cheng!” Jiang Fengmian interrupted at the exact moment Jiang Cheng realized what he had been about to say. Horror spread across his face. Yes, *he* wasn’t going to do that, but that didn’t make his older self doing it any less disturbing.

“What?” Wei Wuxian asked. “What’s ‘Fairy?’”

“Nothing, Wei Wuxian,” Madam Yu responded. “Go on. Has anything been happening outside?”

As Wei Wuxian began a general report on the outside world, the Jiang family made eye contact with each other. Seeing his father’s disapproving gaze instantly sucked all the energy out of Jiang Cheng’s body and left him shaking in both anger and shame at the fact that this happened in front of everyone.

(Not that there was much room for secrets in here.)

“A-Cheng, I-”

Even whispering those words wasn’t enough to soften their blow. When Jiang Cheng flinched, Jiang Fengmian forced himself to stop talking. It wouldn’t do to make Wei Wuxian panic before they were shown *why* Jiang Cheng had grown up into someone like that.

On the other side, Jiang Cheng was a tidal wave of thoughts crashing against rocky shores. Guilt, uncertainty, embarrassment, denial, and a crippling fear of abandonment warred within him, and he cursed himself for saying something so stupid. And now his father refused to talk to him because now he hated-

'A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him.'

Even if his father didn't *hate* him, Jiang Cheng knew he was disappointed. But that wasn't *fair.*

"He deserved it," Jiang Cheng whispered. "He must… somehow."

There was no doubt in Jiang Cheng's mind that what they were being shown was their actual future. But if that was him, then-

"He must have done something so horrible that I don't have a choice. Like-like killing Jin-gongzi. We all agreed that was possible."

"A-Cheng, y-"

"Is he wrong?" Madam Yu asked. "Even Wei Wuxian admitted that this wouldn't normally have happened. And yet his future self wasn't surprised, so something must have changed."

"But, A-Niang he-"

"Wangji, *don't,*" Lan Xichen hissed, seeing the way his brother looked like he was about to declare war on the Jiang Sect.

"And that about sums it up. Any questions?" Wei Wuxian concluded, forcing the watchers to tune in to what he was saying again.

The long pause that followed made it painfully clear that no one had been listening.

"Wei Wuxian," Lan Qiren rushed to fill the silence. "Would you be able to pass on a message to Lan Ziming for me?"

"Sure."

"Good. Tell her to check the shelves to the left of my personal desk. They have the organizational reports she'll need to resume night hunts farther away."

And if Lan Qiren's actions just so happened to create a relationship between Wei Wuxian and the Lan Sect, that was no one's business but Lan Qiren's. His sudden relief over the true nature of his nephew's relationship with Wei Wuxian had nothing to do with it.

(He definitely hadn't already started mentally planning a wedding. That would be absolutely ridiculous and he was above such frivolous behavior. The knowing glint in Lan Xichen's eyes meant nothing.)

And besides, it might be best for everyone if Wei Wuxian took a break from the Jiang Clan.

“Got it, anything else?”

After taking a quick scan around the room, Wen Ruohan decided, “No, that seems to be it. Thank you for your help, Wei Wuxian.”

Wei Wuxian laughed in response, then paused. As the watchers spoke, he couldn’t help but remember the odd way Wen Xu had spoken in his defense to Jin Zixun. The way he seemed to be internally mocking everyone else’s stupidity, as if they should have more information than they did.

And, considering the watchers’ previous questions….

“Um… Uncle Jiang?”

“What is it, A-Xian?”

“I might be going completely off track, and if I am, go ahead and tell me. Just… did the simulation… mention something about me?”

Absolute silence greeted his question. The correct answer was obviously ‘yes,’ but a simple yes was so much of an understatement that it practically counted as a lie. And how were they supposed to describe the truth?

Jiang Cheng could picture it already: ‘*Guess what Wei Wuxian. I just saw first-hand why you’re so scared of dogs. And you wanna know what came right after? Watching my future self use one to torture you! Isn’t that just neat?*’

(Some small part in the back of Jiang Cheng’s mind was genuinely starting to hate his older-self.)

Of course, it was hard to tell how he should feel. They knew so little about what was going on that *nothing* made sense. Jiang Cheng knew himself (and was sure he wouldn’t act that way for no reason), but that was almost worse.

‘Hey, Wei Wuxian, we’re debating the likelihood of you brutally murdering A-Jie for no reason. Any thoughts on the matter?’

“So?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Anything about me?”

“A bit,” the answer came.

“Nie-xiong?” Wei Wuxian asked, surprised that *he* was the one who’d answered.

“The simulation covers a lot of stuff. It’s full of information on our world. I’m sorry to say, but it included a bit on you too,” he frowned, making his regret clear in his voice. “It told us about your time on the streets, after your parents died.”

“...Oh. That makes sense,” Wei Wuxian said at last.

What the watchers didn't realize was that, in the process of explaining one confusion, they'd accidentally opened up about twenty more holes in the process. After all, Wen Xu, the only person to have left the simulation, had recently told Wei Wuxian that the watchers were being shown information about "Mo Xuanyu's" world.

And Wei Wuxian surely had nothing to do with Mo Xuanyu's world, right?

"Is there anything else?" Jin Guangshan asked, sensing the awkward air.

"No, that's it. I'll contact you all soon."

With a click, he disappeared.

And Jiang Cheng finally breathed out a sigh of relief.

"God, that was stressful," Jin Zixuan sighed. "I didn't even say anything, and I still felt like Wei Wuxian was about five seconds away from going full-Yiling Patriarch on us."

"Oh, don't worry so much," Nie Huaisang assured him. "You made Jiang-guniang cry, and the worst he did to you was punch you. I think we can all agree you deserved that much."

Jin Zixuan was forced to shrug in a form of reluctantly-grateful agreement.

"As interesting as my son's changing relationship with A-Li is," Madam Jin began, "We're on a limited time frame here. I suggest we move on to the more important parts of this segment."

There were nods of agreement from all around. The only people who seemed hesitant were the Jiangs, who had no idea where to begin in terms of what they'd just found out.

"So," Wen Qing prompted. "I guess those particular rumors weren't so exaggerated after all."

The fierce glares Jiang Cheng and Madam Yu turned her way did nothing to disrupt her steely confidence. As the only doctor present, she knew better than anyone just how dangerous Wei Wuxian's battles with the dogs would have been to such a young and weak child.

The mental scars it left him with were far from a surprise, even for someone who was normally so resilient.

"Can we pass any judgement on this?" Madam Yu asked. "We have no idea what caused it."

"We've certainly tried passing judgement on most of the things Wei Wuxian did," Nie Mingjue pointed out.

"And we were wrong those times."

"What could possibly justify this?" Lan Xichen asked, still making eye contact with his brother and silently requesting that the second jade keep a tight grip on his temper.

"If Jiang Yanli-"

Nie Mingjue scoffed, “Are we really going to keep swinging back and forth on this? We clearly don’t know enough to come to any sort of conclusion on what’s happened.”

“That’s exactly what we’re saying,” Jiang Fengmian replied. “We don’t know; we need to see what’s led up to it. Jin Zixuan's murder could be the result of another misunderstanding. And as for A-Li, regardless of whether it’s due to demonic cultivation, if A-Xian does go insane-”

“I don’t believe that's plausible.”

“Pardon?”

By then, even Lan Xichen’s panicked, wide eyes and mouthed “please please please stay calm” could no longer hold Lan Wangji back:

“I said, I don’t believe that,” he repeated. “He’s survived the fall of Lotus Pier, being thrown into the Burial Mounds, and the Sunshot Campaign. No matter what happens after, I can't think of anything that would cause Wei Ying to kill innocents.”

“But *I* would? Is that what you’re saying?” Jiang Cheng glared, knowing that if demonic cultivation *wasn’t* inherently corruptive, him attacking Mo Xuanyu at Dafan Mountain couldn’t be excused.

“...It’s the more likely option.”

“You-”

“The point is,” Lan Xichen interrupted, “Whether the one at fault is you or Wei Wuxian or both or neither, we won’t let it happen.”

“That’s all you’re going to say?”

Frowning minutely, Lan Xichen thought for a moment then added, “I agree with Wangji. I don’t think Wei Wuxian could be brought to that point.”

“You can’t know that,” Madam Yu glared, rolling her eyes at the teenager. “Your naive hope-”

“On the contrary,” Lan Qiren spoke. “I also agree with Wangji’s claim. And regardless of what Wei Wuxian has or has not done, we all agree on his core character. He did not deserve what the future’s Sect Leader Jiang did to him.”

Here, Wen Ruohan could barely withhold a laugh. It wasn’t as though he didn’t understand where the Jiangs were coming from (the simulation certainly loved flipping their expectations on their heads), but, in this particular case, he had trouble taking their side. After all, if he and Wen Qing were right about whose core was revolving around in Sect Leader Jiang’s chest — the core that had whipped Wei Wuxian with Zidian and restrained him so a *dog* could pounce — then what had just happened between the two would take on an entirely new light.

Although he was unaware of the information Wen Ruohan had, Nie Huaisang’s thoughts were also drawn to that very memorable scene.

“You know, it’s kinda ironic,” Nie Huaisang hummed. “We had originally wondered if Weixiong was faking his fear of dogs since we didn’t feel any reactions from resentful energy. But, now that we’ve felt some, it’s pretty clear that’s the opposite of what was actually going on.”

Ordering them to help, then to stop, then to fight, then to not. Over time, it had become clear that Wei Wuxian’s uses of resentful energy were at least somewhat tied to emotion. The songs Wei Wuxian performed controlled the emotions of nearby resentful creatures; when angered, Wei Wuxian’s eyes would flash red; even leaving all of that aside, it was *resentful* energy — a concept literally built around emotions.

And yet, no matter how scared Wei Wuxian had gotten while facing down dogs (a level of emotion the Xuanwu and Wen Zhuliu and Wen Chao *combined* couldn’t generate), the nearby resentful energy hadn’t done anything.

(Until that last time.)

“...And what would you say is ‘actually going on?’” Lan Wangji wondered.

“I’m not really sure! Da-ge, what do you think?”

Frowning slightly at the blatant misdirection, Nie Mingjue nonetheless responded, “It seemed like his body was trying to instinctually react, and he was consciously preventing it. Almost like… he was so afraid of what he might end up doing in response, that he’d focused almost all the energy he’d had left on not doing anything.”

“Because he didn’t want to hurt the dogs,” Lan Xichen agreed. “He… knows it’s not their fault that he’s scared of them, so he just tries to control himself, rather than them.”

(And it was quite likely that he didn’t want to hurt Jiang Cheng either, but, after what they’d just seen, it would have felt wrong to bring that up.)

Hearing that, Jin Zixuan looked down and cursed his own foolishness yet again. Wei Wuxian could make sure he didn’t hurt the dogs who terrified him; why couldn’t Zixuan say anything against his father when it was *Wei Wuxian* who might be in danger because of it?

People had always whispered that cultivators in Lanling were selfish; for the first time, Jin Zixuan was starting to believe it. A similar feeling came over Nie Mingjue, who knew full-well that his eventual, inevitable qi-deviation was likely to be far more destructive than what Wei Wuxian had done.

On the other hand, Nie Huaisang and Lan Wangji both felt their hearts overcome by grief for Wei Wuxian.

(They couldn’t help but wonder if the series of tragedies occurring at the end of Wei Wuxian’s life had anything to do with why he was so scared of losing control.)

“I see,” a quiet voice whispered. “No matter what happens, he won’t attack them.”

Which meant it was their only chance at having power over the unconquerable.

Two pairs of eyes turned the voice's way. Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan were the only people close enough to hear Wen Chao say that, and it was instantly clear what the Wen heir meant. In all honesty, Jin Guangshan could see the boy's point. Now, they finally had a foolproof method to punish Wei Wuxian during the boy's initial training period; this was one of the most useful segments yet.

To Jin Guangshan's left, Wen Ruohan found himself frowning deeper and deeper the longer he considered the idea. To use dogs against Wei Wuxian would be effective and efficient, gaining huge results for a very small cost. All it would take was a growl from one, and Wei Wuxian would be trapped in a full-blown panic attack within seconds. It would be a good option to keep in mind, even if it seemed a bit unconventional.

And really, what was the harm? He wouldn't die to mere dogs. They would be easy to control. Wen Ruohan would simply tell them to attack or keep him in place or terrify him and-

And risk damaging that beautiful, brilliant, irreplaceable mind?

His plans for the battles which would eventually result in the Sunshot Campaign were still incomplete, but the incentive was already there. Every day, as he saw the Sects accept more and more from the Wen Clan — practically already viewing them as their leaders — taking over seemed like the obvious option. Especially with how incompetent they all were.

Not individually (he'd be the first to admit how his heirs paled in comparison to the others), but, rather, as a collective. Given the reactions to Wei Wuxian during the soup incident, what had happened to Wei Wuxian's core was still unknown. The boy's general illogical feelings about the Jiangs indicated there was probably an emotional reason for keeping the secret; that didn't change the fact that there was a practical one too.

If the world were to find out that Wei Wuxian had no core, the little respect he'd managed to maintain would disappear at once. Even those who supported him wouldn't be able to say anything against the shouts of the others. Wen Ruohan could hear it already.

'Not even a core? I'd accepted him before, but we were tricked into thinking he was still a cultivator then! A living being operating only on resentful energy? Isn't that just a demon? If he's not even human anymore, then we need to exterminate him.'

(*'Or enslave him for ourselves,'* the more ambitious ones would think.)

It was a foregone conclusion. The cultivation world was made up primarily of fools who cared more about tradition than someone's use. None of them knew how to use the resources at their disposal, which was a large part of the reason why Wen Ruohan had needed to set up supervisory offices. They couldn't be trusted with the cultivators working for them.

Now that he'd learned about Wei Wuxian's fear of dogs, he would need to decide what to do with it. Only a fool would discount the possibilities entirely.

(But, the more he thought about it, the less Wen Ruohan liked the idea of using it.)

The uncharacteristic fear that had stained Wei Wuxian's perfect mind displeased him more than he'd thought it would.

He didn't know what to do about that.

(On the other hand, Wen Chao was nearly drooling with delight as he fantasized about the information's potential. How large could dogs grow, anyways? Would he be able to find one large enough to swing Wei Wuxian around by his arm, just like those dogs had done to the child Wei Ying? What expression would the young Yiling Patriarch make if he was faced with an army of them? Wen Chao was sure he would enjoy the sight of those dangerous silver eyes shining with tears.)

It would be quite the experience. Wen Chao couldn't wait to get out.

Chapter End Notes

The Audio Drama Extra was called Delivering Soup! Also, the 'Wei Wuxian is suppressing his demonic cultivation around dogs' thing is just my headcanon. I've got basically no evidence to support it, so if you disagree with it then feel free to just ignore it. It won't be important later, I promise!
:)

Past and Future Parallels

Chapter Notes

Once again, beta read by Tintin!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm just saying, it's not *my* fault the ceiling ended up covered by bees. How was I supposed to know there would be so many nearby?" Lan Jingyi protested enthusiastically. "And Senior Wei's the one who said it would be funny-"

"Jingyi, if you try using that excuse, Lan Qiren-xiansheng is just going to be more mad," Lan Sizhui pointed out. "Just try explaining the situation to him without mentioning Senior Wei. He'll understand."

With an especially dramatic sigh, Lan Jingyi forced himself to continue walking with Sizhui toward their terrifying teacher (who would undoubtedly give Jingyi an additional *three weeks* of punishment). In hindsight, maybe he should have tried coating his *own* ceiling with flowers before working on the ceiling of Lan Qiren's office. But he didn't have a choice; it was meant to be a surprise! It would have all been ruined if Lan Qiren found out about it ahead of time.

Lan Sizhui — the traitor — clearly had no sympathy for him.

Desperate for something that would stall his inevitable murder at Lan Qiren's hands, Lan Jingyi began looking around for some sort of distraction that would work on Sizhui. Food wouldn't work (that would never distract the other Lan), books wouldn't work (that wasn't time-sensitive, so Sizhui could always read them later), an emergency wouldn't work (because there wasn't one happening around them), and Jin Ling and Zizhen, the only people who Jingyi might have been able to trust to help him distract Sizhui, were nowhere to be found.

Nonetheless, Jingyi continued to look around frantically for inspiration. The trees all along the Cloud Recesses' paths were (unfortunately) just as healthy as ever, and the crisp, cool fog that had settled over the area impeded most of Jingyi's vision. However, a moment later, Jingyi perked up, noticing something different than usual. In the distance, a large carriage was being filled with various treasures and trinkets from the Cloud Recesses. Someone was apparently on their way to a diplomatic negotiation.

Or — and here was the thing that might momentarily stall Sizhui — someone was stealing from the Cloud Recesses!

"Sizhui, Sizhui!" Jingyi tugged at his friend's arm, frantically pointing at the crime scene up ahead. "Look! Look! Over there! Isn't that — wait. Is that…."

“Senior Wei?” Lan Sizhui asked.

Hearing his name, said man glanced back at the two, face switching to a blindingly bright smile as soon as he recognized them.

“A-Yuan, Jingyi!” he waved. “On your way to Lan-xiansheng?”

“Yes,” Sizhui answered. “Jingyi-”

“Really missed Lan-xiansheng!” Jingyi hurriedly interrupted, not willing to reveal the catastrophic failure he’d just had to the most legendary student the Cloud Recesses had ever met. “Anyways, what are you doing here?”

“I’m on my way to visit someone to ask them for a favor. Zewu-jun suggested that I bring along a few gifts from Gusu to make the whole exchange easier, so now I have to take a whole carriage instead of just flying over. Can you believe how cruel my dear brother in law is?”

Intrigued, Lan Sizhui walked closer to observe what was being put into the carriage by one of the Lan Sect’s servants. Seeing that, Lan Jingyi gave a mental cheer. If there was one thing even Lan Sizhui couldn’t resist, it was their Senior Wei. Lan Jingyi couldn’t have thought up a better distraction if he tried to!

A large jar of alcohol was stuffed into the back of the carriage.

“...Senior Wei?”

“Yes, my little radish?”

Slowly, Lan Sizhui turned to his Xian-gege and asked, “Isn’t that jar some of the alcohol Sect Leader Nie brought over for your wedding celebration? Before he realized it wasn’t actually a celebration, that is.”

“Very astute, my clever little radish!”

Lan Jingyi did a double take, “Wait, you’re *re*-gifting Sect Leader Nie’s wedding supplies to ask someone else for a favor?! How shameless could you possibly be?"

"You should know better than to underestimate the Yiling Patriarch, Little Lan!" Wei Wuxian cackled dramatically.

"If you need things to send over, our Sect has plenty! Just ask Hanguang-jun!”

“Yes, yes, but this is more of a personal matter. I didn’t want to delve into the Sect’s reserves for that!”

Like he’d just been slapped, Lan Sizhui flinched back before glaring up and all-but-shouting, “Senior Wei, you are a member of the Gusu Lan Sect. As Hanguang-jun’s husband, you are well within your rights to use the Sect’s wealth for whatever you wish — especially with how much money your inventions have made. *No one* has a right to deny that of you!”

With a gasp, Wei Wuxian stepped back and covered his mouth, eyes wide.

“Senior Wei?” Sizhui asked.

“Oh my god, you sounded like a baby Lan Zhan when you said that!” Wei Wuxian cooed, clearly not having paid attention to anything Sizhui said. Considering he had undoubtedly gotten (and subsequently ignored) the exact same speech from Lan Wangji, Jingyi couldn’t say he was surprised.

“Where is Hanguang-jun, anyways?” Lan Jingyi asked.

“If I’m being perfectly honest, Lan Zhan doesn’t want me to do this at all,” Wei Wuxian revealed. “So I figured I’d head over while he’s busy with being a grand and important Chief Cultivator so that he doesn’t notice!”

An unnerving shiver ran up the two radishes’ spines. When Lan Wangji found out what Wei Wuxian had done, his hate for the position of Chief Cultivation would multiply beyond their wildest dreams. The two of them couldn’t help but send sympathetic prayers towards the pitiful Headshaker, who Hanguang-jun was going to force the position on as soon as humanly possible.

“Um, if Hanguang-jun thinks it’s a bad idea, then why are you going?” Jingyi asked. “And, for that matter, what’s this all about? Why are you being so secretive?”

“Lan Zhan’s just being overprotective,” Wei Wuxian answered with a dismissive wave of his hand. “And as for why I’m doing this at all… it turns out that, a week ago, a quartet of radishes snuck into my lab and activated one of my inventions. I need this person’s help to fix things up.”

An ocean of guilt slammed onto Lan Sizhui.

“I-in that case,” Lan Jingyi stepped forward. “We already know about it, so there’s no need to keep things hidden from us! Can we help?”

“There’s really no need for that,” Wei Wuxian laughed. “Or do you not trust your Senior Wei to take care of it himself?”

“I do,” Lan Jingyi assured him. “But it’s sorta our fault too, right?”

Lan Sizhui nodded, “Senior, please let me speak to the person you’re-”

“*No*.”

Both Lan boys froze. Although Wei Wuxian had continued to smile like usual, the rejection of Sizhui’s offer had left no room for confusion. From someone who would usually pull the conversation this way and that to get them to choose what he wanted them to, the simple ‘no’ was more than a little concerning.

“But-”

Sizhui cut off, seeing Wei Wuxian simply shake his head, watching Sizhui with an almost haunted look in his eyes.

“Sorry, A-Yuan, but I’d rather go alone. I’m not bringing Lan Zhan either, right? Well, in his case I’m not bringing him because he gets a little obsessively cautious about this, but still.”

“I can help!” Sizhui tried.

“I’m not saying no out of a lack of trust for you, it’s out of a lack of trust in the person I’m going to visit,” he explained, then, seeing the panic quickly spreading across their faces, rushed to explain, “I doubt anything will happen, but I’d still rather you stay away from the person I’m going to see. Honestly, at most he’ll probably just throw a few cups at me and shout a lot. He’s gotten much better than he used to be! And besides, I’m the Yiling Patriarch! You really don’t need to worry about little old me.”

Although still skeptical, Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi nodded in defeat.

“Great! Then run along, you two. You said you were on your way to Lan-xiansheng, right? Off you go!”

With heavy hearts and slouches in their steps, the two juniors forced themselves to walk away. Even Jingyi couldn’t make himself be pleased over how well his stalling efforts had worked, too worried for Wei Wuxian to pay that any mind.

As he watched the pair go, the smile on Wei Wuxian’s face molded into a far more bittersweet one. He took a deep breath, then entered the carriage.

“Sir?” the servant Zewu-jun assigned to be his driver spoke. “Where to?”

“Yunmeng Jiang,” Wei Wuxian answered. “I have an appointment with the Sect Leader there.”

The longer Jiang Yanli waited for the next segment to start, the happier she felt. The unease hadn’t gone away yet (the glare Lan-er-gongzi was levelling at her brother made the simulated Jiang Cheng’s actions impossible to forget), but she was nonetheless pleased. After all, right at the end of the last segment, everything had changed.

Jin Ling — her A-Ling, her *son* — had helped Wei Wuxian. All this time, he had described his uncle Mo Xuanyu as a “disgusting cutsleeve lunatic,” who wasn’t worth his time. Just a short while before, Jin Ling had run away from him despite Wei Wuxian’s shouts to stop. Although she didn’t want to admit it, Jiang Yanli had been a little worried; she would love her son regardless, but his character hadn’t been something she had been able to support. After all, Wei Wuxian had saved his life multiple times, yet Jin Ling seemed to meet him with nothing but disgust and hate.

And then Wei Wuxian had been captured, and Jin Ling decided to repay the life debt he owed.

She hadn't expected that. Wei Wuxian hadn't expected that. Jiang Cheng *clearly* hadn't expected that, considering the simulated version left Jin Ling in charge of Wei Wuxian. And yet he had anyways. There was nothing Jin Ling could possibly gain from this, he had just done it because he thought it was right.

Jin Ling hadn't even been born yet, but, right now, she was so indescribably proud of her son that she felt like she could burst. A warm flush began to glow on her cheeks, and her happiness became unrivaled.

Unfortunately, she seemed to be the only one who felt that way.

Her poor brother had been more shocked than anyone by what had been shown. Nearly all the blood had left his face, and the little that remained was in the form of an angry flush that responded to Lan Wangji's silent accusations. She couldn't necessarily blame Lan-er-gongzi for his anger after what they had seen, but he also clearly didn't know her brother like she did.

~~It would be fine. It would have to be, because if it wasn't then she didn't know how to fix it.~~

Even putting aside the ~~glaring~~ staring contest going on between Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng and the same one occurring between her parents, not even her fiance could bring himself to smile. Instead, his face had been set in a deep frown as he glared at the ground, silently interrogating it.

Jiang Yanli leaned closer.

"Don't worry so much," Jiang Yanli whispered. "I know A-Xian was angry at you after what happened with Lady Song, but I know him — he wouldn't kill you over that. If he's still the same A-Xian I know, that's not what happened."

"I… yeah, I know," Jin Zixuan responded, forcing a smile. Jiang Yanli was about to insist upon her point, only to realize that Jin Zixuan was being honest when he said he knew. Wei Wuxian had grown up with her, but now all the watchers (even the people who had never met Wei Wuxian before) knew him almost as well as she did. They knew about his fear of dogs; Jiang Cheng had told them about his love of spice; they had all seen first hand how Wei Wuxian would react to situations Jiang Yanli hadn't even dreamed of.

It would be strange when they all got out. Lan-er-gongzi would probably have an especially hard time interacting with Wei Wuxian now that his feelings had changed so much.

"A-Li?"

"A-ah," Jiang Yanli squeaked. "Sorry. What I… what I was trying to say was that…."

She bit her lip.

'*You don't need to look so guilty over it. It's fine; it was partly my fault, anyways.*'

"A-Li, you can't blame yourself either," Jin Zixuan shook his head. "The soup you left for me was a level of courtesy I… I didn't deserve, after what I'd said about you in the Cloud

Recesses. *I* started taking the soup without knowing who sent it, and I'm the one who picked a fight with you. I'm sorry-"

"No, I'm sorry. You don't need to keep apologizing-"

"I do," Jin Zixuan shook his head. "I don't want… I don't want A-Ling to have to grow up with us if I haven't apologized about this. I know it wasn't me, but it *would* have been me, so… I'm sorry."

The two stared at each other, equally annoyed that the other refused to accept their apologies, until Jin Zixuan snorted and Jiang Yanli began to giggle.

"Apology accepted," she said at last. "You too?"

"Yeah. Apology accepted," he shook his head. "I can't believe it took us so long to understand each other in the simulation. At least we get together eventually."

"At least there's that," Jiang Yanli agreed. When the last segment had ended, everyone had been too shocked by what happened with Fairy to focus on the other things they had been shown. It was only now, after they'd had some time to process those revelations, that they could focus on what had come before.

"I…" Jin Zixuan flushed bright red and looked away. "I really like you. I promise I'll be worthy of you. I promise."

'*And the first step to that will be keeping Wei Wuxian away from my father,*' Jin Zixuan thought, then flinched back — stunned at himself, but unable to deny it.

As Jin Zixuan found himself at conflict between his filial loyalty and honor, a very similar battle was going on in Nie Mingjue's mind. On one hand, he could let the simulation take care of it. It would happen with or without his influence, and would be a far more controlled environment that he could try to react to.

On the other hand, what had Huaisang done to deserve hearing the secret of their cultivation for the first time from someone other than Nie Mingjue?

As much as Chifeng-zun wanted to keep silent, he knew he was running out of time. Whether he told Huaisang or he didn't, his brother was going to find out. The only question was how.

"Huaisang," he spoke up, making his brother flinch. Nie Huaisang was seated directly between Lan Wangji and Jiang Wanyin, refusing to pick a side in their staring contest.

"...Da-ge?"

"Come over here," Nie Mingjue gestured with a beckoning motion. Huaisang followed his instructions at once, sitting across from Nie Mingjue and frowning nervously at the grim expression on his brother's face. The two stared at each other for a moment, neither knowing what to say.

Then-

“Is this about the castle, Da-ge?” Nie Huaisang asked, tilting his head questioningly. He wished he had his fan to hide behind, but he supposed staring with unblinking eyes would be a bit more effective, in this case.

Nie Mingjue pursed his lips. Where would he even begin in explaining this? He had hoped he would have some time to plan out his speech before telling his brother, but the simulation had given them so much to think about that it hadn’t occurred to him until now. Should he start with the sabers? The hall? His own qi deviation foretold by the simulation? And what about Wen Ruohan? He was obviously going to listen in. What if Nie Mingjue accidentally revealed a weakness in the Nie Sect that wouldn’t have been known otherwise?

“Da-ge?”

“...You’re right. It’s… about the castles. Listen carefully. The castle, it’s not malicious. It’s a burial ground. And it’s necessary for us to use. It-”

However, at that moment, the simulation started again. The world darkened at once, and the chirps of crickets cut through the silence.

Nie Mingjue cut off with a flinch, not having realized the simulation would already be starting.

When light returned, the simulation showed the Qinghe inn where the future Jiang Cheng had brought the captive Wei Wuxian.

And a dog.

Jiang Cheng internally cursed and shook his head, unable to understand how what had been shown in the last segment could be possible.

“I…” Nie Mingjue hesitated.

Frowning at the panic spreading across his brother’s face, Nie Huaisang offered, “Just tell me later, Da-ge. We can’t risk missing something in the simulation.”

Somehow, those words only seemed to distress Nie Mingjue further.

Due to Jiang Cheng’s senseless orders, the Yunmeng disciples had ended up scattered all over the place. This allowed Wei Wuxian and Jin Ling to stealthily flip out of the windows, escaping without detection. As soon as they made it out of the shop, they broke into a sprint.

Then, as they entered a forest, Wei Wuxian heard a strange noise.

He yelped.

“Why is it still here?” he demanded, laying eyes on Fairy. “Tell it to go away!”

Lan Wangji clenched his fists, “Wei Ying-”

Jin Ling whistled twice and, whimpering softly, Fairy forced itself to leave dejectedly.

"Good boy," Jin Zixuan muttered, mentally weighing how difficult it would be to own a dog, but still keep it away from Wei Wuxian. If they could train it to always avoid him, it might be possible.

(Just like it 'might be possible' for Jin Zixuan to extend a hand to Jin Guangyao, the person who had gotten his son Fairy. It didn't mean he would be able to bring himself to do it.)

~~(Coward.)~~

Rolling his eyes, Jin Ling gave an unimpressed sneer and scoffed, "You're such a loser. Fairy never bites, it just looks scary. It's a spiritual dog trained to only attack resentful beings! Did you really think it was a regular dog?"

"Hold on, what did you call it?" Wei Wuxian asked, vaguely remembering having heard the name before.

"Fairy. Its name."

"You named your dog something like that?" Wei Wuxian demanded disbelievingly, starting to walk again.

Jiang Yanli giggled, '*Of all the things to inherit from A-Cheng.*'

"What's wrong with calling it 'Fairy?' When it was younger, I called it 'Little Fairy.' Now that it's grown up I obviously can't keep calling it that!"

"No, no, no. The point isn't whether it's little or not!"

Jin Zixuan snorted again, and even Lan Wangji seemed to crack a slight smile (to Lan Xichen). Meanwhile, Nie Mingjue rolled his eyes, Wen Qing fought to keep down a smile, and Jiang Yanli chuckled freely.

"My god, he's just adorable!" Nie Huaisang cooed, unable to believe that the simulated Jin Ling was about the same age Wei Wuxian was when he fought the waterborne abyss.

Wei Wuxian sighed, "Who in the world taught you to name things this way?"

Jiang Cheng felt a foreboding chill creep up his back.

'*It must have been his uncle,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Back in the day, Jiang Cheng also had a few puppies. Their names were 'Jasmine,' 'Princess,' 'Little Love,' and so on. If I didn't know better, I would have thought they were the names of expensive courtesans.*'

"*Courtesans?!*" his ears flaming red. "They were perfectly acceptable names!"

"They are not," Wen Qing calmly disagreed, then raised an eyebrow. "Sect Leader Jiang named Wei Wuxian's sword, 'Suibian,' correct? And now with Jin Ling…."

“Maybe it runs in the family,” Lan Xichen suggested, making Jiang Cheng blush further and Jiang Fengmian laugh warmly. Watching that scene, Lan Wangji found himself disappointed in his own behavior.

(The real Jiang Cheng hadn’t done anything to Wei Wuxian, so Lan Wangji couldn’t do anything in response. In fact, the real Jiang Cheng was shocked by what his older self had done. The real Jiang Cheng wouldn’t tie Wei Wuxian up and force Fairy in front of him. Lan Wangji had no right to be angry at this one.)

(But the real Jiang Cheng *might later,* and Lan Wangji wasn’t sure he could forgive that.)

Scowling in offense, Jin Ling stormed forward and concluded, “Real men don’t bother with trifles like that! Why are you stressing over such details?”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, kid,” Nie Mingjue muttered with a fond sort of exhaustion. This expression perfectly matched Wei Wuxian’s indulgent smile, and Nie Huaisang chuckled at the comparison he’d made.

Wei Wuxian gestured for them to stop. By now, the pair had gotten close to where Wei Wuxian had met the charlatan earlier, so Lan Wangji would most likely be waiting for him nearby.

‘*He really came back to me,*’ Lan Wangji realized, eyes widening in disbelief. He had figured that was the case, but somehow, until now, it hadn’t occurred to him that he’d tempered his hopes in preparation for possible disappointment.

But that was unnecessary. Wei Wuxian trusted him enough to return (and knew Hanguang-jun wasn’t going to do what Sect Leader Jiang had just done to him). He had come back.

‘*I don’t care if he doesn’t love me. If I can get the real Wei Ying to trust me not to hurt him, I’ll be satisfied with that.*’

Scowling in a put-upon annoyance, Jin Ling informed Wei Wuxian, “Now that you’ve offended my uncle, you’re already half dead. Me letting you go now means we’re even, got it?”

“You’re just letting me go?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Do you know what your uncle wants with me?”

“Yeah, he thinks you’re Wei Wuxian.”

‘*It’s not merely ‘suspects’ this time,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, a bitter smile making its way onto his lips.

A huffed laugh escaped Madam Yu.

“Then again, maybe Jin Ling’s reaction shouldn’t be a surprise. Someone coming back to life is more than a little unbelievable,” Lan Xichen acknowledged. “Especially after thirteen years.”

“Perhaps,” Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes. “Although everyone in this future seems willing to believe the Yiling Patriarch is capable of just about anything, so maybe it’s a matter of perspective.”

“That certainly implies quite a bit,” Jin Guangshan agreed.

“Then, what about you?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Do you believe it as well?”

“It’s not the first time my Uncle’s done something like this. He never lets any of them go, even when he’s caught the wrong ones,” Jin Ling revealed, then paused, as if lost in memories.

All at once, a realization clicked into place for Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Yanli. They had wondered for quite some time as to why Lan Wangji hadn't faced further objections; now, they had an answer. It was horrifying and unbelievable, but the longer they thought about it, the less they could deny it.

That said, they still couldn’t *say it.*

(And how could they? They’d been with Jiang Cheng since the day he was born. They’d seen him as an infant and a toddler and a child, growing and learning and struggling as he came to learn about the world. Surely, their A-Cheng couldn’t be the person Jin Ling was talking about just now.)

Wen Qing, on the other hand, had no such hesitation.

“I see. Maybe Jiang Wanyin has accused so many people of being Wei Wuxian that, even when he says it, no one believes him. That would certainly explain why the Great Sects aren’t reacting to his claim of the Yiling Patriarch’s return.”

“*You-!*”Jiang Cheng turned and growled, only to hesitate at the last second and switch his protest to: “It can’t have been that common. My disciples believed me!”

“Did they?” Lan Wangji couldn’t resist asking.

But if they didn’t-

No one was willing to respond to that.

“Anyways,” Jin Ling continued. “Zidian couldn’t draw out your spirit, so I’m gonna trust that you’re not him. Besides, he wasn’t a cut sleeve, and yet you’ve even dared to harass….”

He couldn’t finish, cutting off into a disgusted look, but the words were heard regardless.

His crazy Uncle Mo Xuanyu had even dared to harass Hanguang-jun! And then got taken home by him!

While most of the watchers reacted with amusement toward the misunderstanding, Jiang Yanli just sighed. If Jin Ling felt instinctively disgusted at the idea of two men being together, then she wasn't sure she could do anything about that. What she could change, however, was whether or not Jin Ling was polite to other people, regardless of whether or not they were cutsleeves.

(Something her simulated self hadn't managed to do.)

(Because she had been *dead.*)

Like a click, Jiang Yanli abruptly felt her knowledge of her incoming demise turn from a theoretical fact to an understanding of what it *meant.* A bout of nausea twisted in her stomach.

Finally, Jin Ling shook himself out of those thoughts and made a shooing motion as if driving away flies, "Anyways, from now on, you have nothing to do with the LanlingJin Sect! If you're gonna go at it again, find someone who's not part of my sect! Or else, I won't let you off!"

The more he heard, the more curious Lan Qiren became about who 'Mo Xuanyu' actually was.

After walking a few steps, Jin Ling abruptly spun back again to shout, "Why are you still standing there? Go! Are you waiting for my uncle to come and get you? I'll have you know, my uncle really hates Wei Wuxian! Anyone like the Yiling Patriarch will suffer at his hands!"

Jiang Cheng was going to kill his alternate-future self. No, he didn't care if that was impossible. Yunmeng Jiang's motto told him to attempt it anyways, didn't it? And Wei Wuxian had been the one to tell him he deserved to be Sect Leader. Killing his other self was the least Jiang Cheng could do.

(No, no. He couldn't just trust what the simulation was saying. It made no sense; he'd never do that.)

(Right?)

As Jiang Cheng's thoughts reached their conclusion, Jin Ling continued explaining to 'Mo Xuanyu' how much Jin Ling's maternal uncle hated Wei Wuxian. In response, the Yiling Patriarch just gave a sad, nostalgic smile.

'*He hates me?*' Wei Wuxian mentally repeated. '*I guess that isn't a surprise.*'

The sheer *resignation* in his voice honestly scared Lan Xichen. Wei Wuxian's acceptance of the fact that his shidi hated him was far too similar to Nie Mingjue's easy acknowledgement of his own death.

Neither of them had ever given up on anything for as long as Lan Xichen had known them. And yet, now, neither of them were willing to put up a fight.

Just as Lan Xichen had sat down (too emotionally stunned to trust himself to keep his balance), the world around the watchers shifted and twisted. When it reformed, the simulation had brought them back to the piers of Yunmeng.

Wen Chao grinned, recalling the amusing sight these same piers had made when the Wen Sect attacked.

A child's tearful whines and terrified whimpers cut through the silence.

The Jins and Jiangs all tensed up, remembering the same cries being let out by the child Jin Ling not so long ago. Their concern for his safety (or, in Jin Guangshan's case, the weakness that would reflect on the Jin Sect) made them all zero in on the source of the noise.

A moment later, a few high pitched barks appeared.

"Little love?" Jiang Cheng couldn't resist asking as a light colored puppy formed before their eyes.

With an aggressive bark, it pounced after the child in front of it, who could only cry out "Stay away! Don't bite me!" His eyes were shining with tears, but it was quite clear who this boy was.

Both Lan Wangji and Wen Qing paled, instantly recalling the way a large dog had nearly broken Wei Wuxian's bones while he was living on the streets. And the dog's owner had been so *callous* — so completely indifferent to Wei Wuxian's suffering-

"Coward," another voice huffed. "What's there to be afraid of? Look how cute they are! They won't bite you!"

It was a child Jiang Cheng, his arms crossed adorably as he frowned at Wei Ying's (seemingly) illogical reaction to his adorable puppies. Jasmine, Princess, and Little Love all gathered around Wei Ying, reminding the formerly-homeless boy of the way wolves would circle around their prey to cut off all escape routes.

His tears doubled, but — too terrified to look away for even an *instant* — he forced himself to watch.

'*Jiang Wanyin,*' Lan Wangji's rage grew. '*You insensitive, illogical… is that how you felt while choking Wei Ying? His pain means nothing! All that matter to you is-*'

He cut off, abruptly realizing how pathetic it was to hold such anger towards a child. The person watching with him wasn't the man who had kept Wei Wuxian restrained while Fairy approached, and the boy before them in the simulation was a child who couldn't even understand what was happening.

Wei Wuxian wouldn't hold a grudge over this. Wangji's sect had taught him to not hold grudges at all. And he, himself, knew better than to be resentful over something like this.

He took a deep breath, and forced himself to let his anger go.

However, in the next moment, footsteps approached, and Jiang Cheng's eyes widened in shock. Then, two hands picked Wei Ying up from behind, making the young boy yelp.

It was Jiang Fengmian, lifting him off the ground to keep him away from the dogs.

"A-Die!" Jiang Yanli gasped out, smiling warmly.

"Huh?" the child Jiang Cheng asked, before realizing what was happening and pouting in a way that puffed up his cheeks until his head resembled a watermelon.

Wen Qing cracked a smile at the sight, while Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang tried (and failed) to stifle their snickers. The blush that had been rapidly spreading across Jiang Cheng's face nearly *doubled* in color.

At Jiang Fengmian's gentle instructions, Jiang Cheng's dogs were temporarily brought away. Combined with the sight of Wei Wuxian, this made Jiang Cheng (who couldn't even remember being picked up by his dad five times) furious.

Seeing that, Lan Qiren withheld a sigh. By now, it was clear that Jiang Cheng had felt unloved by his father even before Wei Wuxian arrived; that didn't change the fact that Wei Wuxian's arrival had undoubtedly worsened the situation. And the one who had felt the brunt of that was Wei Wuxian.

The Chief Cultivator agreed.

'*Really, everyone would have been happier if Wei Wuxian had just been a member of the Wen Clan from the beginning,*' Wen Ruohan thought, frowning deeply.

"A-Ying," Jiang Fengmian whispered. "The dogs are gone. It's time to get down."

"No! No!" Wei Ying shouted, burying his face in Jiang Fengmian's chest. "No, please. No!"

The world shifted, and they were brought a few hours later in the day.

"How about now?" Jiang Fengmian offered. "See? There aren't any dogs around here."

"No," Wei Ying whimpered. "No, please don't make me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please-"

And a few hours later again, until it was late afternoon.

"A-Ying, it's okay. There's nothing here."

Wei Ying just trembled, silently begging Sect Leader Jiang to not let him down. The terror in his eyes was more than understandable, after what they had been shown of his childhood.

"It's like when you met, isn't it A-Die?" Jiang Yanli asked softly. "You saved him from dogs then too."

So Wei Wuxian viewed Jiang Fengmian as a safe zone where dogs couldn't hurt him. Seeing it like that, Wei Wuxian's current reaction couldn't be a surprise.

To the child Wei Ying, Jiang Fengmian was safety.

~~How long had it taken Wei Wuxian to realize that Jiang Fengmian would choose Jiang Cheng over him without a second of hesitation? The more Jiang Fengmian thought about it, the less he wanted to know.~~

Night came, and Wei Ying was still wrapping his arms around Jiang Fengmian's neck. By this point, Sect Leader Jiang had given up on trying to coax the child version of Wei Wuxian down. Even as Wei Ying's arms had trembled from the strain of holding himself up, he had continued clinging to Jiang Fengmian.

Clearly, something else would have to be done.

Jiang Cheng had forgotten how long it had taken for Wei Wuxian to come down. Yes, he could remember being annoyed at how long Wei Wuxian had been carried, but he had been a child; he hadn't understood why it was happening.

Now, seeing this, his father's decision to give away Little Love, Princess, and Jasmine made a lot more sense.

"On the second day," Lan Sizhui revealed. "Jiang Wanyin's puppies were given to someone else."

The simulation revealed that very scene, as a distraught Jiang Cheng watched in horror as his beloved puppies were sent away for the sake of the boy who had gotten his father's affection all day. The sight angered Jiang Cheng so much that he threw a big tantrum, whining loudly, breaking things, and bawling his eyes out.

Wen Chao's lips flicked up in amusement, making Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng glare at him. To Jiang Cheng's surprise, after a moment, Lan Wangji joined them in glaring as well.

(The Second Jade of Lan had promised to not hold people accountable for things they hadn't done yet. If that was the courtesy Wei Wuxian deserved, then Jiang Wanyin deserved it as well. Slowly, he was forcing himself to accept that fact.)

However, as Jiang Cheng's distress increased, Wei Ying's elation did as well. Now, finally, Jiang Fengmian could set him down.

The shaking which had overwhelmed Wei Ying's body for hours upon hours finally disappeared.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji whispered, instantly moving to kneel beside the boy.

Wei Ying sat on the ground, looking around with a disbelieving hope as there continued to be no dogs in sight. Now, for the first time he could remember, he was safe.

When Lan Xichen saw the blinding smile on his brother's face, he felt his own heart ease as well.

Behind Wei Ying, however, the child Jiang Cheng continued to shake in rage.

"A-Cheng," Jiang Fengmian said, kneeling beside his son.

"No matter how many times Jiang Fengmian comforted Jiang Wanyin gently, telling him that he and Wei Wuxian could be 'good friends,' Jiang Wanyin refused to talk to Wei Wuxian," Sizhui explained.

"Of course that didn't help," Madam Yu scoffed. "You never realize what the actual issue is."

"I-"

Before Jiang Fengmian could finish, Sizhui continued, "Quite a few days later, Jiang Wanyin's attitude had softened. Jiang Fengmian wanted to strike while the iron was still hot, so he told Wei Wuxian to sleep in the same room as his son, hoping they'd grow fond of each other. At the beginning, though still sulking, Jiang Wanyin was on the verge of agreeing. However, when Jiang Fengmian began to rejoice, he took Wei Wuxian up and let him sit on his arm."

That scene played out before their eyes, concluding with Jiang Cheng being shocked speechless, and Madam Yu giving a bitter laugh as she stormed out of the room. The couple had important matters to deal with later; they'd separated in a hurry to avoid having another argument.

There was nothing Jiang Fengmian could say after what had been shown. For all the time he spent trying to comfort his son, he had never gotten to the crux of the matter: Jiang Cheng's mistaken assumption that he wasn't loved.

As a teenager, Jiang Fengmian's son had thought Fengmian loved Wei Wuxian more than him. Wei Wuxian had *known* Jiang Fengmian loved Jiang Cheng more than him. Jiang Yanli might have not even considered where she stood in his ranking, too accustomed to being pushed to the background to pay that any mind.

Was it even possible to do worse than that?

(And what about Wei Wuxian? No matter how much he wanted to deny it, Jiang Fengmian knew internally that it was more likely for Jiang Cheng to be torturing innocents than for Wei Wuxian to be. And yet he hadn't picked a side when his wife had spoken up against Wei Wuxian.)

(The word 'failure' rang in his head yet again.)

As he watched the thoughts flying through Jiang Fengmian's brain, Nie Mingjue felt himself grow apprehensive. As a nine year old boy, Jiang Cheng's reaction was understandable, and Jiang Fengmian had treated it as such when he tried to comfort his son. It was true that there were many things Jiang Fengmian could have done better, but it was also true that, by that

point, it seemed like every choice Jiang Fengmian could make would turn out badly for him. If this was what getting married entailed, Nie Mingjue was more than happy just making Huaisang his heir.

The sky darkened, and the sun switched to a moon. It was the night of the same day.

"Shidi. Shidi!" an adorable voice called out. "Please let me in!"

"Don't call me that! Go away!" Jiang Cheng shouted back. The words made the child Wei Wuxian flinch, and he hurriedly lowered his hand.

'*A child. This is a child. It doesn't matter what he does when he's older. Right now, he's a child,*' Lan Wangji reminded himself, forcing his fists to unclench.

The child Jiang Cheng continued, "Leave! This is my room! Are you even trying to take my room from me?"

"It's not like that. Jiang-shushu told me to stay with you-"

"Go away!" Jiang Cheng slammed against the door, making it shake violently. "Don't let me see you again, or I'll call my dogs over to bite you!"

'What? We're real!' Jiang Cheng shouted when Wei Wuxian had been led to believe the watchers were illusions. 'I'm serious! You-the first day you arrived at Lotus Pier, I-I threatened you with Princess and Love!'

"I'm leaving! I'm leaving!" Wei Ying shouted. "Don't call the dogs!"

Inside the room Wei Ying had been locked out of, Jiang Cheng glanced toward the door, the anger on his face giving way to concern instead.

If Madam Yu remembered correctly, when he'd first arrived, Wei Wuxian had been a much more obedient child. He had only gone where Jiang Fengmian told him to, and had only ever eaten what he had been given (even if he hoarded that food like precious treasure). As the child Wei Wuxian walked around, not knowing where his room was and too scared to knock on other people's doors, Madam Yu felt her heart sour.

It was embarrassing to show such foolishness before the other sects, but she could accept that. Right now, the simulation was showing Jiang Cheng as a child. If this child thought Wei Wuxian was truly there to steal his place, then that would be the fault of his father, not him.

(It might also, just slightly, be her fault.)

(~~As always.~~)

Having nowhere to return to, Wei Ying did what any homeless child would do: he searched for a corner where there was no wind. He laid down there, his face not showing even a hint of bitterness or resentment.

‘*Of course,*’ Jiang Cheng thought bitterly. ‘*I lose in every way when it comes to him, don’t I? In cultivation, in social activity, in heroism, and now even in this.*’

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get the image of his future self sending Fairy after Wei Wuxian out of his head.

However, despite his initial contentment, the longer Wei Ying stayed there, the less he could relax. Jiang Cheng’s threat played on repeat in his head, and his nervousness grew.

He heard a snap and sat up instantly, only to see that it was a nearby squirrel stepping on a branch rather than a pack of dogs out to get him. He forced himself to relax, only to snap up once again when a fish splashed in the nearby pond.

Unable to stand it any longer, Wei Ying leapt up and fled Lotus Pier.

Watching the scene play out before his eyes, Jiang Cheng felt his guilt multiply. It was silly — everything had turned out fine, and what he had done wasn’t unexpected for someone his age — but the sight of Wei Wuxian running away still made him feel sick to his stomach.

After all, a child illogically blaming another child for his father’s lack of attention was understandable; a teenager blaming another teenager for the destruction of their sect was less so.

(And an adult blaming dozens of demonic cultivators for *reminding him* of Wei Wuxian was the least justifiable of all. Jiang Cheng wasn’t sure he believed that had actually happened, but not being able to say for sure that it hadn’t terrified him more than words could describe.)

Finally, huffing and puffing, Wei Ying found a place he could hide from the dogs. There was a flash forward, and Wei Ying had somehow made it to the top of the large tree, where he hugged the trunk desperately.

“...Sorry,” Jiang Cheng mumbled.

Hearing that, Lan Wangji glanced over and gave the real Jiang Cheng a long, assessing look.

“A-Ying,” a soft voice called out.

“A-Li!” Jin Zixuan realized, his expression lighting up at the sight.

(A little twelve year old Jiang Yanli. He vaguely remembered her from when they’d interacted as children, but it had never occurred to him before how absolutely *adorable* she was at that age.)

“A-Ying, where are you?” she asked, looking around. The only source of light she had was the dim lantern she carried in her hand, illuminating the path for her.

Wei Ying could vaguely remember her as being Jiang Cheng’s sister. Unwilling to confront her, he stayed quiet, hoping that she wouldn’t find him.

‘*Sorry,*’ Jiang Cheng thought, mentally apologizing yet again.

Jiang Yanli stepped a little closer, and the light of her lantern illuminated the patch of grass around the tree. In it, a black boot lay abandoned on the ground.

“What?” Jin Zixuan asked, wondering why Wei Wuxian would abandon his shoes.

“How did this shoe fall off?” Jiang Yanli asked. “Was it too big?”

“No, they fit well,” Wei Ying answered, only to belatedly realize he was supposed to be hiding and darted out of sight behind the trunk again.

“Oh,” Jin Zixuan muttered, looking down. Once again, Jin Zixuan had forgotten that it didn’t matter how shamelessly confident and unfairly talented Wei Wuxian seemed: Wei Wuxian had spent years living a life Jin Zixuan couldn’t even imagine.

(A very similar feeling fell over Madam Yu, who couldn’t help but wonder how different things would have been if she hadn’t been there at all.)

(She shook that ridiculous thought out of her head a moment later, but the lingering ~~guilt~~ bitterness remained.)

“You can come down,” Jiang Yanli offered. “Let’s go back.”

“I-I’m not going down! There are dogs!”

“A-Cheng was just making that up. There are no dogs here. Besides, you don’t have anything to sit on. You’ll fall soon.”

But Wei Ying just shook his head.

“How does the teenage Wei Wuxian always seem so unaffected?” Lan Qiren muttered, cursing himself for the endless string of snide, judgemental words he’d levied at the boy before.

“It’s like A-Li always says, isn’t it?” Madam Yu cursed. “No matter what happens to him….”

‘A-Xian was born with a smiling face,’ the Jiang Clan remembered their eldest young miss saying. ‘No matter what tragedies befall him, he won’t cling to them. No matter where he is, he’ll be happy.’

“Resilience doesn’t mean it won’t hurt him,” Lan Wangji frowned, staring at the simulated child.

Wei Ying had continued to stubbornly hang on to the rough tree, refusing to let go for even an instant. The jagged bark dug into his young skin and scratched deep lines into it every time he started to fall. However, to Wei Ying, that pain was a worthwhile tradeoff if it meant avoiding the dogs.

Trembling, he whimpered.

(Wen Chao smirked in glee.)

Afraid that Wei Ying would hurt himself, Jiang Yanli set her lantern down by the tree and stood under where Wei Ying was, extending her arms to catch him when he fell.

Jiang Yanli heard a huffed laugh, and glanced to the side to see Wen Qing smiling at the scene. Noticing her gaze, Wen Qing glanced back, allowing the two to make eye contact with each other.

They both smiled in shared understanding.

"Thirty minutes later," Sizhui explained, and yet neither Jiang Yanli nor Wei Ying had moved an inch.

"That's some impressive stubbornness," Nie Mingjue observed, sending Jiang Yanli a nod of approval. She blushed and nodded back, pleased that this was being shown after all the suffering the watchers had been forced to observe.

At that moment, Wei Ying couldn't hold himself up anymore. He slipped off the tree and fell down. Jiang Yanli hurried to catch him, but Wei Ying slammed against the ground regardless.

Nie Huaisang winced at the scene, and Wen Qing and Lan Wangji rushed to Wei Wuxian's side.

"My leg is broken!" Wei Ying cried, clutching it tightly.

"*Is it?"* Lan Wangji demanded, eyes wide in panic.

Wen Qing leaned close, equally frantic, but was unable to get a good view of something she couldn't actually examine.

"It's not broken," the simulated Jiang Yanli informed them. "Does it hurt a lot? It's fine, don't move. I'll carry you back."

Relieved, Wen Qing nodded at her and agreed, "That's the best you could have done, given the situation."

It was meant to compliment her good judgement and critical thinking. Instead, the words 'given the situation' meant all Jiang Yanli heard was a vicious whisper from her subconscious.

'*You didn't have the strength to catch him. It doesn't matter how good your intentions are if you lack the power to actually improve the situation.*'

Noticing her sudden dejection, Jin Zixuan instantly moved closer to his fiance, hoping to offer her some privacy from everyone else, at the very least.

"Here," Jiang Yanli offered, positioning herself so Wei Ying could easily get on her back.

Still sobbing, Wei Ying nervously looked around and asked, "Are… are there dogs?"

"No. And if dogs come, I'll chase them away for you."

Jiang Cheng looked away. He had promised Wei Wuxian the same, hadn't he? And yet, when the 'Wen-dogs' came, he had blamed Wei Wuxian for their arrival instead.

(And then used Fairy *on him*.)

Seeing Wei Ying's continued hesitance, Jiang Yanli instead moved to pick up the boot he had dropped and observed, "They really don't fit, do they?"

"They fit," Wei Ying insisted again.

"In truth, they didn't fit. They were quite a few sizes too large," Sizhui explained. "But it was the first pair of shoes Jiang Fengmian had bought him. Wei Wuxian was too embarrassed to make him go out of his way to buy another pair, so he had said that they weren't too big."

'Really Ziyuan?' Madam Jin thought. '*This is the being you decided was your sworn enemy?*'

A moment later, she frowned.

~~After all the times she'd refused to allow those bastard children into the Sect, did she really have any right to think that?~~

Without saying another word, Jiang Yanli helped him put his shoe on, then pressed down on the hollow tip.

"It's a bit big," she decided. "I'll fix it for you when we get back."

Hearing this, Wei Wuxian sunk in on himself again as if he'd done something wrong.

'*This is Jiang-shushu's home,*' he recalled, his lower lip trembling. With that, a memory formed. It was an older woman who, going by her state of dress and general cleanliness (or lack thereof), was also homeless.

'Listen to me, young man,' she said. 'When you're in someone else's home, the worst thing you can do is make trouble for your hosts.'

"Oh, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli gasped.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji whispered. "Make as much trouble as you want. Just…."

When Lan Qiren had found out about the state of things at Yunmeng Jiang, Wei Wuxian's rebelliousness at the Cloud Recesses had taken on a whole new light. It was still annoying and disorderly and shameless, but him messing around was a sign of comfort and safety. Now, even the general muteness he'd had around Madam Yu became an indication of more perceived security than Lan Qiren could have possibly imagined it as.

The panic growing within Wei Ying had nearly enveloped his entire being, however, before it could, Jiang Yanli reached over and plopped a now very-confused Wei Ying onto her back. The change in weight was almost too much for Jiang Yanli's body, but she forced herself to walk on wobbling steps.

By this point, Jin Zixuan's eyes were filled with so much awe that they were practically glowing.

"A-Ying, don't worry about what A-Cheng told you," Jiang Yanli advised. "He doesn't have a good temper, so he's always at home playing by himself. Those puppies were his favorites. A-Die sending them away made A-Cheng upset, but he's actually very happy you're here with him."

Meanwhile, Nie Huaisang snickered at the description Jiang Yanli had given of the young Jiang Cheng, and laughed harder when Jiang Cheng's attempts at hitting him to make him shut up only phased through. It was annoying and incomparably embarrassing for Jiang Cheng to hear himself described as having had no friends before Wei Wuxian, but those feelings were tempered slightly by the current state of things.

(His father had spoken with him; he had gotten closer to Nie Huaisang even without Wei Wuxian; Jin Zixuan and even Lan Wangji seemed to not be holding his future self's actions against him.)

As he was now, things were fine.

However, in the back of his mind, he couldn't help but wonder whether his adult self — the powerful and respected Sect Leader he had always dreamed of becoming — had anyone who cared about him.

"You were gone for so long," Jiang Yanli continued, stumbling slightly from the weight yet again. "Actually, I only came out here because A-Cheng was worried about you and came to wake me up."

The maturity in the twelve year old Jiang Yanli's voice was stunning. Impressed, Wen Qing sent her another nod of acknowledgement, sending a pink blush blooming across Jiang Yanli's cheeks.

Then, once again, Jiang Yanli stumbled and was forced to adjust Wei Ying to keep him from slipping off. Her mature voice was at ends with the weakness in her body. That lack of strength, however, didn't matter to Wei Wuxian.

Right now, he almost felt more secure in Jiang Yanli's arms than he'd felt in even Jiang Fengmian's.

'*What about mine?*' Lan Wangji wondered, then flinched and cursed himself. It was one thing to do that between children (and Jiang Yanli was so close to him she might as well be his sister). Now that Lan Wangji had realized the true depravity he was capable of imagining, he would never allow himself to embrace Wei Wuxian.

Suddenly, the night wind carried forth a series of sobs.

“What’s that sound?” Jiang Yanli asked fearfully.

Nie Huaisang squeaked and slipped inside his brother, asking “Is that a ghost? There shouldn’t be any in Yunmeng, right? What’s making that sound?!”

“How could you possibly find a common ghost scary after watching what Wei Wuxian can do?” Jiang Cheng demanded.

“I trust Wei-xiong to make the right decision! I can’t predict a ghost!!!”

Hearing that, Nie Mingjue scowled deeply, unable to deny his brother’s claim. But, if they agreed Wei Wuxian could be trusted with his power, then that was all but making a direct accusation against Jiang Wanyin.

(And themselves. They had all been part of the siege on the Burial Mounds, after all.)

“Did you hear it?” Jiang Yanli asked.

“I heard it. It came from inside that pit.”

Carrying Wei Wuxian, Jiang Yanli cautiously walked to the pit and looked down inside. A small silhouette laid face-down at the bottom. He lifted his head up, allowing them to see two streaks on his muddy face, washed off by tears.

“A-Jie!” Jiang Cheng cried out.

Trembles attacked Lan Xichen’s body as he fought desperately to keep himself from laughing at the adorableness of the scene. Seeing that, Lan Wangji sent his brother a *highly* unimpressed look.

It only succeeded in making it even harder for Lan Xichen to hold in his laughter.

Jiang Yanli sighed in relief, “A-Cheng, didn’t I tell you to gather the others and search for him together?”

In response, Jiang Cheng could only shake his head. The world shifted and brought them back in time half an hour to show Jiang Cheng waiting impatiently as his sister searched for Wei Wuxian. As time went on, he began to fidget as if he was sitting on pins and needles, and soon stood up, unable to take it anymore. He ran after his sister and Wei Ying, but, in his hurry, forgot to bring a lantern. The expected result occurred: he tripped on something halfway down the road and fell into a pit.

Wen Qing gave a massive sigh, having been forced to heal up Wen Ning far too many times after the boy had sustained similar careless injuries.

A warm smile on her face, Jiang Yanli reached forward and helped pull her brother out of the pit. She took out a handkerchief and dabbed it against Jiang Cheng’s bleeding forehead, scratched when he’d fallen.

‘*Such a mom,*’ nearly every watcher thought.

On the other hand, Jiang Cheng appeared to have sunk in on himself, deflating in his dejection. As Jiang Yanli worked, Jiang Cheng’s black pupils kept drifting to look up at Wei Ying, quickly darting back down again each time.

Noticing this, Jiang Yanli asked, “A-Cheng, don’t you have something to say to A-Ying?”

‘*Such a mom,*’ Yu Ziyuan thought again, then- ‘*Has anyone ever thought the same of me?*’

She paused for a moment.

‘Wei Wuxian certainly hasn’t.’

Jiang Cheng appeared reluctant to speak, but both Jiang Yanli and Wei Ying were content to wait patiently. In the meantime, Jiang Yanli finished cleaning up the blood, and handed the handkerchief over to Jiang Cheng.

Pressing the handkerchief against his forehead, Jiang Cheng quietly mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

Jiang Yanli smiled in response.

The trio began making their way back, but, due to both Wei Ying and Jiang Cheng having injured legs, Jiang Yanli was forced to carry one on her back, and the other in her arms. Both boys had their limbs wrapped around her, allowing them to cling to her like monkeys as she hobbled back to the Sect. The strain was so great that she had to stop and take a breath every few steps, barely able to continue.

“A-Li,” Jiang Fengmian spoke softly, not wanting to be heard by the others. “In a situation like this, you can come get some help. I wouldn’t have minded you waking me up.”

Jiang Yanli froze at those words for a moment, before finally nodding and responding, “I-I know. I apologize, A-Die. We just-”

“Just what am I supposed to do with you two?” Jiang Yanli asked. Pitifully, Wei Ying and Jiang Cheng just hugged her neck even tighter.

“I…” Jin Zixuan tried. “I mean, we’re not ready for kids yet — obviously, I mean. It’s just….”

Jiang Yanli smiled at his adorable, flustered manner of speech, waiting patiently for him to continue (and grateful that she had an excuse to not respond to Jiang Fengmian).

“Just… A-Ling will be lucky to — I mean I will….” Jin Zixuan took in a deep breath, reminding himself of the importance of stating his feelings clearly and honestly (as proven by the painful endeavor that was watching Lan Wangji fight his own feelings about Wei Wuxian). “What I-what I’m trying to say is that I’m lucky to have you in my life and-and you’re really cool?”

After watching the soup incident, Jin Zixuan knew he had a lot to make up for. Given the smile that had appeared on Jiang Yanli's face, he could only hope that he had started to.

Turning to look down, Jiang Cheng's attention was drawn to Wei Wuxian's injured feet. There was a large bruise coloring his leg purple and scratches covering the rest of the skin. As he stared, Jiang Cheng's face was quickly consumed by a frantic nervousness.

'*I even went out of my way to search on my own in case whoever I asked told, but now, since we're going to the healers…*' Jiang Cheng clenched his tiny fists. '*If A-Die finds out about this, about how I threw Wei Ying out and made him hurt his leg, he'll definitely dislike me even more!*'

"Dislike you?" Jiang Fengmian repeated disbelievingly. Jiang Cheng shrunk down at the words, but Jiang Fengmian found his mind too consumed by conflict to respond.

The conversation Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had after the Xuanwu had made Jiang Fengmian's failure clear: his son thought he was unloved, and believed Wei Wuxian was the preferred child.

'It serves you right to be bored to death! You shouldn't have played hero, and you shouldn't have cared for such a hell of a thing! If in the beginning you didn't-'

'Jiang Cheng,' Jiang Fengmian interrupted sternly.

Jiang Fengmian's son hadn't been born with values that matched the Yunmeng Jiang Sect ~~to the point where Jiang Cheng's older self had disciples~~ *accustomed* ~~to abiding by torture~~. Jiang Fengmian didn't love him any less for it, but it was nonetheless true that Jiang Fengmian wanted to steer him away from that track. And yet, every time he had tried to give his son advice, it had always failed.

Even before Wei Wuxian had arrived, any disapproval from Jiang Fengmian was interpreted as dislike, rather than an offer for help. And he had done nothing to fix that.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, too quietly for anyone but his children to hear. They spun towards him, eyes wide in confusion, and watched as he gave them a small bow of apology. His wife was undoubtedly responsible for what Jiang Cheng had thought as well, but Jiang Fengmian wasn't blind to the way his own (lack of) actions contributed.

(Watching this, Lan Qiren found himself wishing his brother could be half the father Jiang Fengmian was.)

"Don't worry," a cute, high-pitched voice spoke up.

"Wei Ying?"

"I won't tell Uncle Jiang!" Wei Wuxian winked. "I just hurt myself since I suddenly wanted to climb a tree last night!"

Wen Ruohan's relaxed smile instantly disappeared.

‘*Taking the fall for him as always? First after the party at the Cloud Recesses, then worrying about him after the Xuanwu, then letting him get away with choking you, then* giving *your* core *to him?! Surely, Jiang-guniang won’t let them-’*

“You can relax as well,” Jiang Cheng promised, sighing in relief. “Any time I see a dog, I’ll chase it away for you!”

‘*But he hadn’t. He had tied Wei Wuxian up and brought Fairy and-*’

“That’s the spirit,” Jiang Yanli praised.

‘*Of course,*’ Wen Ruohan scoffed. ‘*You’ll just let him do that. He’s new and the Madam doesn’t like him and he has far more to lose if he makes Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan angry, but that’s all fine so long as you’re not involved.*’

They were children. It was ridiculous for Wen Ruohan to imagine such long lasting consequences due to such a small moment. They barely knew each other by this point; if the siblings went too far, Wei Wuxian would just tell them to stop.

‘When you’re in someone else’s home, the worst thing you can do is make trouble for your hosts.’

It didn’t matter if Wei Wuxian thought he owed them. The boy was confident and capable and knew his limits. He would know better than to comply if they asked for too much.

~~But if his *core* wasn’t too much, then what would be?~~

The memory faded away, returning them to the Wei Wuxian (in Mo Xuanyu’s body) and the teenaged Jin Ling. The boy had his head turned away as he continued to ramble on and on to Wei Wuxian about the many things Jiang Wanyin would have done to “Mo Xuanyu” if he’d had the chance.

Jin Ling finally faced Wei Wuxian again, scoffing, “Let me tell you — don’t think I’ll be grateful just because you saved me! Don’t expect me to say anything cringe-worthy either!”

“A-Ling, you’ve already shown your gratitude plenty,” Jiang Yanli laughed.

‘*Undoubtedly more than those Wei Ying saved in the Xuanwu cave,*’ Lan Wangji mentally added. ‘*So long as you don’t take part in a siege against him, you’re doing fine.*’

But Wei Wuxian just gave an indescribably sad smile in response, “Young man, there are two cringe-worthy phrases that must be said no matter what.”

“Hm?”

“Which two?”

“‘Thank you’ and ‘I’m sorry.’”

Wen Qing frowned, noticing the level of emotion behind Wei Wuxian's voice as he said them. She stepped closer, only to force herself back, remembering that there was nothing she could do.

Jin Ling clicked his tongue and mocked, "And what will happen to me if I don't say them? I told you, I'm not thanking you!"

"Someday, you'll say those words in tears."

Jin Ling just laughed.

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes as well, wondering where Wei Wuxian got the idea that he had any right to lecture their nephew when he-

"I'm sorry."

"What?"

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji asked, moving to stand next to Wei Wuxian. The expression on Wei Wuxian's face was a mixture of bittersweet sorrow, guilt, and regret, all piled together into a package that was nothing but genuine.

"I'm sorry for those words I said to you on Dafan mountain," Wei Wuxian clarified.

"...It's no big deal," Jin Ling shrugged, awkward in the face of such a sincere apology. "You're not the first person to tell me that. It's true anyways — that I had no mother to teach me."

And Jiang Yanli would have been such a perfect mother, if she'd gotten the chance.

In the silence that followed, Jin Ling shifted awkwardly again. Although many people had told him the same after seeing his attitude, no one had ever apologized to him in such a serious manner before.

'*And no one will have to,*' Jin Zixuan promised. '*We'll change things. It won't be the same.*'

After another second of hesitation, Jin Ling shook those thoughts away and insisted, "But it doesn't matter! I won't be inferior to anyone, regardless of that! In fact, I'm gonna open everyone's eyes and make them see that I'm stronger than all of you!"

"That doesn't mean you should run off to fight Goddesses," Jiang Cheng mumbled, then cut off, understanding his nephew's feelings of inferiority all too well. As she watched that reaction, Madam Yu felt the alarms in her head screech.

Her son was desperate to prove himself, and her grandson was even more so. So desperate, in fact, that he had nearly gotten killed two times in less than a month, only saved by Wei Wuxian's coincidental appearance.

Honestly, shouldn't her son know better? If he felt the same way, he should realize Jin Ling would need to be watched more carefully!

‘*Because you’ve always watched after your children?*’ a snide voice in Madam Yu’s head scoffed. ‘*After seeing what your daughter is capable of, do you really have the audacity to claim to be better?*’

Then again, it would have been much easier for her to show such weakness if she hadn’t had to worry about her son so much. He hadn’t even managed to become head disciple. If Wei Wuxian had just-

‘*Blaming him again? Didn’t you just see first-hand that you’d made this into a problem even before he arrived? Is your memory truly so poor that it doesn’t remember something as obvious as that? By now, you of all people should know that it was never Wei Wuxian’s fault.*’

Madam Yu had nothing she could say in response, so she cut off that train of thought and did her best to muffle the voice that continued to laugh in the back of her mind.

“Alright, I’m going to head back now,” Jin Ling decided, frowning nervously at the thought of his uncle’s inevitable anger. Wei Wuxian smiled and was about to respond when he suddenly flinched back.

“Jiang Cheng!”

Jin Ling spun around, his guilt over letting Wei Wuxian go making him react instinctively, only to fall to the ground unconscious a moment later. Wei Wuxian had just knocked him out.

Jin Zixuan, who, along with many other watchers, had turned in the direction Wei Wuxian had jumped back from, hadn’t seen what happened. He blinked twice, then turned to his fiance.

“What just….”

“Ah, A-Xian isn’t a fan of politics, but he’s very good at lying when he wants to,” Jiang Yanli explained, then, remembering Wei Ying trying to make her believe his shoes fit, giggled and added, “Or, at least, he is now.”

Remembering the same, Lan Wangji found himself comparing his own childhood against Wei Wuxian’s. They both had grown up to value the same things, but the Lans’ strict, “no lying” rules, rigid values, and plentiful wealth couldn’t have been further from Wei Wuxian’s experiences growing up.

‘*You haven’t even talked to him,*’ Lan Wangji reminded himself. ‘*There’s so much you still don’t understand about the person he is.’*

By the time Lan Wangji’s thoughts reached their conclusion, Wei Wuxian had set Jin Ling down against the ground and rolled up his pants, revealing the curse mark yet again.

“...You know, I completely forgot about that,” Nie Huaisang admitted.

‘*It’s already so dark,*’ Wei Wuxian observed. ‘*What did Jin Ling offend to get it to this point?*’

Frowning, Wei Wuxian reached forward. Before Jin Ling had run away, Wei Wuxian had tried burning the mark off with stronger resentment, overpowering it, and diving deep inside to see if he could identify the source. All those methods had proven useless one by one.

Luckily, there was one more thing he could do.

There was a bright red glow from the mark, and it crawled up Wei Wuxian’s arm and down to his own leg. When it faded, the bruised outline had moved from one person to another.

Wei Wuxian had transferred the mark to himself.

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli whispered, feeling her eyes start to water. Just a short while ago, she had watched her younger self carry Wei Ying to help his hurt leg. It seemed Wei Wuxian was paying back everything that had been done for him ten-fold.

Jin Zixuan looked away. On some level, this shouldn’t have been as surprising as it was. Wei Wuxian was the adult here; of course he would help his martial nephew out in such a way. Besides, he would be able to take care of it just fine; despite Jin Ling’s talent, it seemed likely that it wouldn’t be anywhere near as easy for him. Any reasonable, responsible adult in his situation would have obviously done the same.

‘*But would your father do the same for you?*’ a voice in Jin Zixuan’s mind asked him. He glanced to the side, where Jin Guangshan was watching the simulation with a layer of carefully-hidden boredom, and found he wasn’t willing to contemplate the answer to that question.

Then, with a small grumble, Jin Ling began to stir. His eyes blinked open and he glanced up. It took him a few seconds to shake away his drowsiness and realize what had just happened.

“Wha-” he jumped up and sped back. “Did you knock me out? You actually hit me?! Even my uncle hasn’t hit me before!”

Playing the fool, Wei Wuxian tilted his head and asked, “Doesn’t he frequently tell you he’s going to break your legs?”

“He was just saying that! You damn cutsleeve-”

Jiang Yanli sighed.

“-What on earth do you want? I-”

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian jumped up as well, looking just behind Jin Ling as he exclaimed, “Ah, Hanguang-jun!”

Terrified, Jin Ling snapped up and fled at once, shouting, "You damn cutsleeve! Disgusting maniac! I'll remember you! This isn't over yet!"

He disappeared into the distance, and yet the Hanguang-jun he so feared wasn't present. A moment later, Wei Wuxian started laughing so hard he couldn't breathe and collapsed to his knees.

"...I can't believe he did the same thing twice."

"I can't believe the same thing *worked* twice," Nie Mingjue added on to Lan Xichen, giving a reluctant smile at the way Nie Huaisang had doubled over laughing from the scene. Although Nie Mingjue wasn't able to read Lan Wangji in the same way Lan Xichen could, he had a feeling the other boy was also feeling somewhat amused (from a fondness for Wei Wuxian, if nothing else). After all, if this had happened around the Lan Wangji of a week ago, Nie Mingjue had no doubt the boy would have gaped and raged over Wei Wuxian's 'shamelessness.'

Instead, all he did was tilt his head, his eyes softening at the open happiness in Wei Wuxian's expression.

After nearly a minute of laughter, Wei Wuxian coughed a few times and gasped in a handful of deep breaths. Soon enough, his breathing had returned to normal, and his body had become calm once more. He stood up again, but, this time, the only humor to be found in his expression was a bitter laughter at the world's idea of irony.

'*I always thought Jiang Cheng would be on my side, and that Lan Wangji would be on the one opposing me,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Who would have guessed, in reality, it's the opposite.*'

Jiang Cheng flinched at the words, and the rest of the Jiangs were left speechless.

Shaking her head, Madam Yu cursed, "How could the future be wrong in so many ways?"

For once, Wen Ruohan was in complete agreement. Based on the future Jiang Wanyin's actions, it was starting to seem like Wei Wuxian truly had murdered Jiang Yanli, and yet Wen Ruohan simply didn't see how that was possible.

(But then, the citizens in the future had been wrong about so many things, hadn't they?)

'The Jiangs raised him as their own, but almost all of them were killed because of him!'

Why hadn't Jiang Wanyin corrected that assumption?

'The Wens would have come regardless of what Wei Wuxian did,' Jiang Cheng knew. 'But-but maybe they would have come a little later — maybe we would have had a little more time.'

Wei Wuxian had been on the run from the Wens immediately after Lotus Pier, but once he'd come back he was the Sunshot Campaign's most valuable fighter. Why wouldn't he have corrected the public? Why wouldn't he reveal Madam Yu's incomparable grudge against him? Why let the world eventually brand him as a traitor?

‘Don’t worry, I won’t tell Uncle Jiang!’ Wei Wuxian winked. ‘I just hurt myself since I suddenly wanted to climb a tree last night.’

‘That’s the spirit!’ Jiang Yanli praised.

Some part of Wen Ruohan told him it was ridiculous to take a conversation between children and apply it to the interactions between adults. The rest of him was too annoyed at the Jiangs to pay that any mind.

If *he’d* had Wei Wuxian during the war, things would have turned out very differently.

Unaware of the thoughts of the watchers, Wei Wuxian continued walking back to where he’d agreed to meet up with Lan Wangji. The streets were now completely empty, the moon high in the sky. With the situation as it was, the blinding white of the Gusu Lan Clan’s robes made Lan Wangji appear to glow, his very presence illuminating the entire street.

Wei Wuxian froze, staring at the scene.

And the watchers did as well.

In the cultivation world, Gusu Lan’s twin jades were famous for their perfection. No matter how late it was, or how boring their classes and conferences were, the two of them would never show the slightest lack of discipline. Slouching was an impossibility, no matter the circumstances.

And yet, now, the motionless Lan Wangji stood with his head hung low, scarlet streaks in the corners of his eyes.

Desperation. Hopelessness. Despair.

To Lan Xichen, those emotions were reflected clearly in his brother’s face. Although they couldn’t read Lan Wangji themselves, the rest of the watchers understood far more of the context than Wei Wuxian did.

“Did he…” Nie Huaisang paused, looking up at the pitch black sky. “Did he think Wei-xiong had run away?”

Lan Wangji flinched back, horror flooding through his veins at the mere suggestion. When they had separated, Hanguang-jun had done nothing to ensure Wei Wuxian would actually return. Both he and Wei Ying had prioritized solving the case over staying together, and had acted accordingly. At the time, Lan Wangji had been grateful (if confused); it showed that his other-self’s temporary insanity hadn’t overcome his commitment to dealing with evil.

But then, after having been separated from Lan Wangji for a mere hour, Wei Wuxian had been found and tortured by Jiang Wanyin.

And just like that, the watchers had been forced to realize that the danger Lan Wangji was trying to protect Wei Wuxian from was very, very real.

How long had Hanguang-jun waited, not knowing if Wei Wuxian would return? How long had he stood there, thinking that his love come back from the dead had vanished, leaving him behind a second time? For how long had he been there, wondering if he'd missed his second chance and Wei Wuxian was dead *again?*

How long would Lan Wangji have continued to stand there, waiting for him to return?

Then, even without Wei Wuxian making a sound, Lan Wangji looked up and saw him. After some hesitation, he walked over with a dark expression.

Startled, Wei Wuxian took a step back.

And promptly twisted his ankle.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji jumped forward, then watched, aghast, as the illusion phased through his body.

Hanguang-jun snapped forward and caught him by the wrist to steady him, much like he had on Dafan Mountain. With that, Wei Wuxian managed to regain his balance.

Seeing that Wei Wuxian had been steadied, Hanguang-jun got down on one knee to examine his leg.

"No, no, Hanguang-jun, you don't have to do this!" Wei Wuxian insisted.

'*Don't listen to him,*' the shaking Lan Wangji told his other self. '*He needs help. You should help him regardless of what he-*'

Lan Wangji flinched back. When Hanguang-jun had dragged the Yiling Patriarch back to the Cloud Recesses, the real Lan Wangji had been horrified. Hanguang-jun had ignored Wei Wuxian's cries and taken him somewhere he didn't want to be out of a misplaced desire to protect him.

(But it was so much more complicated than that.)

(But it wasn't. Nothing they'd discovered changed what had happened. Lan Wangji couldn't allow himself to forget the big picture. It would be wrong to ignore Wei Wuxian.)

He could not become Hanguang-jun.

"Really, Hanguang-jun. Stop."

The simulated Lan Wangji had heard Wei Wuxian's protest and had glanced up, only to look down again and roll up Wei Wuxian's pants. Kept in place by Hanguang-jun's grip, Wei Wuxian could do nothing but look at the sky.

Within seconds, a curse mark covering Wei Wuxian's entire leg was revealed.

"...Where did it come from?"

“It just… kind of randomly… I don’t know how… it just came on its own.”

Jiang Cheng facepalmed and gave the lowest, longest sigh the watchers had ever heard in their lives.

“Stop trying to skirt over the issue,” Wen Qing demanded, then looked towards the ceiling, and muttered, “A-Ning, you better be watching him closely.”

“It was on Jin Ling,” Hanguang-jun correctly assumed. “You could not clear it away, so you simply transferred it to your own body.”

“Uh, that’s about right,” Wei Wuxian admitted, making Lan Wangji’s eyes darken even further. “I-it’s not like there was any other option!”

“...Thank you, Wei Wuxian,” Jin Zixuan muttered for what felt like the thousandth time.

“Anyways, I have a lot of experience dealing with these kinds of things,” Wei Wuxian declared.

A sharp exhale from Hanguang-jun told Wei Wuxian exactly what he thought of this solution.

“Wangji,” Lan Xichen whispered, watching the war of emotions in his brother’s eyes. “It’ll be fine. Wei-gongzi is the Yiling Patriarch, remember? The chance of something being more powerful than him is slim to none.”

Silence was his only response.

After staring at it for a while longer, Lan Wangji clenched his fists: “I only left for a few hours.”

Despite the serious situation, Nie Huaisang couldn’t help but snort at the frustrated tone, laughing “Ah, Wangji-xiong. You should know better than to underestimate the kind of trouble Wei-xiong can get into!”

Wei Wuxian shrugged, “A few hours is a long time. Anything can happen. There, there, straighten up.”

With his hand grasping Lan Wangji’s own, Wei Wuxian pulled the other to a standing position again. By now, luckily, he appeared to have mostly dropped the “insane Mo Xuanyu” act, and was allowing himself to behave normally again.

“It’s only an average curse mark,” Wei Wuxian assured him. “We can just kill it when it comes to find me. Hanguang-jun, you’ll have to help me. If you don’t, I won’t be able to handle it!”

“...I guess he hasn’t dropped the act completely,” Lan Xichen acknowledged, forcing Lan Qiren to withhold a sigh at the ridiculous claim of weakness.

“Anyways, have you caught the person Fairy found? Is it *him*? Where is he now?”

In response, Lan Wangji looked in the direction of a shop a few buildings down the street.

Resisted the urge to shudder, Nie Mingjue silently directed Huaisang to move closer to him. His brother complied, but also lost all the cheer he'd had previously.

Whatever Nie Mingjue had been trying to tell him was clearly going to be revealed soon.

'*Idiot,*' the Nie Sect Leader cursed himself. '*If you had just gotten over yourself and told him before the simulation, you wouldn't be having this problem right now.*'

"Let's deal with the stone castle issue first," Wei Wuxian suggested, beginning his journey toward the shop. As he walked, he noticed that his leg had become a bit numb, most likely from the force of Zidian.

***'It's a good thing Jiang Cheng controlled Zidian's force enough that I wasn't turned into a lightning-scorched corpse,'* Wei Wuxian laughed.**

The only person who found that funny was Wen Chao, who sincerely wished that had happened. Plenty of things wouldn't be a problem then. After all-

He froze, all the blood leaving his face at once as his memories of the Yiling Patriarch spilled forth, taking over his mind. He had done everything in his power to suppress them, made easier by the fact that the current Wei Wuxian was in Mo Xuanyu's body, rather than his own.

But he would never forget those burning crimson eyes.

'Remember the dogs,' he told himself. '*You'll be fine. You'll be fine. Just surround yourself with dogs that can tear him to shreds.*'

(Right?)

Ignorant of Wen Chao's thoughts, the people in the simulation continued unimpeded. The few people in the street began turning off the lights, and a child was pulled indoors by his mother. Rubbing (Mo Xuanyu's) leg, Wei Wuxian forced himself to continue walking. He sighed:

"You really will need to help me with all of this, Hanguang-jun. It's too much for me on my own."

He stretched his arms.

"Honestly, I have no idea-"

"Wei Ying."

Everyone stilled in synch with Wei Wuxian.

"...You know," Wei Wuxian realized. "For how long?"

“Fairly early.”

“...Ah,” an awkward expression came over Wei Wuxian’s face as he remembered all the things he did while trying to escape. The bed and the whining and claiming to be a cutsleeve all flashed through his mind.

“He knew?” Jiang Cheng gaped, then glared. “Then… why didn’t he say anything? Why let Wei Wuxian make a fool of himself like that?! You-”

“Maybe it was to not hold him?” Nie Huaisang suggested.

Lan Qiren’s eyes seemed to cloud over as he nodded, “It isn't a coincidence that he chose to reveal it now. Wei Wuxian returned to him of his own free will. Revealing he knows Wei Wuxian’s identity won’t be seen as a threat, anymore.”

Lan Xichen made eye contact with his brother, the both of them truly and completely speechless.

“You met Jiang Wanyin,” Lan Wangji stated, his eyes glued to the mark Zidian had made atop the curse mark.

‘*Why is everyone assuming* I’m *the biggest danger to Wei Wuxian? Someone else could have had a lightning whip!*’ Jiang Cheng internally demanded. Despite asking that question, he found himself unwilling to actually search for an answer.

The possibilities were terrifying enough.

Wei Wuxian shrugged carelessly, “As long as the two of us are alive in this world, it’s inevitable that we’d meet again sooner or later.”

Lan Wangji frowned, “Stop walking.”

“If I dont walk, how am I supposed to leave?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Are you going to carry me on your back or something?”

“You!” Lan Wangji glared. “Shameless.”

Even as he said that word, however, he couldn’t tell if he was referring to Wei Wuxian or himself. After all, it was impossible for him to ignore the small part of him that sang at the image Wei Wuxian’s words provoked. A hot blush full of both excitement and shame spread across his ears.

The simulated Lan Wangji stepped forward, and Wei Wuxian’s expression twitched, a foreboding sensation coming over him. His fears were confirmed a moment later.

Lan Wangji had kneeled down before him, fully prepared to carry Wei Wuxian on his back.

“Wangji!” Lan Qiren snapped. “Regardless of how you feel about Wei-gongzi, by the Heavens maintain your dignity!”

Unfortunately, Lan Qiren's words simply washed over his younger nephew, whose mind was too preoccupied with the audacity of the supposedly honorable Hanguang-jun to pay it any mind.

"Stop, stop, I wasn't being serious!" Wei Wuxian protested, shock clear in his face. "It's only numb 'cause I got hit by Zidian a few times, it's not broken. Really, a full grown man getting piggyback carried? That'd make me look bad."

'*At least he still has some decency,*' Jiang Cheng sighed.

Lan Wangji frowned, "Would it look bad?"

"Would it look good?"

"But… you carried me on your back before."

"He did?" Madam Jin asked.

"Oh, oh!" Nie Huaisang jumped up. "In the Xuanwu cave! Right after everyone agreed to call for help! Because of Lan-xiong's injured leg! And-and-"

"How do you remember this?" Nie Mingjue asked.

"Of course I do!" his brother responded, backing away from him as if affronted by the implication of the scene's unimportance. "Don't be silly. I've cataloged each and every moment between those two. For future reference, of course."

"Good work," Lan Xichen complimented, enjoying the nearly-purple color spreading across Lan Wangji's ears.

However, after thinking it over for a moment longer, Wei Wuxian could only respond, "Did that happen? Why don't I remember?"

"World's. Weirdest. Memory," Jiang Cheng decided, unable to believe Wei Wuxian would remember the song Lan Wangji had hummed while he was practically *hallucinating*, but not *this*.

"You never remember such things," Lan Wangji replied indifferently.

"Everyone says I have a bad memory," Wei Wuxian acknowledged. "Alright, fine. Anyways, I'm not letting you carry me on your back."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Don't be so stubborn!" Wen Qing ordered. "You have a curse mark all over your leg. You're in no position to argue!"

Wen Ruohan sighed, wishing he could take just the tiniest bit of his second son's selfishness/fear of pain and transfer it to Wei Wuxian. Everyone would be much happier then.

Then, having thought the problem over for a moment, Hanguang-jun came to a conclusion. He stepped forward and placed one arm on Wei Wuxian's back and the other behind his knees.

"Hm?" Wei Wuxian asked, only to squeak slightly in embarrassed horror as he was suddenly picked up!

"*What?!*" Lan Wangji shouted, unable to believe the lengths his other self would go to. He heard Nie Huaisang cheering in the background along with Wangji's brother — his own brother! That *traitor!* — but was too distracted to pay that any mind.

A loud siren screeched through Lan Wangji's head, bringing all thoughts to a halt and replacing them with sheer, unadulterated *panic.*

'What?' he thought. '*What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? Wha-*'

"Lan Zhan!!!" Wei Wuxian shouted, horrified.

"And he's back to using your first name too," Lan Xichen teased. "You must be happy about that."

But Lan Wangji wasn't. He was only thinking one thing:

'What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What?'

"Ah, Wangji-xiong, your romantic mind puts the rest of us to shame," Nie Huaisang sighed, giggling at the way Lan Qiren broke out into coughs after swallowing down the wrong pipe.

(Jiang Cheng was stunned. What was *wrong* with those two?)

Without missing a step, Lan Wangji explained, "You said you didn't want to be carried on my back."

"I didn't say I wanted to be carried like this either," Wei Wuxian protested.

Fortunately, it was already late at night, meaning the streets were too empty for anyone to see them.

'*Thank god,*' Jiang Cheng thought. '*Those two — if anyone had seen them, their reputations would never recover. I can't believe even Lan-er-gonzi is going along with this!*'

Then, after Lan Wangji had walked for a few steps, Wei Wuxian looked like he came to an understanding. Smirking, he brought up his hand to (pretend to) tug teasingly at Lan Wangji's robe.

"So, you want to see whose face is thicker?" Wei Wuxian asked, narrowing his eyes seductively at the challenge.

The endless stream of ‘what’ going on in Lan Wangji’s head was quickly replaced by a raging siren alerting the rest of his body to the emergency before them. Clenching his teeth, he quickly stood up and turned around, unable to storm off while in the simulation, but unwilling to watch for even a second longer.

“Do not flail around,” Hanguang-jun ordered, and yet Wei Wuxian continued to flirtatiously tease him. The Yiling Patriarch had expected Lan Wangji’s usual, flustered reaction to occur. Instead, Hanguang-jun continued looking straight forward with a serious expression.

Wei Wuxian was befuddled:

‘*I never would have expected Lan Zhan to be such a vindictive person,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*He’s making me pay for all the times I teased him back then. This is too much progress. Not only has his cultivation improved, but his tolerance has also improved!*’

Leaning close to Wangji, Lan Xichen whispered, “Your older self is much better at dealing with Wei-gongzi than you are. Perhaps you should watch so that you can follow his example later.”

“Xiongzhang!” Lan Wangji hissed back. “I… he-”

“Lan Zhan, you’ve known it was me ever since Dafan Mountain, right?” he asked.

Jiang Fengmian and Lan Qiren (who had been turned away, embarrassed by the flirting between their nephew and ward) turned back to face the two at those words.

“I have,” Lan Wangji answered, calmly.

“How could you tell?”

“You told me yourself.”

“Myself?”

“Wow, you’re really making him pay for all the teasing he did to you, huh?” Jin Zixuan asked, then flinched minutely at the terrifying glare Lan Wangji levied his way.

(The second jade was absolutely not in denial. He had thought this through very carefully, and he fully, completely, and utterly *did not believe* that the soul inhabiting his body was his own. It was clearly some sort of Nan Gui — a powerful demon who had appeared on earth with the goal of seducing and ravishing the poor, innocent, pure, newly-returned Wei Wuxian!)

(Lan Xichen was a cruel, cruel brother who found Wangji’s struggles hilarious.)

Despite having spent a moment to think about Lan Wangji’s answer, Wei Wuxian could not figure out what the Second Jade meant.

“Because of Jin Ling? Or Wen Ning? Or how I acted around Jiang Cheng? None of those, right?”

It seemed as if something had sent ripples through Lan Wangji’s eyes. However, those slight waves faded almost immediately, returning his eyes to a still pool of water again.

“Think,” he commanded.

“I’m only asking you because I can’t think of anything!”

“Why is he still carrying him like that?!” Jiang Cheng shouted, unable to hold it in anymore. Hearing that, Jiang Yanli could only laugh at his reaction.

Lan Qiren gave a ~~fond~~ sigh.

Despite Wei Wuxian’s pleading eyes, Lan Wangji refused to answer. Instead, calm as always, he stepped into an inn. Inside, the desk clerk saw how Wei Wuxian was being carried and promptly choked on water.

Now that someone had actually *seen* them, Jiang Cheng felt his embarrassment meter overflow. He gave a heavy groan and folded in on himself, burying his face in his hands.

“Oh, don’t be like that, Jiang-xiong!” Nie Huaisang told him. “Of course they don’t mind showing the world! It’s true love!”

“Huaisang, stop,” Nie Mingjue begged.

Jiang Cheng scowled, “They’ve never actually met! It’s not *true love*-”

“Doesn’t matter,” Wen Ruohan interrupted, making most of the watchers jump.

Wondering if he'd misheard, Jiang Cheng looked over and gaped, "I...”

Wen Ruohan’s ice-cold eyes glanced back: “Regardless of whether the real versions have met, these two have. What we've seen of their relationship should be more than enough reason to allow them to meet, once the simulation is over. After that happens, I don't imagine it will take long for things to progress.”

More than one person was gaping at the Chief Cultivator in slack jawed silence, but he saw no reason to pay them (or the heavily blushing Lan Wangji) any mind.

Hanguang-jun walked up the stairs until he reached a closed door.

Wei Wuxian sighed in amused defeat, “Alright, we’re here. You should let me down now. You need to open the door-”

There was a loud *crack* as Lan Wangji kicked the doors open.

“Hanguang-jun, I don’t know! I don’t know! I…” Nie Huaisang paused, finally noticing the unbelievable sight before him. “...I really don’t know.”

Given the way Nie Mingjue had been acting, no one could really say they were surprised be the revelation of who the mysterious 'him' was.

(That didn't make them any less curious as to what was about to be revealed.)

Almost completely ignoring Nie Huaisang, Lan Wangji brought Wei Wuxian inside the room and delicately set him down on a bamboo mat, treating him with all the care and delicacy a merchant would show a priceless piece of pottery. In the meantime, Nie Huaisang snapped open his fan and covered his face, as if he couldn't watch.

When Nie Huaisang perked up and bounced over to observe his future-self, Nie Mingjue hurried to follow after, unwilling to separate a such a crucial time. This allowed both of them to get a clear view of the simulated Nie Huaisang, having moved near enough to see around the obstructive fan.

To the Nie brothers' delight, Nie Huaisang's future self was clearly far less changed than Jiang Cheng's — a fact which was obvious on first glance.

'*Although Nie Huaisang was born with an elegant, attractive face, his expressions and demeanor always make it seem like he wouldn't resist no matter what you did to him. His stylish outfit shows a fine taste in clothing as well as the thought he's put into it. Rather than a sect leader… he looks more like a wealthy idler,*' Wei Wuxian thought.

'*If only!*' Nie Huaisang agreed, not at all offended. '*And I won't have to be anything else, so long as I manage to keep Da-ge alive this time.*'

"I don't know what you want me here for," the simulated Nie Huaisang repeated.

Without speaking, Lan Wangji held up the scrap of fabric Fairy had ripped off, comparing it against the obvious tear in the simulated Nie Huaisang's sleeve. Noticing that, Nie Huaisang felt along and realized the same.

He could only miserably respond, "I-I just happened to pass by. I really don't know anything."

"Ha! Who would believe that?" Wen Chao scoffed. "What a moron."

"Considering how *your* encounters with Wei Wuxian ended, I'd love to see you do better," Nie Mingjue growled, glaring at Wen Chao ferociously. He had expected Wen Chao to respond regardless, but, instead, the second young master of the Wen Sect simply froze.

All the blood left his face, and the string of memories returned.

~~The Yiling Patriarch had come for him.~~

Indifferent to his pathetic second son's suffering, Wen Ruohan merely narrowed his eyes, observing illusion of the new Sect Leader Nie closely.

"I…" Nie Huaisang looked away and concluded "Hanguang-jun, when I arrived at the hill, a dog attacked me. So I really didn't go anywhere."

‘*Dogs appear to be amusingly effective against both of them,*’ Jin Guangshan thought, glancing between Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang. He didn’t personally have a reason to go after the second Nie brother, but he knew Wen Ruohan well enough to realize the other man was treating Nie Huaisang weirdly.

He made a mental note to keep a closer eye on the boy.

“I-it’s been hours,” Nie Huaisang mumbled. “Can you please let me go? I promise, I don’t know anything.”

“Alright,” Wei Wuxian agreed easily. “If you don’t know anything, I’ll talk. Maybe listening to me will help you jog your memory on a few of these things.”

With a deceptively warm smile lit by the dim glow of candles, Wei Wuxian sat down and began pouring a cup of tea.

“Why did we have to be shown the Yiling Patriarch’s power *before* this scene?” Nie Huaisang complained. “That makes Wei-xiong so much more scary!”

“You should have just told us,” Lan Wangji calmly advised. “If you had, this wouldn’t be happening.”

“Wangji-xiong, you’re heartless!”

Unaware of the surrounding conversation, the simulated Wei Wuxian began:

“In the towns around the Xinglu ridge, there are many rumors about a ‘Man-Eating Castle’ and a ‘Man-Eating Ridge,’ but there aren’t any actual victims. It might just be hearsay, but it’s more than enough to keep normal people from approaching the castle. Thus, it’s intended purpose is to serve as the first defense line.”

Behind his careless, awkward smile, Nie Huaisang felt his intrigue grow. He might have nowhere near the same level of night hunting experience as Wei Wuxian, but he knew just enough for the ‘castle’ to have raised alarms in his mind — especially with the way Nie Mingjue had been acting.

Now, he would get to figure out the truth.

“If there’s a first, there must be a second. In this case, that second was the walking corpses on Xinglu Ridge. Even if someone ignores or forgets about the rumors, they’ll flee after they see the walking dead. Luckily, those corpses are also weak enough that they won’t cause anyone real harm.”

Silently, Lan Xichen moved closer to Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang, who had backed away from the latter’s older-self over time. It was true that he was concerned about the secrets Nie Mingjue had apparently kept, but that hadn’t overpowered his worry for his increasingly stressed friend.

Besides, the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun were the ones investigating. Every watcher had no doubt that the truth would be revealed soon enough.

“The third defense is the formation around the stone castle. The maze array on Xinglu Ridge is very sophisticated — defending against cultivators, rather than ordinary people. Without a spiritual beast good at following scents or being as powerful as Hanguang-jun is, you’d undoubtedly get lost. The castle has no doors, no windows, and a strong barrier around it,” Wei Wuxian continued, his silver eyes piercing through the room. “Without a sufficiently powerful spiritual weapon, it would be difficult to get in.”

Looking a second away from squirming, Nie Huaisang tapped the fan against his nose, as if wishing he could hide his entire body behind it.

‘*It’s fine,*’ Nie Mingjue reminded himself. ‘*You’ve seen Lan Wangji’s and Wei Wuxian’s righteousness first-hand. You know you can trust in it. Huaisang will be fine.*’

He bit his lip.

‘Probably.’

“These measures keep the Xinglu Castle hidden from the public, and make the people responsible for the castle quite clear. This is the Nie Sect’s area; they’re the only ones who would be capable of setting something like this up.”

“...It sounds really obvious when he says it like that.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Wen Qing advised, glancing between Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian. “That’s just… how those two are.”

“What exactly is the QingheNie Sect’s goal in building the castle?” Wei Wuxian asked, standing up without regard for the curse mark growing up his leg. “Where did the corpses in the wall come from? Were they eaten?”

Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan both smirked like vultures, waiting for their prey to reveal its weakness.

“Sect Leader Nie,” Wei Wuxian smirked, stepping behind Nie Huaisang and forcing him to look back. “If you don’t give us a proper explanation, I’m afraid that the the clans will soon come to find out about it.”

He leaned forward, practically standing side by side Nie Huaisang, and yet threateningly looming over the other all the same.

It was similar to the closeness they’d shown each other in the Cloud Recesses, and yet, just like Wei Wuxian’s relationship with Jiang Cheng, so, so different.

“The clans will undoubtedly come to interrogate you,” Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes. “At that moment, even if you try to explain things, no one is going to believe you.”

‘*Was that advise based off personal experience?*’ Lan Wangji wondered. ‘*Wei Ying… what happened to you?*’

Nie Huaisang gave a nervous swallow.

“Hanguang-jun…” he said. “And… Young Master. Can you swear to me that, whatever I tell you, you won’t spread it around? Even if just for the sake of the long relationship between our sects, our brothers were sworn brothers! And, if the secret is exposed in the future, I’d greatly appreciate it if you two could say a few good things as witnesses.”

The more Wen Ruohan heard, the more anticipatory he became.

“You have my word,” Lan Wangji calmly agreed.

Wei Wuxian nodded, “We won’t tell anyone.”

He held out the cup he’d poured to Nie Huaisang, and Sect Leader Nie enthusiastically took a big gulp. Clearly, this would be very difficult for him to say.

Unconsciously, Nie Huaisang found himself sneaking closer to his brother yet again.

A moment later, the now-empty cup was slammed onto the table.

“It’s not a Man-Eating Castle at all. It’s just… it’s my sect’s ancestral burial grounds!”

“...”

“...What?”

“Ancestral burial ground? Whose ancestral burial ground buries sabers instead of corpses?!” Wei Wuxian asked.

Everyone but Nie Mingjue was thinking the exact same thing.

“You said that it’s not a Man-Eating Castle. Does that mean it hasn’t eaten anyone?”

Clenching his teeth, Nie Huaisang reluctantly answered, “...It has.”

“Wow.”

“What? Da-ge!” Nie Huaisang cried out.

Nie Mingjue just sighed.

“But only once!” Nie Huaisang rushed to say.

Jin Zixuan raised an eyebrow, “Because that’s so much better?”

“And we weren’t the ones at fault for that! Besides, it was dozens of years ago!”

“Must you meander around the issue?” Lan Qiren frowned. “I told you, when constructing argument, begin with-”

“Uncle,” Lan Xichen whispered. “Now might not be the time.”

“The rumors of the Man-Eating Castle on Xinglu Ridge also started after that! I just… fanned the flames a little.”

And that answered Nie Mingjue’s question regarding how the charlatan knew so much. Now that he thought about it, it actually wasn’t a bad way to deal with non-Wei-Wuxians-and-Lan-Wangjis.

Provided the Nie Sect survived what was about to be revealed to Wen Ruohan.

Barely moving, Lan Wangji glanced over and requested, “The details, please.”

His polite words were just as powerful as a threat would be.

“Wangji-xiong!” Nie Huaisang cried, hoping to release the tension in his body. “Why are you and Wei-xiong bullying me like this?! You know I don’t stand a chance!”

The second jade remained wholly unsympathetic.

“Hanguang-jun,” Nie Huaisang began. “You know that my Sect — the Nie Sect — has always been different. Our founder was a butcher, so we cultivate with sabers instead of swords.”

As though they were the ones who had been asked, Jiang Cheng, Jin Zixuan, Jiang Yanli, and the real Nie Huaisang all nodded in agreement.

“Since we’re so different from the other sects, it’s only natural that blood has been shed. The sabers of our past leaders are all heavy with hostile energy and killing intent. That’s why almost all of our sect leaders have met sudden ends due to qi deviation. Our irritable tempers also have a lot to do with this.”

Neither Nie Huaisang nor Lan Xichen had forgotten the far too easy way Nie Mingjue had accepted his own death.

And now-

“This is getting quite close to demonic cultivation,” Wei Wuxian observed.

“It’s different!” Nie Huaisang protested. “Demonic cultivation is only demonic cultivation because it uses human lives! My Sect’s sabers use the lives of evil spirits and beasts.”

“...Da-ge?”

“I’m here,” Nie Mingjue answered, meaning it in both the reassurance of protection, and in the promise that he wouldn’t run away from Huaisang’s later anger and questions.

Not much point in trying to hide it now.

“Throughout their whole lives, my sect’s sabers have been killing evil things. Once their owners die, they aren’t able to kill any longer, and cause trouble, disrupting the sect. A

saber spirit only deems one person its master, and won't allow anybody else to use them. And it's not like we can just melt the sabers! Not only would it be disrespectful to our ancestors, but it's entirely possible that wouldn't solve the problem."

That was indeed quite the puzzle.

"Is it only the Sect Leaders' sabers that tend to cause trouble?" Wen Qing asked. "It's not like your outer-disciples are buried there."

"Correct," Nie Mingjue confirmed, his tone as blank as Lan Wangji's. "It takes a lot of power for them to do that."

Wei Wuxian smirked, "Those sabers are quite full of themselves, aren't they?"

Nie Huaisang sighed, "The sabers who fought and cultivated alongside our ancestors are in a position to be full of themselves."

As Nie Mingjue sat here, watching the conversation take place, he couldn't help but feel his thoughts drift towards Wei Wuxian. He had spent years agreeing with his sect's cultivation style and training in it. It provided a great deal of strength, wasn't a shortcut (as it still required normal cultivation), and was the legacy he was meant to inherit. Most who cultivated in his style experienced no problems, so he didn't need to feel guilty in that regard. Even now, he still was committed to cultivating in the Nie Sect style.

And yet, his reasons *paled* in comparison to what forced Wei Wuxian to study demonic cultivation. And while it was true that manipulating human souls was a far greater sin, his reasoning for falling to it was so much stronger.

And yet, in the beginning of the simulation, Nie Mingjue had condemned Wei Wuxian for it without even asking about the circumstances that led up to it.

(Would the simulated Wei Wuxian do the same thing to Huaisang?)

(No, he didn't have to worry about that. After all, Wei Wuxian was a much better person than he was.)

Clearing his throat, Nie Huaisang continued, "As the generations went on, the Sect Leaders had higher and higher levels of cultivation, and the problem worsened. That is, until the sixth leader came up with a solution!"

"The Man-Eating Castle?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Unconsciously, Lan Xichen found himself clenching his fists.

"No, no. They're connected, but that solution appeared later. The sixth sect leader built two coffins for his father's and grandfather's sabers, then dug a tomb. Inside the tomb, rather than valuable treasures, he put corpses that were about to transform."

"What?" Lan Qiren gasped.

Lan Wangji frowned.

“Hanguang-jun, I can explain! We didn’t kill them! We just gathered them from around! We also bought a bunch of them for a high price. The sixth sect leader said that, if the saber spirits want to fight evil beings, then give them evil beings to fight forever!”

That was slightly better than Wei Wuxian going around digging up graves during the Sunshot Campaign.

But only just slightly.

“The saber spirits suppress the transformation of the corpses, and the corpses calm the sword spirits’ fury. Things would continue like this, the two sides keeping each other in check. This would allow the future generations to live in peace.”

“Then why was the stone castle built afterwards?” Wei Wuxian pressed. “Why were the corpses buried inside the walls? And didn’t you say it did end up eating a few people?”

“Scary, Wei-xiong,” Nie Huaisang whined.

“These are all the same answer, I guess. You can say it ate people, but it wasn’t on purpose! Our sixth sect leader made them look like average tombs, and the following generations followed his lead. But, about fifty years ago, those tombs were dug up by some grave robbers!”

Wei Wuxian made an “oh” sound.

“Ah.”

“Well, that explains it.”

“Those *idiots,*” Jiang Cheng cursed. Rolling her eyes at the described men’s stupidity, Madam Yu sighed.

Also in agreement, Wei Wuxian shook his head and thought, ‘*Undoubtedly a case of poking a sleeping dragon.*’

“...Didn’t *he* dig up numerous graves throughout his life?” Wen Qing asked.

“Ah, but you see, *he* can take care of himself,” Nie Huaisang pointed out. “Besides, he’s got Lan-er-gongzi to help him if something goes wrong!”

A bright flush began to glow in Lan Wangji’s ears yet again.

Clearing his throat, Nie Huaisang continued, “For something as big as a tomb, no matter how hard you try, it’s impossible to go completely unnoticed. The grave robbers peered into the matter, and decided the tomb was undoubtedly left over from past dynasties. They planned it out for a long time and came prepared. A few in the group were genuinely skilled, allowing them to locate the position and pass by our maze array.

They'd seen plenty of dead people in their lives, so they didn't bat an eye at the corpses in the walls. While they were searching for gold and treasures, these young men — full of yang energy — ended up breathing all over the corpses."

Just like Jin Zixuan's son had.

"Ten or so corpses — which, even before the men's arrival, had been about to transform — woke up due to the men's actions. In a surprising turn of events, the grave robbers were skilled enough to kill the walking corpses which attacked them. They realized it was too dangerous to stay, but, just as they started to leave, they were eaten by the castle!"

Just like Jin Zixuan's stupid, stupid son.

(He wondered if he'd be able to convince Wei Wuxian to secretly babysit Jin Ling on every night hunt the boy went on. The LanlingJin Sect would certainly have the money to pay for it.)

"You see, the number of corpses in the castle needed to be strictly controlled. Just enough to balance the sabers without overwhelming them. It would've been fine if the grave robbers just caused the transformation — if they'd done that, everything would have still balanced itself out — but they'd destroyed the corpses! There were fewer corpses than there had been at the start, the ones that had once been there were now cut to pieces. So, to ensure there was still a balance, the castle could only… it could only close itself off and trap them inside the tomb to make up for the shortage."

"Surely there's a better way to go about this?" Madam Yu asked, raising an eyebrow. "Something that volatile-"

"Do you *have* a better suggestion?" Nie Mingjue asked. As he'd expected, Madam Yu put far too much value in filial behavior to consider suggesting he stop cultivating in the Nie Sect way, and even those who looked like they wanted to say that (Lan Xichen and Wen Qing) understood the complexity of the decision.

(Still, Nie Huaisang wished it wouldn't lead to his brother just *accepting* the fact that he would die before he was thirty!)

"...What about A-Xian?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

"A-Die?"

After glancing for a moment at Jiang Yanli, Jiang Fengmian continued, "Using animal cores rather than human souls does make this significantly different than demonic cultivation, but there are still a few similarities. Perhaps A-Xian will be able to figure out a better solution to this problem — or at least a way to increase the defenses."

"Sect Leader Jiang," Lan Wangji stood up. "I was led to believe that we were trying to steer Wei Ying *away* from demonic cultivation. Regardless of whether it's actually corruptive,

society's view of it will cause them to turn against him once he's no longer needed to ensure our safety."

There words were spoken so politely that even Madam Yu had trouble disagreeing.

"In addition," the second jade continued. "We've already realized just how dangerous it can be to believe he can do anything. I ask that you don't expect him to come up with miracles upon request."

"He can at least take a look at it," Jiang Cheng suggested. "I'm sure he'll be able to figure out something."

Lan Wangji pursed his lips, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement.

"Ah, anyways," the simulated Nie Huaisang continued. "Since the saber tomb was destroyed, the Nie Sect had to think up a different method. They chose a different spot on Xinglu Ridge and built a saber hall, rather than a saber tomb. The Sect Leader hid corpses in the wall as a disguise in case grave robbers came again."

Lan Wangji's eyes flicked to the side, in the direction where said sword hall stood.

"This was the rumored 'Man Eating Castle.' When those grave robbers came to Qinghe, they pretend to be hunters. They never returned and left no corpses behind, so people started to say they had been devoured by a monster on the ridge. Then, after the stone castle was built but before the maze array was set up, a passerby stumbled across the castle and a rumor that the monster lived there was born. We thought the rumors would help keep people away, so we interfered with the rumors a bit and the 'Man Eating Castle' was born."

The world faded to black.

"...So."

"So?"

"At the very least, that does answer the questions we had," Jiang Fengmian supposed. "That must be the resentment A-Xian noticed around Sect Leader Nie's body when he went to inspect them."

Hearing that, Wen Ruohan smirked, "And to think, you were so against Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation at the beginning. Did you not stop to think about the consequences?"

"It's completely different," Lan Qiren argued. "Carefully selecting the appropriate bodies versus digging up and disturbing random souls cannot be considered equal, even if we now understand why Wei Wuxian acted in such a way."

"Really? Because I seem to recall the Nie Sect's main complaint being the danger of corruption demonic cultivation contained. And yet, that seems to be a far bigger concern for their own cultivation than his."

“Did we know that at the beginning?” Nie Mingjue glared. “By the time that became apparent, the Nie sect had already accepted his choices.”

“Perhaps,” Jin Guangshan allowed, remembering how the Nie were some of the first people to side with Wei Wuxian. “Nevertheless, don’t you think we should turn that same lens upon you?”

“The Nie Sect has been using this cultivation for years,” Lan Xichen pointed out, moving to stand beside his friend. “If it hasn’t been a concern for the other sects all this time, then I don’t see why we should get involved now.”

“Except for when Wei-gongzi can offer some help?”

“If he’s wiling to.”

“Besides, Your Excellency,” Wen Qing began. “This helps Wei Wuxian as well. If the Nie Sect can be accepted by us, there should be no reason for anyone to attack Wei Wuxian over demonic cultivation. It will provide an extra safety net for him, if things do go wrong.”

The Jiangs swerved her way, wondering how pointing that out was supposed to help the Nie cause. Wouldn’t that just incentivize Wen Ruohan to not accept this, allowing him to take out two of his strongest enemies at once? And yet-

“I see,” Wen Ruohan responded.

And that was that.

(Most of the other watchers made bewildered eye contact with each other, not understanding what just happened. In that pause, Nie Mingjue glanced over at Wen Qing, who simply continued making unflinching eye contact with her sect leader.)

“...Are you planning on revealing this to the whole world?” Nie Mingjue asked, crossing his arms.

“Answering how we found out about this would most likely lead to things we don’t want known being exposed,” Jin Guangshan acknowledged, backing off at once now that Wen Ruohan was stopping.

Hearing that, Lan Xichen smiled and told his friend, “It’s like the simulated Huaisang said. Now that we all know, if your secret does get out, the Great Sects can all support the truth of the situation.”

Nie Mingjue nodded.

‘*That’s all well and good,*’ Nie Huaisang thought. ‘*But none of that actually solves the problem of the fact that Da-ge is going to die from a qi deviation soon enough and doesn’t seem at all inclined to stop it. Nor how the other Sect Leaders now know the Nie Sect’s greatest weakness, and can use it against us even without revealing the information!*’

Nie Huaisang glanced to the side, and saw Lan Wangji frowning minutely into space, thinking through something.

'Sorry, Wangji-xiong. I get what you're saying, but, since it's probably the only way to save Da-ge, I think I'll be getting Wei Wuxian involved in all this regardless of what you say.'

Meanwhile, the Jiang Clan was consumed by a solemn silence. On one hand, seeing their past-selves had reminded them of the happiness that awaited them outside, should they manage to prevent the war. On the other, none of them could deny that the glimpse they'd had of the past showed the seeds of everything that would later form between Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian.

Especially in the case of Jiang Fengmian.

'*A-Cheng wasn't willing to ask me for help. He was scared of me,*' he thought. '*Scared I'd be disappointed, at least.*'

And Jiang Fengmian probably would have been. Just like any parent would have been. That shouldn't mean *all* his children should decide that keeping it from him was the solution to that problem.

During the simulation, Jiang Fengmian had spoken to his children. He had made his true feelings clear, and stated them explicitly. That didn't change what was surely years of habits ingrained in all of them. Yes, things had been going better for now, but would it return to the way it had been before as soon as they left the simulation?

(And what about with Wei Wuxian? Would his family go back to treating Wei Wuxian the same way they had before?)

Clearly, Jiang Fengmian should have done something differently long before Wei Wuxian had arrived. He should have spoken with his wife and made it clear-

No, their conversations had always just became one sided arguments on her part. It was unlikely that would have fixed anything. She never heard anything he was trying to say.

Then he should have spoken to his children.

And told them he loved them? He had tried. He had never managed to speak above Yu Ziyuan's shouts of his favoritism. Even now, after he'd made his feelings clear during the tenth segment, things weren't fixed. He wasn't so delusional as to think the fact that he'd talked to Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli would automatically solve everything. Once they left, there was no telling what they would divert to.

So therefore he should have silenced his wife?

Maybe. Or that would have just made more problems. He truly, honestly did not know.

(And maybe that was the problem all along. He'd never been able to decide on what to do, so he'd just done nothing and allowed this whole charade to continue.)

Some distance away, the twin jades approached each other.

“Wangji?” Lan Xichen asked. “Is something wrong?”

The second jade had been frozen for most of the in-between period (so still he looked like he was genuinely made of jade, and so lost in thought that he had barely blinked since he’d last spoken).

“Xiongzhang, do you remember all the things Wei Ying told me in the Xuanwu cave. For everything the did, he never wanted to receive thanks.”

‘Alright, the bad blood’s out. No need to thank me!’

‘How could Lan Zhan do this to me?’ Wei Wuxian thought after being bitten. ‘He might have saved me, but you could say I saved him as well, didn’t I? It’s not that I wanted him to thank me or anything, but why is it that we still can’t be friends, even after so much has happened?’

Then Lan Wangji had actually thanked him, and Wei Wuxian had rejected it:

‘No need to thank me. I really can’t stand when others thank me, especially not when they do it so seriously. It gives me goosebumps. And kowtowing is even more unnecessary.’

“It’s hard to tell with him,” Jin Zixuan, who had been near enough to hear, interjected. “Maybe he just didn’t want to make it seem like he’d done with with the expectation of being thanked?”

“Or maybe it’s because he wanted to be close to you as a friend,” Lan Xichen suggested. “He didn’t want you to befriend him out of a debt, so he made it clear that thanks weren’t required.”

“So he doesn’t want to be close to Jin Ling?” Lan Wangji asked.

Fidgeting awkwardly, Jin Zixuan muttered “Well… if he’s as involved with my and A-Li’s deaths as those memories implied, then — oh, not that I think he killed me! You’re right, I can’t imagine a scenario that would make him want to kill innocents. Just… maybe he still feels responsible? So he’s trying to….”

“Repay his debt?” Lan Wangji suggested. Jin Zixuan gave a hesitant nod in response.

From the side of all this, Wen Ruohan gazed over the crowd, frowning deeply. The segment had many things for them to think about, the most interesting of which being the truth behind the Nie Sect. And yet, despite the initial uproar about it, everyone had mostly settled down, accepting the clan’s cultivation.

Cultivation that wasn’t as much of an insult to tradition as demonic — explaining Lan Qiren’s lack of opposition — but was still somewhat dangerous to the user, not explaining the acceptance from all the other sects. Was it simply that understanding and supporting Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation made them more willing to accept this less-severe one?

Or were the cultivation world's leaders being as foolish as always, and accepting it simply on the basis of Nie Mingjue being the leader of an honored and powerful sect, rather than the son of a *servant.*

(It was probably a mix of both, but the mere inclusion of the latter option infuriated Wen Ruohan beyond belief.)

If only Wei Wuxian had been part of *his* sect.

"God, I wish I was part of the Wen Sect!" Wei Wuxian declared, draping himself over Wen Ning's shoulders. "Yunmeng has no books on any of this! Even Qinghe's studies on the effects of resentful energy are pathetic! No one knows anything!"

"W-well," Wen Ning stuttered. "Qinghe might not have a lot of medical texts, but GusuLan is also a good source."

"Oh, good point! Okay then, we'll start a plan to infiltrate the GusuLan Sect posthaste! Certainly sounds more fun than dealing with the Jiang elders again. God, I can still hear them. 'No,' they say. 'We don't have enough money to devote to more experiments. Just focus on running the sect.' We have plenty of money! They're just too lazy to want the competition there would be if I wake the other Sect Leaders up!"

"R-right, but-"

"Oh, and there's also the Lanling Jin Sect. I bet they have enough money to run some experiments if I wanted to. The elders wouldn't be able to use that excuse then!"

"Of course, but, um-"

"Worst comes to worst, I could try to branch out and find Baoshan Sanren's mountain-"

"Sir?!"

Here, at long last, Wei Wuxian glanced over.

"R-regardless of whether or not you've been able to research… shouldn't we worry about *that* first?"

The 'that' Wen Ning was referring to was, of course, the red arry glowing in the middle of the air. It was another message from Mo Xuanyu — the first one they'd gotten since Wei Wuxian informed him that they were leaving the watchers inside. Wen Ning had somewhat hoped that ignoring it would eventually lead to it losing energy and going away.

The longer they waited, the more obvious it was that that wasn't going to work.

"What would you suggest we do?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"I-" Wen Ning paused and looked back at it. "Well, we can't do *nothing*, right? What if it's important?"

“Really? But what if activating it blows Yunmeng up?”

“*WHAT?!*”

As Wei Wuxian grinned, Wen Ning gradually began to realize he was just being messed with. Nonetheless, he couldn’t shake that fear from his mind.

“W-will it?”

“No. It’s definitely a different array than the ones before, but it has nowhere near enough energy to do that. At most, it’ll blow up this room.”

Wen Ning eeped, nervously backing away from the red light and asking “S-should we evacuate the-”

“No, no, no,” Wei Wuxian assured him. “It seems to just be altering the speed of the connection and such. The only part that might be a cause for concern is those few new characters in the bottom right.”

Frowning, Wen Ning bent forward and observed the dozens of pages Wei Wuxian had covered with notes on the new array. He’d spent the past few hours working on them, and had become increasingly tense as time went on.

“What do… what do those characters do?”

“I’m now pretty sure they’re *receiving* information,” Wei Wuxian said. “Which probably means we should check it out as soon as possible, just in case it’s here to spy on us.”

Wen Ning instantly paled.

Another beat of silence passed as Wei Wuxian’s silver eyes narrowed in on the array. If Wen Ning wasn’t mistaken, they seemed to be gaining a faint red tint as Wei Wuxian's annoyance increased. Not that Wen Ning didn’t understand his frustration.

(On one hand, it could be dangerous. On the other, the watchers were all lying to them, and this was their only chance at getting some real information that, for all they knew, would be needed to save the watchers.)

(They couldn’t risk giving this up.)

Wen Ning clenched his fists and looked toward the array as well. It’s ominous red light seemed to signify an incoming danger, but Wen Ning knew the danger of missing information was just as big as the danger receiving that information could pose. He had no idea what to do.

Then he saw Wei Wuxian give a truly *vicious* smile.

“Wen Ning, do you remember how to activate the voluntary ejection array? The one that will allow the watchers to leave the simulation?”

“Uh, yes?”

“Okay then. Give me a moment. I’ll activate Mo Xuanyu’s message soon, but I figure it can’t hurt to be careful.”

Understanding instantly, Wen Ning nodded.

When the light of the array finally faded, Wei Wuxian found himself in a large room made of light colored wood, much like those he’d seen at the Cloud Recesses. In the center of the room, Mo Xuanyu an an unknown man in a dark cloak stood, facing him. Directly in between him and them was an array of light that seemed to be carved into the ground.

His exit, in case things went poorly.

Raising an eyebrow, Wei Wuxian waited for them to proceed.

“Welcome, Wei-gongi!” a cheery voice greeted him. “I’m Mo Xuanyu. I’m the one who made the array that was used to put together the simulation your sect leaders are currently watching. Thanks for opening this message!”

“*And* for taking forever,” the man in the cloak grumpily added on.

Instantly, Wei Wuxian felt his tension rise. How would they know how long it took? And why were they saying that? Had they just assumed he would be cautious, and wanted to add something to make him tense? Were they admitting to the attempts to spy on him, even indirectly? Was this message all supposed to be a threat?

“So,” Mo Xuanyu continued. “Given that you refused to comply with taking your sect leaders out of the simulation, I figured I’d probably lost your trust somewhere along the way. And I guess I can’t blame you-”

The man in the cloak snorted.

“-I mean, I might have stretched the truth a bit a few times.”

Here, even Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the absurd understatement.

“Hey! Don’t roll your eyes at me, brat. You could at least pretend to be respectful.”

Wei Wuxian felt his blood freeze.

“What?”

Mo Xuanyu smirked.

“You…” Wei Wuxian gaped opely. “You’re here? You can hear — you can *talk* to me?”

“Yup! I admit, it’s kinda my fault I lost your trust. But, in my defense, some things were hard to explain when we could only send messages. So I improved it! Now, we can just

talk directly to each other!"

"But how would you even *do* that?" Wei Wuxian asked. "The distances these messages have to cross-"

"No, no. Our perception of time is slowed down in here."

"Like the simulation."

"Right! So it can pass so long as it has the connection-"

"Which is what the energy trail I felt was!" Wei Wuxian realized. "So every second you're recording what I say and sending it back — oh, that was what the recording characters were for-"

"Right! And I had to maintain the energy balance-"

"Of course! Because it would have destabilized otherwise-"

"And then blown up-"

"Oh! Which is why the path between us was written first! Because it needs to-"

"Build on that base!' Mo Xuanyu agreed. "Unlike the former-"

"Which prioritized a complete-"

"Package that didn't lose-"

"Any information and-"

"Would you two focus!" the man in the hood snapped, startling both Wei Wuxian and Mo Xuanyu out of their excitement. "What are you even talking about? Packages?"

"Er, information packages," Wei Wuxian explained. "I mean, not really. It's just-"

"Don't worry about him," Mo Xuanyu shook his head. "He doesn't get talismans."

"Shut up! With the number of disasters your inventions have caused-" the hooded man cut off, watching Mo Xuanyu pale at his words. A moment later, they both looked back at Wei Wuxian, not bothering to elaborate on that.

"Anyways," Mo Xuanyu said. "I acknowledge that I've been keeping too much from you. Honestly, I shouldn't have been surprised that you picked up on the stretched truths I used. But that's all over now! I'm going to tell you exactly what the watchers are seeing, and why I wanted to hide all this from them."

"Are you?" Wei Wuxian raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"I will. So tell me: what do you think of time travel?"

Thrown back by the abrupt topic change, Wei Wuxian paused for a moment to wonder if this was just meant to be a distraction. It was entirely possible it would be best for him to just leave now.

But if they were serious….

“I don’t believe in it,” he responded.

“Yes, I thought you might say that,” Mo Xuanyu sighed. “So, I brought along a guest!”

With a flourish toward his hooded partner, Mo Xuanyu stepped aside and allowed the unknown man to take off his hood. Two purplish-grey eyes glared at Wei Wuxian, uncompromising and determined.

And familiar.

“Jiang… Cheng?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Wei Wuxian,” the man — his shidi grown up *into* a man — greeted back.

Chapter End Notes

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A Patchwork Chapter

Chapter Notes

A million thanks to Tintin, who had to edit the longest chapter I've ever written!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Wei Wuxian soared through the air — accompanied by Wen Ning and two elders from Yunmeng Jiang — he found himself lost in thought for what seemed like the millionth time that week. That afternoon would mark eleven days since the sect leaders had fallen unconscious due to the Píngxíng Gateway. Eleven days since he'd been forced to (temporarily) take over Yunmeng Jiang.

Because of time travel. Apparently.

It would be a lie to say Wei Wuxian completely believed Mo Xuanyu's story, but the "older Jiang Cheng" had been unnervingly realistic. A bit more genuinely angry and stressed than Wei Wuxian would say his shidi was, but other than that it was completely on point. Which, unfortunately, meant Wei Wuxian had to at least *consider* the explanation he'd been given.

So: time travel. And a "Sunshot Campaign" against the Wens with the sects being assisted by the mysterious "Yiling Patriarch," the grandmaster of demonic cultivation. Supposedly, the ability to manipulate resentful energy like Mo Xuanyu (and, later, Wei Wuxian) could do was invented by that man. Then again, the future Jiang Cheng had laughed when Mo Xuanyu started describing the Patriarch's accomplishments, so Wei Wuxian was half convinced Mo Xuanyu had just made up the Yiling Patriarch and he wasn't a real person. After all, plenty of the things they told him were fairly difficult to accept.

'What about me, A-Cheng?' Wei Wuxian had asked, tilting his head teasingly. 'If this really is the future, why not have my future self come and visit? It would be impossible to deny that.'

Jiang Cheng's teeth had gritted together (as they always did when he was caught off guard), but Mo Xuanyu had just given him a bitter smile and said, 'I apologize, Wei-gongzi. In our world, you die when you're twenty two.'

So, that was fun. And more than a little hard to believe, even if it would explain the adult Jiang Cheng's general demeanor.

At that moment, Wei Wuxian passed over the town he had been looking for. With a single gesture back to the trio flying with him, he began to descend into Mo Village.

What Mo Xuanyu had told him was hard to believe, but some of it could be confirmed pretty easily. Wei Wuxian had never heard of a 'Mo Xuanyu' before, but if a four year old was

actually here — if his living conditions were exactly what the future one had described — then Wei Wuxian might have to reconsider his doubt.

He approached the manor.

“Uh, Young Master?” a guard asked, meant to dissuade intruders, but too scared of the cultivators to do so. “Is-is there something I can help you with?”

Wei Wuxian nodded once and asked, “Is this the residence of Mo Xuanyu?”

The servant’s eyes dropped to the blade at Wei Wuxian’s side. He glanced back at the house, made eye contact with his partner, then found his eyes returning to the blade again.

“...Ah, right this way,” he reluctantly admitted, allowing them inside.

For a moment, Wei Wuxian wondered the two men had somehow recognized Suibian. It seemed unlikely that they’d allow random people (even cultivators) inside without asking for more information. A moment later, he heard a servant girl mutter ‘I thought the Jin Clan wore gold’ and realized what had happened.

They thought he was here to pick Mo Xuanyu up on behalf of Jin Guangshan, the boy’s father.

(Well, that confirmed one part of Mo Xuanyu’s story. Looking good so far.)

Rather than to Mo Xuanyu himself, Wei Wuxian was then brought to a dining hall and asked to wait while Mo Xuanyu and the boy’s mother were fetched. He and Wen Ning made eye contact, watching the servants’ pandemonium as they rushed around. Refreshments were brought to the cultivators in a frantic attempt to keep them occupied.

Fifteen minutes later, the boy was brought out. As soon Wei Wuxian made eye contact with the boy, he found himself wondering if the wait had been to give the clan time to prepare Mo Xuanyu before presenting him. After all, it was clear on first sight that Mo Xuanyu had been freshly washed, styled, and coated in heavy sploches of makeup. Perfect, for hiding any possible scars.

Wei Wuxian couldn’t even claim to be surprised; Madam Yu had done the same to him plenty of times.

(The adult Mo Xuanyu had certainly implied a less than ideal childhood. Wei Wuxian supposed this was another point in the man’s favor.)

“Welcome, Gongzi,” a woman stepped forward and bowed respectfully. “I am the Madam of this household. May I ask what you wanted to see my sister and nephew for?”

Technically, now that Wei Wuxian had seen them and confirmed Mo Xuanyu’s existence, he didn’t need them for anything. Technically, he could just make up an excuse and leave.

But the boy’s bright, hopeful eyes which warred between elation and nervous anticipation reminded him far too much of some of the friends he’d made on the streets.

(The ones who hadn't been found by the leader of one of the Great Sects. The ones who, as far as he knew, had probably died anywhere from years to days after he'd left.)

Madam Mo had taken control fairly recently, and so it would be all too easy for Wei Wuxian's high rank, entourage, and expensive clothing to gain her respect. And now that he had an actual goal in mind….

"Thank you for coming to meet with me. My name Wei Wuxian. I'm the head disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect," he introduced himself. "And I have come to invite Mo Xuanyu into our sect as an outer disciple."

"The Jiang Sect?" Mo Xuanyu's mother gasped out. "No, but — but the Jin! A-Shan told me-"

"Silence!" Madam Mo hissed. "You're being disrespectful to the Young Master. You delusional-"

She abruptly cut off, unwilling to say anymore, and spun back to Wei Wuxian. Her worryingly frantic eyes frightened Mo Xuanyu slightly, but his attempts at slipping away were cut off when Madam Mo reached out and snatched his wrist, pulling him close. A slight frown formed on Wei Wuxian's face.

Madam Mo cleared her throat, "I apologize for the complication. May I ask how you came to find out about my darling nephew, Young Master? Are you an acquaintance of Sect Leader Jin, perhaps?"

"Of course," Wei Wuxian allowed, eyes becoming colder and colder as Mo Xuanyu began to shake in the Madam's grasp. "As I'm sure you've heard, the Great Sleep has affected the leaders of all the great sects. The main branch of the Jin Clan is currently out of commission, and so several jobs have been delegated to myself, given that the Madams of our sects are so close."

"I see, I see," Madam Mo lit up and pulled the shaking Mo Xuanyu even closer. "Ah, but you see, A-Yu is very important to our family. I would hate to-"

"W-wait!" Mo Xuanyu's mother spoke up. "A-Yu isn't going anywhere. He needs to meet his family in the Lanling Jin Sect. A-Shan told me that that's where our son belongs. He'll become an heir there!"

"Ah, my sister doesn't mean that-" Madam Mo defended.

"Yes, I do. Thank you young master, but we-"

"Be *silent*, you wretch-"

Wei Wuxian held up a hand in a calming gesture, and the two Madams instantly stopped. Gritting his teeth together to keep a smile on his face, Wei Wuxian continued:

"I understand your concerns, Ma'am. I apologize; I should have sent notice ahead of time before I sprung this on you. I can personally assure you that, after the Great Sleep has ended,

you may choose to switch to the Lanling Jin Sect, if you so please. I'll even write a letter of recommendation for you."

"Eh?" Mo Xuanyu's mother asked.

"Ah, that would be greatly appreciated, Young Master," Madam Mo rushed to assure him. "But, as I was saying earlier, I don't want my beloved nephew to get lonely. Would you be able to bring his cousin along as well? I feel like he'd be much more comfortable then."

Every single cell in Mo Xuanyu's body tensed instantly.

"I apologize, but I'm afraid I have only received permission to bring Mo Xuanyu along," Wei Wuxian lied. "Perhaps next time. Those with family in the sect are certainly much more likely to be allowed in later."

"I see," the Madam said, her initial disappointment fizzling away at those words. "In that case, of course. We'd be more than happy to allow A-Yu to go with you."

"Wait-"

But before Mo Xuanyu's mother could finish, one of the servants snapped forward and grabbed her arm, pulling her away from the table. In response, she screeched.

"What are you doing?" Madam Mo yelled back.

"No! Stop it!" Mo Xuanyu's mother shouted. "A-Yu needs-"

"You insane, delusional-"

"*Enough,*" Wei Wuxian spoke, and all the fighting ended at once. Rather than addressing the Madams again (far too drained to bother keeping up the polite mask anymore), Wei Wuxian stood up and walked over to Mo Xuanyu, who trembled as he hid behind the table.

"A-Yu, right?" Wei Wuxian asked. "I'm sorry if I've scared you a little."

"I'm not scared!" the trembling boy whimpered.

"I know, you're very brave," Wei Wuxian agreed. "A-Yu, would you like to come and learn cultivation with me? If it gets to be too much, I promise you can return here at any time."

Mo Xuanyu jumped, suddenly overwhelmed by the possibility of *choice*, and spun towards his mother. She, still restrained by two of the Mo family's servants, looked at her sister, her son, and finally at Wei Wuxian.

"I'll keep him safe, I promise," Wei Wuxian swore.

Slowly, hesitantly, Mo Xuanyu's mother nodded once at her son.

The light that spread across Mo Xuanyu's face was radiant in its intensity.

When Wei Wuxian stretched his arms out, Mo Xuanyu didn't hesitate for even a second before jumping into them with an excited squeal, allowing himself to be picked up without complaint. Wei Wuxian laughed at the boy's excitement, and bounced him slightly to hear even more of it. As she watched, Mo Xuanyu's mother gradually began to relax.

Wei Wuxian would love to offer to take her as well, but, after having refused to bring along Mo Xuanyu's cousin, he felt that any sort of offer to that nature would be regarded with suspicion.

That was fine; Wei Wuxian could handle it. What was more important was that Wei Wuxian now had to consider the things the adult Mo Xuanyu had said. Every bit of information the future Mo Xuanyu and Jiang Cheng had given him had been true; Wei Wuxian was becoming more and more convinced that Mo Xuanyu truly was from the future.

(And, if that was what was being shown to the watchers, then their continued vagueness made a lot more sense.)

Mo Xuanyu and the future Jiang Cheng had given Wei Wuxian a brief summary of what the simulation was going over. As shocking as it should have been, Wei Wuxian could already see the earliest traces of what would eventually become the "Sunshot Campaign." It also explained why Mo Xuanyu had wanted Wen Ruohan out of the simulation as fast as possible. Unfortunately, not only would Wei Wuxian need Wen Xu's permission to use a talisman that would force them out, but it was too late now. They had already learned everything Mo Xuanyu hadn't wanted them to know. He didn't really explain what that was, of course, but Wei Wuxian supposed he'd learn as soon as the watchers woke up.

These days, it was starting to feel everyone *but* Wei Wuxian knew what was going on. Though, based on what his grown-up shidi said, that might not be entirely true.

(*'How'd other people get access to the Pingxing Gateway in the first place? Wouldn't the Jiang Sect put it in the artifacts hall? Did they somehow break in?' Wei Wuxian had asked.*

An awkward expression came over Mo Xuanyu's face: 'Ah, I'm not part of the Jiang Sect. We just… we just know each other.'

'Well, maybe consider it next time then,' Wei Wuxian suggested. 'Nothing will keep your inventions safer than that! Right, 'Sect Leader Jiang?''

But Jiang Cheng hadn't reacted to his teasing at all, instead rolling his eyes and muttering, 'Well, that would require 'Mo Xuanyu' over here actually trusting me with information. Believe me, there's no chance of that.'

All the warmth left Mo Xuanyu's face and he frowned, muttering, 'Jiang Cheng, if this is about Baoshan Sanren's mountain, then now is not the time-'

'Oh, I *was referring to what Jin Ling said about what he saw of your time in the Burial Mounds! You know, the stuff you, to this day, never told me about? But sure, Baoshan Sanren is a good second!'*

‘The Burial Mounds?’ Wei Wuxian had asked. ‘Baoshan Sanren?’

Mo Xuanyu swerved to him and forced a laugh: ‘Don’t worry about it-’

‘Yeah, it’s apparently nothing for us to worry about,’ Jiang Cheng had hissed. ‘Because clearly, I can’t be trusted with-’

‘Jiang Cheng! Enough!’ Mo Xuanyu had snapped.)

At that moment, the child Mo Xuanyu fidgeted slightly in Wei Wuxian’s arms, and he quickly realized that he’d started unconsciously squeezing too hard while lost in memories. With an apologetic smile, he relaxed his grip. This was the person the watchers apparently valued enough to hide him from Wei Wuxian, and a person Jiang Cheng was willing to help despite the obvious bad history between them. As Jiang Fengmian’s temporary representative, Wei Wuxian would need to be careful with him.

“Well, there’s no need to rush things,” Wei Wuxian said, bouncing the quietly laughing boy up and down in his arms. “I’ll have someone return in two days to pick Mo Xuanyu up. If you change your mind by then, just tell him, and he’ll accept that.”

“Thank you, Young Master,” Mo Xuanyu’s mother said, bowing deeply. Wei Wuxian nodded once, and smiled at the sheer and utter relief spreading across the mother’s face.

He glanced down at the happily bouncing Mo Xuanyu, and wondered how it was possible for such an expressive boy’s adult-self to be so hard to read. After all, despite having actually ‘spoken,’ Wei Wuxian had no idea how many things Mo Xuanyu was still hiding from him. And the future Jiang Cheng had seemed like an older Jiang Cheng, but….

For a brief moment there, the adult Jiang Cheng’s expression had shifted, and Wei Wuxian had felt genuinely scared.

Toward the end of their conversation, Wei Wuxian had asked how old Mo Xuanyu was in his timeline. In response, he had gotten the answer ‘four or five,’ too young to start cultivating, but old enough to begin the theoretical training. Wei Wuxian had been impressed.

‘Wow, it’s been twenty years?’ Wei Wuxian had asked, staring at Jiang Cheng. ‘I never would have guessed! I mean, I guess you do look a little older, but still. Just physically, I would have thought you were twenty-two at most, instead of an old man!’

‘Old man?!’” Jiang Cheng had indignantly snapped while Mo Xuanyu openly laughed.

‘Oh, don’t be mad, A-Cheng. It’s a compliment! Good job, Shidi! I always knew you’d be able to form a super strong golden core-’

He cut off and flinched back. Jiang Cheng’s expression had turned darker than the blackest night.

Sighing once, Wei Wuxian smiled brightly and started his journey back to Yunmeng, quietly wondering when his life had gotten so complicated.

Back in the tavern room from the end of the last segment, Nie Huaisang continued his explanation. Reaching inside his robes, he pulled out a handkerchief and a white stone the size of a garlic head. After using the handkerchief to wipe away his sweat, he passed the stone over.

"Take a look at this," he instructed.

The real Nie Huaisang paled and jumped farther back, but the rest of the teenagers were curious enough to step closer.

Wei Wuxian frowned, '*Rather than a rock, that looks like… the bone of a human finger.*'

"I suppose he'd know better than anyone," Wen Qing muttered with a smirk.

Nie Huaisang wiped his sweat once again as he continued, "That… Young Master Jin…. He suddenly made a huge explosion, creating a hole in the wall. To break such a thick wall… he must have carried some very powerful spiritual tools with him."

"Those were supposed to keep him *safer*," Jiang Cheng growled, annoyed at the whole situation.

"Oh, sorry! That's not the point. Anyways, what I'm trying to say is that the area he blew up was the saber hall we built earliest, back when we didn't have as many countermeasures. We hadn't thought of using stone bricks on both sides of soil to prevent yang energy from going in, so the corpses in this hall could transform much more easily. When Young Master Jin made the opening, he hadn't realized that, in the process, he'd destroyed one of the skeletons inside. Before long, he was sucked into the walls to replace the corpse he'd blown up."

"Thank you, Lan-er-gongzi," Jiang Yanli whispered. "I apologize for the trouble."

In complete agreement, Jin Zixuan nodded with a speed that was only barely kept down due to his mother's watchful eyes. Lan Wangji got that feeling that, if it had been just the two of them, Jin ZIxuan would have gotten down on his knees in a full kowtow of gratitude.

Wangji gave a single nod back.

After taking a deep breath, Nie Huaisang continued, "Every so often, I go to Xinglu ridge to check things out. Today, when I arrived, I found this."

He gestured at the stone in his hand.

"Right as I picked up the stone, the dog came after me!" he continued miserably, the words causing a trace of pity to flash across Wei Wuxian's face. "This place is pretty much just our ancestral hall… I really…. Most cultivators know this is our area, so they never night hunt around here. Who knew that…."

Who knew that his luck would be so bad as to involve the Jin heir, Wei Wuxian, and Hanguang-jun!

Watching the simulated Nie Huaisang melt into a depressed puddle of goop, Nie Mingjue sighed and knelt down beside him, wishing there was some support he could offer.

(But he had died, so now Huaisang was alone.)

"Hanguang-jun, I've already said this, but you really can't tell anyone about the tomb! Or else…."

'*Or else it would be disaster,*' Wei Wuxian mentally finished. '*Given the Nie Sect's lacking situation under Nie Huaisang, if this was released to the public, Huaisang would become a sinner and a disgrace to his ancestors even after he's died. It's only natural that he'd rather be the laughingstock of all the sects instead of focusing on cultivation or daring to sharpen his saber's blade. If his cultivation reaches a certain level, he'll start becoming more irritable and, eventually, die in an anger-induced qi deviation just like his brother and ancestors did. Even after death, his saber will haunt the world. Between those two options, being seen as a worthless person is greatly preferable.*'

"Also, training isn't any fun," Nie Huaisang cheerily added on, then frowned and looked at his brother. Nie Mingjue had been the strongest Nie in decades, and had known exactly where that would lead him. Why would he push himself to that end? Was the power really worth that much to him? It wasn't like their parents were the Jiangs — unlike with Jiang Wanyin, Nie Mingjue's sense of self worth wasn't dependent on his cultivation, so why? Because he couldn't see another option? Because their ancestors had done the same? It was true that it would have taken years for Nie Mingjue to find a new path to teach (crippling the sect in the process), but still. He couldn't even try?

Wen Ruohan smirked, and the answer abruptly appeared before Nie Huaisang's eyes.

If Nie Mingjue wasn't strong enough, Wen Ruohan would have acted far sooner. Regardless of the strange emotions the Chief Cultivator was currently directing at Wei Wuxian, Nie Huaisang would never forget that Wen Ruohan was responsible for his father's death. And Nie Mingjue, who valued righteousness above all else, would think being strong enough to stop that was worth his inevitable, painful death.

Nie Huaisang sighed. It was completely unfair to Wei Wuxian, but Nie Huaisang was going to put the baby Patriarch to work the *second* he got out.

As the real Nie Huaisang thought through his emerging plans, the simulated one bowed and hurriedly left, having satisfied Wei Wuxian's and Lan Wangji's questions. On the way out, he reminded them numerous times to not tell anyone.

Jin Zixuan had to admit, he felt a little guilty about finding out this way. The Nie brothers had forced themselves to accept it, but they clearly weren't happy.

(Then again, they were far from the only ones who had something they'd rather keep hidden revealed.)

Wei Wuxian, who had been sitting in deep contemplation for some time, took a second to notice Lan Wangji walk over and kneel in front of him. Without further warning,

Hanguang-jun reached forward and began rolling up Wei Wuxian's pants.

"Wait, again?!"

"Oh, my," Lan Xichen whispered. "Wangji, I didn't realize you had it in you to be so aggressive-"

"Xiongzhang, *please*," Lan Wangji begged. "I won't — that's not-"

"We will remove the curse mark first," Lan Wangji explained, observing the revealed leg. Fuzzy black marks like a painting made of ash covered creamy white skin, standing out starkly. This effect was increased by the pair of powerful hands wrapped around the leg as Lan Wangji to inspect it closely.

"I would never do that," Lan Wangji spoke calmly, shaking his head. Not a single person believed him.

(Especially not after seeing how effective Hanguang-jun's ~~flirtatious~~ interactions with Wei Wuxian had been.)

Lan Wangji pushed the pants up further.

"I'll do it myself!" Wei Wuxian rushed to say, quickly pushing away Lan Wangji's hands.

'*It's finally over,*' Lan Wangji breathed out in relief.

'*Lan Zhan's already knelt before me so many times in these past few days; I really can't take it anymore,*' Wei Wuxian thought. He quickly finished rolling up his pants, only to see that the curse had already wound itself up the entire lower half of his leg. Frowning, he rolled his pants up more and more, revealing inch by inch of ivory skin.

Lan Wangji instantly spun around, feeling like steam was leaving his ears (and noticed, to his great relief, that his other self had done the same). They, along with most of the other watchers, were awkwardly looking away at the shameless display of skinship.

(But, to Jin Zixuan's growing horror, Jin Guangshan was not among them.)

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian asked, seeing the way Hanguang-jun had turned around. Hearing that, Lan Wangji turned back to face him again, keeping his eyes awkwardly directed to the side of Wei Wuxian, rather than at him.

An urge to tease suddenly overcame Wei Wuxian.

A foreboding shudder ran up Lan Wangji's spine.

Luckily (or unfortunately, in Nie Huaisang's opinion), before anything could be said, there was a loud slam and a shuddering from the desk. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji turned toward the source of the noise, and found a Qiankun Pouch in a pile of white shards of porcelain — the tea pot and tea cups had shattered against the ground. The

bag excitedly bounced up and down, paying no mind to the puddle of tea rapidly spreading around it.

It almost looked as though the contents were eager to come out.

And, as important as the investigation was-

"It ruined their moment!" Nie Huaisang shouted indignantly. Right then and there, he decided he didn't care what sort of unfortunate history the corpse had gone through; Nie Huaisang would never forgive it for ruining that scene.

Reaching down, Wei Wuxian felt around for the bamboo flute he'd been keeping by his waist, only to come up empty handed. He looked back, and found the desired flute in Lan Wangji's hands.

With precise movements, Lan Wangji began carving into the flute, refining its coarser edges and smoothing out the holes. A moment later, he handed it back to Wei Wuxian.

"Play it properly," he ordered.

Wei Wuxian burst out laughing.

"Thank the Heavens," Lan Qiren mumbled, certain that his ears would have started bleeding if he'd been forced to hear Wei Wuxian *intentionally* playing horribly even one more time.

When Wei Wuxian finally managed to catch his breath, he thought, '*Poor Lan Zhan. Tolerating it must have been so difficult for him these past few days!*'

With a smile still on his face, he reached forward and took the flute. The two began to play together — skill incomparable to the tragedy of their earlier attempts — and yet, only a few seconds into it, the Qiankun Pouch suddenly bulged and straightened up.

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow, "Has it gotten too used to the bad playing? I'm playing properly for once, and yet it looks like it disapproves."

"Just focus, Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng scolded.

The arm swayed left and right, gaining a sense of balance. It paused, aligning itself perpendicular to the floor. For a moment, everything was still.

Then, it pounced.

Lan Wangji snapped out of his seat like a slingshot, and watched with visible relief as the simulated Hanguang-jun launched an attack at the arm, keeping it pinned with a fiercer melody from his guqin. He looked over at his shameless older self, and wondered how it was possible to simultaneously be so proud with and horrified by the person he had grown to be.

Seeing that the arm had been subdued to the point of stillness again, Lan Wangji resumed playing a duet of Rest with Wei Wuxian. Now that the Yiling Patriarch was no

longer intentionally messing up his playing, it was easy to see why the two of them had both become known for their skill.

Smirking, Nie Huaisang scooted closer to Lan Wangji and whispered, "Say, Wangji-xiong, the real Wei-xiong knows how to play the flute, right? He's already a master of the six arts. Maybe you can do a duet together during your first date!"

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue scolded.

As Lan Wangji's ears flushed bright pink, Jin Zixuan glanced to the side. His fiance was watching the performance with interest, smiling warmly at the comment Nie Huaisang had made.

Perhaps, if the others were up to it (and, given Wei Wuxian's love of his shijie, Jin Zixuan knew he would be), Zixuan and Jiang Yanli could have their first real date at the same time as Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian did. At the ice cream parlor in Caiyi town, perhaps.

('*Deal with your father first,*' a traitorous voice in his head whispered. '*The rest can come after.*')

Finally, after nearly ten minutes of continuous playing, the arm settled down again and the pouch returned to its original size. An intrigued smile crossed Wei Wuxian's face as he hooked his flute back onto his hip.

"It hasn't acted like that for days. Do you think it was provoked by something?"

"It was something on you," Lan Wangji theorized.

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow, his eyes darting down to the leg bearing the castle's curse mark. His curiosity had already been piqued by the simulation's frequent focus on the arm investigation, but now, with this….

Whoever's body that was had quite the complicated past, didn't they?

Also understanding Lan Wangji's words, Wei Wuxian had similarly looked down at the curse mark growing across his leg. He had gotten it from Jin Ling, who had gotten it from something at the castle.

"Do you mean that another part of the body might be within the Nie Sect's Saber Hall?"

"Why do we have something so *scary?!*" Nie Huaisang whined, mentally cursing whoever had put that terrifying body in his sect's Saber Hall.

The next voice that appeared was Lan Jingyi's, as he explained, "The next morning, Hanguang-jun and Senior Wei departed for the Saber Hall again."

The world shifted and molded itself accordingly, proving the accuracy of the narration yet again. However, this time, neither Wei Wuxian nor Lan Wangji appeared to be in a rush.

“To investigate the hall as thoroughly as possible, Hanguang-jun had requested the assistance of the Nie Sect,” Lan Jingyi explained, a dreamy quality of thick admiration soaked into his every word. “Unfortunately, the possible danger meant they wanted to wait until it was brighter before doing anything. In addition, it would most likely take a bit of time for Sect Leader Nie to arrive, so the pair needed to wait for a while.”

A cheerful bounce in his step, Wei Wuxian began zig zagging back and forth from the stalls on the left to the stalls on the right. At every stop, he made a friendly (or flirtatious) comment, instantly winning the hearts of everyone he interacted with.

Wen Chao shuddered, struggling to understand how *this* could be the Yiling Patriarch.

A moment later, Wei Wuxian felt a nearby trace of resentful energy flaring up, as if its source was panicked. Curious, he looked to the left, then the right, then smirked.

A pitifully weak corpse, hiding behind a wall, flinched at the look.

The words [The Yiling Patriarch] appeared above Wei Wuxian, helpfully added in by the spirits.

The watchers, like all resentful beings, could feel the unquestioned control Wei Wuxian had over the energy in the vicinity. They understood those words all-too-well.

‘*Pitiful corpse,*’ Wen Chao thought miserably, showing sympathy for the first time in his life.

The corpse shook and shook and shook, and then, copying the corpses who were the Nie Sect’s second ‘line of defense’ stumbled away at full speed. Wei Wuxian laughed at the sight.

“Oh. Awesome, Hanguang-jun! You scared the walking corpse away with just your presence!” he praised, applauding freely. Despite the blatantly false statement, Lan Wangji enjoyed the reference to Wei Wuxian’s earlier (terrible) attempts at hiding his identity enough to not object. A cluster of sparkles appeared around him as a visual depiction of Wei Wuxian’s imagination. It made him shine like a heavenly light that could purify evil instantly, as though the spirits thought the watchers needed help to appreciate Hanguang-jun’s beauty.

Nie Huaisang had never been more offended in his life. He would show *them* what true beauty was! If he just had his paints, he’d be able to depict Hanguang-jun as far more ethereal than their measly sparkles could manage!

At that moment, however, a blinding light began to radiate from a far corner, sending the earlier corpse tumbling away.

The watchers and Wei Wuxian winced and closed their eyes.

“Woah. So dazzling!” Wei Wuxian commented, trying to peek through his tightly shut eyes. “What’s that light?”

At that moment, it faded just enough for the watchers (and Wei Wuxian) to see the source for themselves. It was a beautifully constructed portrait of Hanguang-jun, the guqin Wangji balancing evenly in his arm.

"Oh. 'Light-bearing Lord.' I get it now."

"Hanguang-jun?" Wei Wuxian read aloud, observing the script just below the poster. "Wow. You've truly been honored for all the times you've defeated demons and ghosts! It's just a picture, but it's still so dazzling."

As Madam Yu raised a reluctantly impressed eyebrow, Jiang Cheng reflexively shrank away, feeling an unspoken judgement. Seeing that, Jiang Yanli instantly moved closer, her kind eyes prepared to offer her brother comfort.

(Their family might be better now, but they were still far from perfect.)

By now, the poster of Hanguang-jun had finally stopped blinding them with its light, allowing Wei Wuxian and the watchers to actually see again. Slowly, Wei Wuxian's eyes drifted to the side, where a far more grotesque poster was pinned to the other door. He observed it for a moment, then sighed.

"Meanwhile, this one is so ferocious. How could it be on the same door as you?!"

Lan Xichen discretely sent his brother a nod, loving the way Wei Wuxian constantly valued the simulated Lan Wangji over all others.

But he had a point. This picture had bulging eyes, sharp teeth, hairy limbs, wild locks, a pig-like nose, and a depiction of the cheapest robes imaginable.

"Whose portrait is this anyways?" Wei Wuxian wondered, glancing down at the characters below. "Eh? *Yiling Laozu?!*"

"Huh?"

"But… but that one looks nothing like the one the charlatan had!" Madam Jin gasped. "The proportions are completely different, and the face — I…."

"...Both seem equally far from the actual appearance of the Yiling Patriarch," Lan Xichen offered. "I suppose the common folk really just… know nothing about Wei Wuxian."

Lan Qiren humphed, "Different people all telling fantastical, ridiculous stories? *Someone* has done a very poor job of maintaining accurate historical records."

'*That,*' Jin Guangshan thought. '*Or someone's* intentionally *manipulated the records.*'

He tilted his head, observing the speechless Patriarch closely.

Wei Wuxian was forced to take a step back, "Wha — that — I was known as an attractive and handsome man! I ranked fourth among the young masters! What is this?!"

Jiang Cheng groaned, "Don't just *say that!*"

Abruptly realizing he had just admitted his identity to any passerby who happened to be close enough to hear, he quickly amended, "Er, no, let me explain. I… I just think this isn't fair to our Patriarch!"

"Well, that settles it," Nie Mingjue muttered to Lan Xichen. "If we're ever worried about Wei Wuxian hiding somewhere, we just need to spread around ugly posters of him to make him reveal himself."

Lan Xichen grinned and nodded in agreement.

Crocodile tears poured from Wei Wuxian's wide eyes, but the simulated Lan Wangji's were glued to the Patriarch's poster.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian asked, frowning and reaching forward to wave a hand in front of Lan Wangji's face. "Hanguang-jun? Hey, what's wrong with you?"

But Lan Wangji remained enamoured by whatever redeeming qualities he saw in the painting.

"Is it because of the wicked energy?!"

"A-Xian, it'll take more than that to corrupt Hanguang-jun," Jiang Fengmian laughed.

And yet, the horrifying portrait remained reflected in Lan Wangji's unblinking eyes.

"Some time later, and the Nies were *still* not ready to help out-"

"Jin Ling, be polite," Lan Sizhui scolded.

"What? I'm right!"

Wen Chao smirked at Nie Huaisang, only to pale slightly when Nie Mingjue directed a truly heart-stopping glare his way.

Using the fastest walking speed he could get while being just short of running, Lan Wangji darted through the town. Watching him from within one of the nearby shops, Wei Wuxian frowned.

'*Lan Zhan's acting really weird,*' he thought, then smirked. '*Why don't I go see what this 'wicked energy' is up to.*'

Back at the door guards, Lan Wangji was hard at work. He stood in front of the Yiling Patriarch one, covering up the watcher's view of it as he toiled away. Spying from behind a nearby tree, Wei Wuxian quickly recognized the location.

'*Huh? Weren't we just there?*' he thought, then jerked back as realization struck him. '*Wait, is he — even though the picture's ugly, that's the place for the Yiling Patriarch!*'

“Next to you?” Lan Xichen suggested, enjoying the way his brother seemed to melt into an embarrassed puddle at the words.

‘*I have to stop him!*’ Wei Wuxian thought.

Without a second of hesitation, he jumped forward.

“Lan Zhaaaaaaaaaaan!” he shouted. “Stop-”

Right at that moment, Lan Wangji turned to face him and moved just close enough to mess up Wei Wuxian’s intended landing area. They collided.

A cloud of dust exploded into the air.

“Wei Ying?” Lan Wangji asked. On the side, Jiang Cheng gave what seemed like his millionth eye roll of the past hour.

Having bumped his head in the crash, Wei Wuxian spun around for a few times, seeing stars. As soon as he had recovered, he looked up to see what Lan Wangji had replaced his portrait with.

“...Oh.”

It was an expertly crafted painting of the Yiling Patriarch, showing every inch of the attractive face Wei Wuxian had been so proud of.

“Oh my God!” Nie Huaiasng squealed. “That’s so cute!”

“Wangji, you shouldn’t change the seals over someone else’s house without permission,” Lan Qiren mumbled, more for the sake of putting up some form of protest than anything else. In response, Lan Wangji just nodded once and bowed in apology, clearly completely unrepentant.

Finally able to stand up again, Wei Wuxian approached the painting and gasped out, “This is….”

After a few moments, Lan Wangji nodded in agreement, finishing, “An attractive man.”

Wei Wuxian’s face was *glowing* in blush.

And Lan Wangji’s was too.

“E-eh,” Wei Wuxian could barely speak. “H-hanguang-jun… good job.”

“Mn.”

“How do you do it?” Jiang Cheng shook his head disbelievingly. “No one can ever get that idiot to hesitate or blush, and yet your older self does it time and time again!”

The pink spreading across Lan Wangji's ears seemed to blanket him in an aura of warmth. Even just watching the interactions unfold had filled him with a level of emotion he hadn't experienced since his mother's death.

Was this something he'd be able to do once he was with Wei Ying?

But Hanguang-jun had been so *shameless*-

But it had worked, hadn't it?

Jin Ling sighed, "At long last, Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun were finally able to return to Xinglu Ridge."

The simulation shifted to present itself accordingly. As Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji stepped forward, Nie Huaisang (who had apparently misunderstood their message) had just finished refilling the wall up with new corpses. He gazed upon the tightly stacked bricks with a warm satisfaction.

'*My poor, poor other self*,' Nie Huaisang thought miserably.

However, as he turned around, his legs almost gave out; with a shaky smile, he said, "Hanguang-jun, and… you."

"Sect Leader Nie!" Wei Wuxian cheerfully called back, waving enthusiastically. "You're building walls?"

If Lan Xichen wasn't mistaken, his brother had just fallen in love with Wei Wuxian's smile (for what, by his count, was the twenty-third time).

Huffing slightly, Sect Leader Nie nodded and pulled out a handkerchief, wiping his forehead so many times he almost took off a layer of his own skin. His eyes began nervously drifting back and forth between the pair (unsure of who he needed to watch out for the most).

'*Wei Wuxian!*' Wen Chao thought confidently. '*Keep your eye on that one. You can't risk looking away for even a moment.*'

Then, he remembered the unbridled *fury* that formed on Lan Wangji's face when Wei Wuxian had been thrown into the Burial Mounds, and decided that maybe keeping an eye on Hanguang-jun as well wasn't a terrible idea.

"My apologies," Wei Wuxian began, his voice loaded with empathy and a dash of timidness. "I'm really sorry for the inconvenience, but you might need to rebuild the wall again in a little bit."

"Yes, ye — What?!" Nie Huaisang did a double-take. "What-"

Before he could finish his question, Bichen flashed out and broke down the newly repaired wall.

“Wangji-xioooooooooong,” Nie Huaisang whined. “Why is every version of you so mean to me?”

“People will die if the corpse isn’t dealt with.”

“Oh, yeah? And what was your excuse for when we were children?! Were people going to die then too?”

“You mean all those times he punished you for breaking the rules?” Nie Mingjue interjected. “Which you *did* do?”

“Precisely!”

Wei Wuxian immediately got to work, deconstructing the wall and removing the bricks at a speed that greatly eclipsed the rate at which Nie Huaisang’s crew had put them back together not too long ago. The handful of Nie cultivators who had joined their Sect Leader awkwardly shifted from side to side — unhappy, but not stupid enough to oppose Hanguang-jun either.

As he watched, Nie Huaisang trembled and gaped, gripping his fan tightly. Lan Wangji was trying to explain the situation to him, but the words seemed to be going in one ear and out the other. His shakes soon made it clear that he was on the verge of tears, but Nie Huaisang could do nothing but watch as all his hard work was destroyed.

Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng both awkwardly gave Nie Huaisang sympathetic looks, finding the absolute *devastation* on his virtual self’s face to be more than a little worrying.

“Are you alright?” Jiang Yanli asked him, seeing the way the real one had started trembling as well.

“I don’ wanna become sect leader,” the boy miserably replied. Nie Mingjue flinched at those words, and found any reassurance he’d been about to offer die in his throat, making him swallow heavily. Similarly, Jiang Cheng, whose greatest goal had always been to become sect leader, didn’t know what to say.

Jin Zixuan was too awkward to even try.

“What?! Nonsense! That’s utter nonsense!” Nie Huaisang suddenly declared, making the heirs flinch at the sudden change in volume. “My Saber Hall only uses complete corpses — ones with all limbs attached. It’s impossible for there to be some ‘armless male corpse.’ If you don’t believe me, I’ll help you take apart the wall and prove it! But we need to put them back as soon as possible. After all, this is the Nie Sect’s ancestral burial grounds.”

“Who wants to bet that they’ll find it?” Wen Qing asked, making Nie Mingjue give a tired half-laugh in response.

The Nie Sect disciples who had been waiting on the side then got to work, joining Wei Wuxian in deconstructing the wall. Seeing that, Wei Wuxian backed off a few steps and

watched them work.

“About an hour later,” Lan Sizhui explained.

By now, the wall Jin Ling had been buried in was mostly taken care of. Some disciples had put on face masks, while others were regularly swallowing red pills that would keep their yang energy from disturbing the corpses. In the black dirt, ashen hands and rotted limbs poked out, tangled up in the masses of greasy, grimy black hair that was littered everywhere.

Although they were too proud to turn away, Madam Yu and Madam Jin gave identical looks of disgust at the scene before them.

To the side, each and every male corpse that had been found was being cleaned up and laid side by side on the ground. Some were rotting, others were fresh; nonetheless, it was clear at a glance that each and every one of them had their arms.

As much as he wanted to feel reassured by that, Nie Mingjue knew this wouldn’t be shown unless the spirits had seen something interesting in the mess.

“Taking apart this one wall is enough, right?” Nie Huaisang asked, leaning away from Lan Wangji warily. “D-do any more need to be taken down? Probably not, right?”

‘*See Da-ge, look at how terrible at this I am,*’ Nie Huaisang thought. ‘*You can’t leave the Nie Sect to me! Y-you have to make me an uncle. And a grand-uncle! You always said I needed to follow Lan Qiren’s teachings right? So you need to live long enough to make me those things.*’

Wei Wuxian squatted down by the rows of corpses, observing them intently and thinking, ‘*Given the darkness of the curse mark on Jin Ling, it’s obvious that it has to have been from one of the corpses here.*’

At the reminder of the danger her grandson had been in, Madam Jin sent a fierce glare toward the corpses on the ground.

After thinking for a moment longer, Wei Wuxian glanced back at Lan Wangji and asked, “Should we get the Qiankun pouch?”

“Be careful, A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian muttered. If two limbs were brought close to each other, there was a chance that they would agitate each other and trigger a dangerous situation. With all the resentful energy gathered around the saber hall, the consequences could be multiplied.

‘*And where was that concern for him when Lotus Pier was burning?*’ a voice in his head asked. ‘*Where was that concern when you volunteered him to the Nie Sect? You only realized what you’d done after Lan Wangji spoke up.*’

Taking a deep breath, Jiang Fengmian tried and failed to shake away the feeling that, if he was still alive, Wei Changze would be indescribably disappointed in him.

'*It's too dangerous to use the arm,*' Wei Wuxian eventually decided. '*But what else can we do? We weren't able to find the missing arm on any of the people here. Maybe the arm doesn't belong to a man? No, that's impossible. I was able to tell at first sight that it was a man's arm. Does the owner have three arms?*'

"No, you idiot!" Jiang Cheng shouted, a bright flush crossing his face at the fact that these thoughts were being broadcasted to all the sects.

"The legs," Lan Wangji realized, cutting off Wei Wuxian, who had been about to laugh at his own thought. In a flash, the spirits brought forth a memory; no matter how much time had passed, the curse mark never went higher than the legs.

"Good work, Wangji," Lan Qiren nodded, prouder than he was technically supposed to be.

"I see," Wei Wuxian lit up. "The pants! Take off the pants!"

"Wha-"

"What are you saying in front of Hanguang-jun?!" Nie Huaisang gasped out, shocked beyond belief.

However, not showing an ounce of shame, Wei Wuxian shrugged and said, "We're all men; it's not *that* shameful. Help me take off the corpse's pants. Only the male corpses! This has nothing to do with the female ones."

"Well, this is certainly not going to help Mo Xuanyu's reputation," Madam Jin muttered, still annoyed at the scandal that constantly followed the Jin Sect.

(And still wondering whether she had followed Yu Ziyuan in being personally responsible for much of that scandal.)

"Here, let me," Wei Wuxian decided, reaching forward to take off the belt of one of the corpses. The paleness that suddenly washed over Nie Huaisang's skin made him look like one of the corpses, and he could only watch helplessly as disaster approached-

"I'll do it," Lan Wangji decided, stepping forward.

"What?!" Lan Qiren hacked.

"You'll do it?" Wei Wuxian repeated. "*You're* going to do something like that?"

The corners of Hanguang-jun's brows twitched slightly, making the usually-unreadable man appear as if he was holding himself back. He took a deep, silent breath.

"Do not move. I will do it," he repeated. Nie Huaisang nearly fainted.

A snicker broke through the silence.

"Aw, I see," the real Nie Huaisang grinned. "I understand; I get it. Corpses or not, Wei-xiong taking off another man's pants must be-"

“Nie Huaisang!” Jiang Cheng shouted, standing up. “You — that-”

Before Jiang Cheng could put together words that would properly describe his feelings, Bichen flashed forward and sliced through the clothing on the corpses’ legs.

‘*Thank the Heavens,*’ Lan Qiren thought. He hadn’t actually expected his nephew to lower himself to taking off the corpses pants with his hands, but Hanguang-jun had surprised him so many times throughout the simulation that he couldn’t be sure.

A light chuckle escaped Lan Xichen when he realized that Lan Qiren’s blatant relief was matched by Wangji’s own.

“I found it,” the simulated Lan Wangji reported, gazing down at a corpse by his feet. Everyone else allowed their eyes to fall down there as well, enabling them to see a corpse with two light, circular marks on its thighs. Upon closer inspection, it became clear that there was a faint difference in the skin tones above and below the marks.

The legs had been sewn on.

“What the-” Nie Mingjue gaped openly, unable to believe his eyes. “How… who would have even been able to sneak in here? Was it put here by one of the ancestors?”

“Maybe they were already on when you bought the corpse,” Madam Yu suggested. Nie Mingjue could only shake his head in response, looking only a little less shocked than the two Nie Huaisangs did.

Narrowing his eyes, Wen Ruohan gave the simulated Nie Huaisang a long, intense look. No matter how much the boy hated cultivation, it had become clear that he was far from unobservant. The surprised face the new Sect Leader was putting on was quite convincing, but, given how exaggerated the stories of the boy’s incompetence had become, Wen Ruohan was wary.

Did Nie Huaisang *really* not know anything?

“Who chooses the corpses the Nie Sect uses in its Saber Hall?” Wei Wuxian asked to the speechless Nie Huaisang.

His eyes glazing in shock, Huaisang replied, “Usually, the past Sect Leaders would choose and store them throughout their lifetimes. My brother passed away pretty early, so he didn’t have enough. I had to chose some for him.”

A stab of shock cut into the real Nie Huaisang at those words. His other self had just talked about his brother’s death like it was nothing. Or, rather, like it wasn’t a surprise. And why would it be? It had happened years ago. The real Nie Huaisang had just found out about it, but this one had long-since accepted that fact.

His other-self had learned about Nie Mingjue’s death, mourned, and then moved on.

Somehow.

Ignorant to the thoughts running through his younger-self's mind, the simulated Nie Huaisang concluded with his usual "I don't know anything else, sorry. There are just… too many people who could be responsible."

Not bothering to contest that point, Wei Wuxian moved to put the now-separated legs into a new Qiankun pouch, laughing, "Looks like this corpse was cut to pieces. And, not only that, the parts were scattered all over the place — one piece here, one piece there! I hope the pieces aren't too tiny. Just how much did his murderer hate him?"

As the Nie brothers, Jiang siblings, and Jin Zixuan paled at the description, Lan Wangji was forced to look away. Wei Wuxian's voice had been open and joking, genuinely amused by the situation. And yet-

'I heard, since he cultivated the dark path, his powers backfired on him and he was ripped into a fine powder by his own ghost soldiers.'

'What's there to be scared of? It's not like the Yiling Patriarch's here! His owner's already been torn to pieces.'

And even if that hadn't happened — which it surely, terrifyingly had — what about the Burial Mounds? When Wei Wuxian was thrown in, the corpses had fought to tear him apart with the viciousness of starving wolves.

And yet, Wei Wuxian had shown no reaction to his own words other than amusement. Was he really not bothered by that?

(No. No matter how strong someone was, that would be impossible.)

'*Take care of him,*' Lan Wangji reminded himself. '*Keep him happy. And safe. Don't let him face these things alone.*'

"S-say," Nie Huaisang mumbled, adamantly refusing to make eye contact with either of his companions. "That's it, right? There… aren't any more weird pieced-together corpses here that I don't know about, right? That's it? W-we can put everything back together now?"

Although he refused to look at them, the pleading in his eyes was clear for all to see.

"You can," Lan Wangji confirmed. "We now-"

He cut off and looked back right as a dozen figures dropped from the trees.

Nie Huaisang screamed and Wen Chao shrieked as one of the figures landed directly on him (unfortunately phasing through).

Upon realizing Hanguang-jun had discovered them, the men had dropped down, getting in better positions for the approaching confrontation. Each and every one of them had covered their faces with a black mist generated by talismans, disguising their identities. In their hands were cultivation swords, instantly revealing their power.

Whimpering, Nie Huaisang took a nervous step back.

"Why are they here?" Madam Yu demanded. "Who sent them?"

"Did they know Wei Wuxian would be here?"

"Well, it's not as though the sects have been doing a very good job keeping Hanguang-jun's investigation a secret," Wen Ruohan pointed out with a smirk. "Especially not when Lan-gongzi was so willing to reveal it to others."

"To the new Chief Cultivator, you mean?" Lan Xichen asked, narrowing his eyes.

"To a person we know nothing about, and have no way of knowing the reliability of."

Both Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue stood up in protest, but, knowing next to nothing about Jin Guangyao, had no response.

"Lan Zhan, go to the castle and make sure they don't tamper with any evidence," Wei Wuxian ordered. "I'll take care of them."

Without hesitation, Lan Wangji nodded with a quick, short, "Be careful."

He spun around and shot toward the door, completely trusting Wei Wuxian to watch his back. A moment later, his confidence in the Yiling Patriarch was proven reliable; ominous black smoke rose from Wei Wuxian's feet.

And screams of resentment filled the air, making some of the watchers wobble where they stood.

The unknown cultivators attacked, rushing after Lan Wangji, but were cut off as — a second after Hanguang-jun passed through the door — black spikes shot up and blocked the entrance.

As the darkness sparked and fizzled with power, Wen Chao felt his soul leave his body.

(He would never forget the way spikes identical to those ones had impaled his other self's body time and time again.)

"This flute isn't the easiest to use," a chillingly calm voice explained. "But it's more than enough to deal with *you*."

Wei Wuxian spun the flute once in his hand, giving a cheeky, fearless smile all the while.

Every time Lan Qiren had seen his student like that, he had known something awful was about to happen. It had appeared before Wei Wuxian's initial theory on resentful energy, and before Wei Wuxian tricked Wangji into reading porn. And yet now Lan Qiren couldn't help but smile at the sight of it.

"Kill him!"

The cultivators lunged forward, only to get blasted back by a *tsunami* of resentful energy.

"*Aah!*" Nie Huaisang shouted, getting thrown back as well.

Even without using his flute, Wei Wuxian had been able to deal with a dozen well-trained cultivators in a matter of moments. Unlike normal cultivation, the strength of a person's demonic cultivation apparently didn't decrease when the soul was brought into a new body.

(Which was especially important, Wen Qing thought, if she was right about what had happened to Wei Wuxian's core.)

"Woah," Nie Huaisang gasped out from his hiding place behind a tree. "Mo-gongzi, you really hid your power well-"

"Huaisang! Look out!" Nie Mingjue shouted.

But it was impossible for watchers to affect the simulation, so it was impossible for the simulated Huaisang to hear Nie Mingjue's warning. He was ignorant to the trio of swords that had been fired his way. When he did turn around, it was a second too late.

He leapt away, but tripped on a rock right as the swords began their decent and then-

A bright, sky-blue light slammed into the blades, knocking them off track. Seeing that, Wei Wuxian relaxed from the offensive position he had just been in, allowing the resentful energy he had gathered by Huaisang to ease.

"Xichen," Nie Mingjue gasped out, relief flooding his body.

(This was the furthest future they had seen yet. They no longer had any guarantee that the people involved would survive.)

"Er-ge. San-ge," Nie Huaisang gasped out in surprise.

"Huaisang, what happened?" the Jin asked.

"Jin Guangyao?" Jin Zixuan realized, not having expected the man to appear again so soon. It made sense, he supposed. They were Nie Huaisang's sworn brothers, and it had been over a day since Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had arrived, but it was still shocking.

"Well, this time… I really don't know anything!" Nie Huaisang cried out as Jin Guangyao stepped forward — through Jin Zixuan — to reach his sworn brother's brother. He reached down to help Nie Huaisang stand up.

Nie Mingjue relaxed slightly.

As he straightened again, Jin Guangyao laid eyes on Wei Wuxian. They widened in a mix of surprise and confusion, the recognition clear upon first glance.

'Right, Mo Xuanyu is our half brother too,' Jin Zixuan thought. '*And I… and he… Mo Xuanyu was invited into the Jin Sect. He was allowed to be part of it, even when Jin Guangyao was sect leather… at least until Mo Xuanyu started harassing people. The courtesy Jin Guangyao showed Mo Xuanyu… would I have been able to offer the same?*'

There was a clang of swords in the distance, and Wei Wuxian snapped to attention at once.

"Lan Zhan," he whispered, before turning away from the Sect Leaders and running in the direction of the noise. A few of the remaining assassins picked themselves off the ground and prepared for combat, but a simple mid-run hand motion from Wei Wuxian was all it took to knock them to the ground once more.

Jin Guangyao narrowed his eyes at the scene.

'*Clever enough to identify a threat, at the very least,*' Jin Guangshan thought. '*He killed Wen Ruohan, didn't he? The other Clans might expect me to take the boy in just for that once this is all over. My word, how annoying.*'

The watchers were pulled along with Wei Wuxian as he ran toward the sounds of fighting, darting beside and over tree branches through the dense forest. In the distance, flashes of white and blue signified the ongoing battle.

Even with just a mere glance, Wei Wuxian was able to analyze the fight: '*This guy isn't as good as Lan Zhan is, but he… seems familiar with the swordplay of the Lan Clan.*'

And indeed, the unknown sword dancing through the air with Wangji's Bichen remained unsurprised by Lan Wangji's techniques, even as it continued to be pushed back. However, a moment later, Hanguang-jun abandoned the aerial battle of their swords and flashed forward, delivering a powerful strike to his opponent's chest that sent the other flying.

"Nice!" Jin Zixuan praised.

"Go Wangji-xiong!"

Wen Qing nodded in agreement.

Panting heavily, the unknown assailant covered his side, his disguised sword broken on the ground. Hoping to cut off their escape route, Wei Wuxian circled around behind them so that he and Lan Wangji kept the assassins directly between them.

"Get in formation," one of the men ordered. The group levitated their blades in the air, preparing to strike at Lan Wangji. In return, Hanguang-jun exchanged his sword for his guqin, and used a single powerful note to blast them back.

~♩🎵~

Knocked onto the ground yet again, an extremely grumpy Nie Huaisang could only mutter, "Nothing about those two makes any sense. First they defeat the Xuanwu at seventeen, and

now… how is this a fair fight?!"

"We *want* them to win," Jiang Cheng pointed out.

"Still! You agree with me!"

Jiang Cheng did, but he certainly wasn't going to admit that.

However, as the leader forced himself to get off the ground, Wei Wuxian noticed something that forced him to do a double take. All along the man's chest, bloated splotches and bumps had appeared.

In an instant, Wen Qing was by the man's side, examining him as a scientist would a lab rat.

Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes, "Traces of… the Hundred Holes Curse?"

"Pardon?" Jiang Yanli asked, unfamiliar with lesser-known cultivation terminology.

"It's a curse whose end result is death," Wen Qing explained, analyzing closely. "Though this… rather than the effect, I think it might be the backlash? I'm not sure why that would resonate so strongly with Wei Wuxian, though."

Several people turned to each other and made questioning eye contact, but no one had an answer to give.

A howl of wind broke the watchers out of their thoughts a moment later, as their attention was instead drawn to an approaching mass of darkness.

Someone had released a cursed spirit.

As powerful as it was, it was nothing compared to Hanguang-jun. However, a moment after the guqin, 'Wangji,' banished the curse from sight, the leader of the assailants got to his feet and fled. Wei Wuxian turned to follow-

"Ah!" he gasped out, collapsing to his knees.

"Wei Ying!"

"Wei Wuxian!"

Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng were the first to appear by Wei Wuxian's side, but a congregation of other watchers followed shortly after, concern apparent on all of their faces.

Wen Ruohan wanted to sigh at the futility of it all — especially given the fact that they *knew* there was nothing they could do — and looked down at his own foot in annoyance.

(He had known there was no point to any of it, so why had he stepped forward as if to catch the boy when Wei Wuxian fell down?)

The two Qiankun bags resting in his sleeve glowed brightly, proving that they were the cause of the curse acting up again after so much time.

In the chaos of the situation, the surviving perpetrators raised their blades to their unconscious comrades and themselves, fearlessly committing suicide and taking their secrets to their graves.

Nie Mingjue cursed.

Hanguang-jun had moved to Wei Wuxian's side and knelt down next to where his real counterpart was. The two Lan Wangji's sent Wei Wuxian equally concerned looks, which he easily waved off with a smile. The three sect leaders moved around, confirming once and for all that their attackers truly were dead.

Unfortunately, not a single one stirred.

Several minutes later, Wei Wuxian had managed to stand up again, having passed the Qiankun pouches over to Lan Wangji. Clouds had spread across the sky, making it darker than before. In this dimness, Sect Leader Lan approached Wei Wuxian, a warm smile on his face.

"Mo-gongzi, please, take this pill. It won't remove the curse mark, but it should help dampen some of the effects," he offered, having seen the mark when Lan Wangji rolled up Wei Wuxian's pants for inspection.

"Thank you, Sect Leader Lan," Wei Wuxian said, bowing respectfully.

Meanwhile, standing by the newly-repaired Saber Hall, Nie Huaisang sighed deeply. The stress of the day had clearly gotten to him, and his exhaustion was clear for all to see.

Seeing the tension in his brother's body, Nie Mingjue felt another brief cut of guilt slice through him.

However, even without a simulated Nie Mingjue around, Nie Huaisang still had help:

"Don't worry, Huaisang," Jin Guangyao said, placing a hand on Sect Leader Nie's shoulder. "Er-ge and I will help you take care of this. That's why we came over in the first place; we heard that Hanguang-jun was taking care of something that had called your attention."

"Ah, thank you, San-ge."

"How did he know that?" Lan Qiren asked, frowning deeply.

"Hm. The watchtowers, perhaps?" Wen Ruohan suggested, wondering as to their applications. "Or perhaps the sects are simply close enough to have knowledge of each other."

"Hm," Jiang Fengmian acknowledged. "Regardless, the help is clearly appreciated."

‘*Thanks… A-Yao,*’ Nie Mingjue thought, smiling as he watched.

“Wangji, what do you plan to do?” Lan Xichen asked.

“To find the arm’s owner, and determine who split his soul and body,” Lan Wangji answered succinctly.

“I see,” Lan Xichen nodded once. “These men were well trained and vicious. They may be trouble if we fail to determine who they are.”

“Hanguang-jun,” Jin Guangyao stepped forward. “The mastermind behind them may be powerful. Please, allow me to send some men to help you.”

“And interrupt Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong’s date?!” Nie Huaisang screeched, looking faint at the thought.

“Thank you, Clan Leader Jin,” Lan Wangji nodded. “But I don’t need them for now.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, and he spun to face Lan Wangji, surprised by the rejection.

“If we face any trouble, I will seek help from a watchtower,” Lan Wangji continued.

At that, the pro-WangXian community did internal or external dances of joy (depending on how much dignity they were trying to preserve).

“Alright,” Jin Guangyao allowed, before turning to face Wei Wuxian. “Xuanyu. I hear you’re practicing demonic cultivation. It may not be accepted by the masses, but, so long as you have a good heart, I have no objections.”

Jiang Yanli beamed at the man (her to-be brother-in-law), and Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue both felt themselves giving him several additional points for that statement. It had taken the watchers discovering what had caused Wei Wuxian to invent it for them to accept it. Although Jin Guangyao had lived in a society where demonic cultivation was much more common, they couldn’t help but respect his words.

(On the other hand, Nie Huaisang couldn’t quite shake the feeling that Jin Guangyao was expecting ‘Mo Xuanyu’ to understand a hidden meaning in the statement that was different from the words actually being spoken. He had no proof, but Meng Yao seemed to find Mo Xuanyu’s reactions to be interesting. Perhaps it garnered further investigation.)

(After all, one doesn’t simply *stumble upon* a demonic ritual capable of resurrecting the Yiling Patriarch.)

“Follow Hanguang-jun and learn from him, alright, Xuanyu?” Jin Guangyao finished.

‘*It sounds like he and Mo Xuanyu knew each other,*’ Wei Wuxian observed. ‘*Less talk means fewer mistakes.*’

'*And less second-hand embarrassment for us,*' Jiang Cheng thought.

“Yes,” Wei Wuxian responded, bowing once.

“No time to waste,” Hanguang-jun added. “We should get going.”

Without even a moment of hesitation, Wei Wuxian followed after Lan Wangji, and the two of them vanished into the nearby fog. Nie Huaisang saw them off with a “see you,” despite looking for all the world like he would greatly prefer never running into them again.

Meanwhile, Jin Guangyao narrowed his eyes just slightly as he observed their retreating forms.

‘*Maybe he’s nearsighted?*’ Jin Zixuan wondered. ‘*That’s pretty rare among cultivators, but he started late, so I guess it’s not too much of a surprise.*’

The pair walked off, and Ouyang Zizhen’s narration began: “As Senior Wei and Hanguang-jun had expected, the pair of legs were the same skin tone as the arm. If they were put close together, they would react violently, vibrating without rest as though they wanted to join together. Unfortunately, due to missing the torso of the body, the bond holding them together was weak — nowhere near as strong as the bond holding Senior Wei and Hanguang-jun together across death-”

“Wait, what?”

“-And thus, the parts remained separate, unable to attach to each other. Senior Wei and Hanguang-jun had too little information about the corpse; they needed more pieces. As a result, the pair followed the arm to the southwest, not knowing what awaited them.”

Pursing his lips together, Lan Xichen thought over the way Ouyang Zizhen had described Wei Wuxian’s relationship with Wangji. There had been hints of this before, but this was the most obvious case so far; for some reason, the two of them were considered a pair, even to the juniors who didn’t know everything the watchers did.

“If that’s the case…” Lan Xichen brightened, making eye contact with his second-in-command, Madam Jin. “Perhaps, in this foretold future, everything works out between those two.”

“Agreed,” Madam Jin said at once. “It will be quite nice to see how that progresses.”

“*A-Niang!*” an embarrassed Jin Zixuan squeaked.

“Shush. After watching the catastrophe you made of your relationship with Jiang-guniang, I deserve to be able to watch something as sweet as this!”

As Lan Xichen, Nie Huaisang, and Jiang Yanli laughed at those words, Lan Wangji (unnoticeably) began to shrink in on himself. It would be wonderful if that was the case. No matter how shameless Hanguang-jun apparently was, Wangji could now trust him to make Wei Wuxian happy. However-

‘*I haven’t met him yet,*’ he recalled, his fists clenching at the thought. ‘*What if, by watching this, I change my actions and mess everything up. What if this isn’t a future I’ll be able to have?*’

There were many unknowns, but one thing was certain:

‘*If that’s what it takes to keep Wei Ying alive, then I’ll gladly watch this to the end.*’

As they went, the pair travelled through town at a leisurely pace, once again acting like they had all the time in the world. They were still making significant progress, but the overall atmosphere was less like a nighthunt, and more like a *date*.

If Lan Wangji wasn’t mistaken, his brother and Nie Huaisang were both pursing their lips together in an effort to avoid squealing at the perceived adorableness of the scene. He supposed he appreciated their attempt, at the very least.

“Have you heard about what happened at Xinglu Ridge?” a man at a tea shop asked his companion.

“Yeah. They say the Lanling Jin Sect and Gusu Lan Sect leaders were spotted heading toward that hill. Do you think ‘the Headshaker’ is asking for help again?”

“Thank you, Er-ge!” Nie Huaisang cried, his eyes watering from how touched he was. Nie Mingjue huffed, but, seeing as how Lan Xichen had happily accepted the thanks, he didn’t bother pointing out that he and Lan Xichen weren’t sworn brothers (yet).

‘*Thank you, A-Yao,*’ he mentally added.

“So many important people are gathering together. What do you think it was for?”

Wei Wuxian pursed his lips at that, and the memory of the person with the hundred-holes curse appeared in his mind again.

Wen Qing frowned again, wondering what about that was so memorable to Wei Wuxian.

“Honestly, so many important people. What, is the Yiling Patriarch back?”

Hearing that, Wei Wuxian halted in his thoughts to give a bitter laugh, wondering “How does that have anything to do with me?”

‘*Even jokingly, he keeps getting brought up and blamed for things no matter how many years pass,*’ Wen Ruohan observed. ‘*Isolated by the cultivation world as someone both respected and feared, the former for his inventions, and the latter for everything else.*’

Out of everyone here, he was probably the one who understood that the best. He wasn’t blind to the way his own lofty ancestry had contributed to his success — leading his image to be one more on the respect side than the fear side until he started attacking the Great Sects — but the similarities were still there. Come to think of it, the Jiangs had never officially adopted Wei Wuxian, had they? Wen Ruohan didn’t want to risk alienating the boy by dragging him away from those he perceived as family, but….

Something to think about, nonetheless.

"Nonsense!" the first man's companion responded. "He died being consumed by his own cursed army. There's no way he can come back from that."

Hearing that, Lan Wangji's eyes silently drifted toward Wei Wuxian, watching his reaction.

(Or worrying lack thereof.)

"Wei Ying."

Snapping out of his thoughts at the mention of his name, Wei Wuxian turned to Hanguang-jun, tilting his head in curiosity. To any outsider, it would truly seem like being reminded of his death didn't affect him at all.

"There's one thing I still don't understand," Lan Wangji began.

"Oh? Something you don't know?" Wei Wuxian asked, leaning closer with an adorable playfulness and light curiosity. "Tell me. I want to hear!"

However, a moment later, Lan Wangji elaborated, "Everyone says that you were consumed by your ghost army."

The watchers flinched back.

And Wei Wuxian faltered, his gaze losing some of its seemingly endless cheer.

Lan Wangji stepped closer, sincerely wishing he could silence his older self.

"Is that what happened?" Hanguang-jun asked.

A gust of wind brushed through the now desolate street, making a windchime ring piercingly through the silence. The cloudy sky that had been so crisp and fresh a short while ago now appeared oppressive and heavy. Pinwheels in a nearby stall spun around and around and around, continuing on endlessly.

There was a bitter half-laugh, and Wei Wuxian allowed the stunned expression on his face to melt into a calmness carrying the slightest trace of grim humor.

"I died," he said. "It doesn't matter… how it happened."

'*Doesn't matter?*' Wen Ruohan repeated, his own death — a *betrayal* — flashing before his eyes. '*How could he say that? He remembers feeling every moment of it, and yet….*'

For once, the expression on Hanguang-jun's face was clear as day to everyone present.

"Wei Ying-"

"Oh, a rattle drum!" Wei Wuxian excitedly realized, running forward to the stall.

“Wha-”

“Wait, Wei Wuxian!” Wen Qing stood up. “You can’t just-”

But, unable to hear her, Wei Wuxian just began happily playing with the drum, turning it from side to side so that the beads would hit against the body.

“I don’t know why, but I’ve always loved this thing!” Wei Wuxian revealed, completely captivated by the object in his hands.

“What does it take to make him talk about these sorts of things?” Wen Qing asked, staring straight at Jiang Yanli. “I don’t want to force him to remember if he doesn’t need to, but if there’s a way we can help...”

‘*Why are you asking A-Li? It’s not like she’s his mother!*’ Madam Yu thought, just barely self aware enough to realize how petty that complaint was and stop herself from saying it aloud.

(After all, no one would ever make the mistake of considering *her* Wei Wuxian’s mother. For years, she had reveled in that. Now, she wasn’t so sure.)

“Ah, well,” a sad expression overcame Jiang Yanli’s face as her eyes turned to Wei Wuxian. “I’m afraid I don’t know an answer to that. He occasionally approaches me with topics he’d like a second opinion on, but, otherwise, he’s always been able to move on by himself. He’s never needed anyone else for that.”

‘*He’s strong,*’ Lan Wangji acknowledged. ‘*Still… I’d like to help him.*’

However, with the situation as it was, Hanguang-jun was forced to concede. A small exhale conveyed both his frustration and lack of surprise with Wei Wuxian’s answer, before his face returned to his usual unreadable blankness. Less than a second later, Wei Wuxian turned around with a laugh.

“Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan! Please buy me one!” Wei Wuxian requested, holding out the rattle drum.

“...Anything,” Lan Wangji agreed instantly. “Always.”

“Okay,” Hanguang-jun accepted, his lips tilting up into a small smile.

Watching that, Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but remember the way Wei Wuxian had always used Yunmeng Jiang’s money whenever he wanted something from Yunmeng. And, just like that, a thought sparked within him.

The Jiangs were being replaced.

By *Lan Wangji.*

Unconsciously, he felt his hands clench into fists at the thought.

Hanguang-jun stepped forward to approach the waiting Wei Wuxian. However, a moment later, the sky filled itself with an infinity of white — snow falling from the sky. In the unfamiliar streets around them, the watchers could hear a rattle drum being played with.

On a pile of snow in the back of an alley, two makeshift straw dolls were carefully set down.

"A-Die. A-Niang," a child's voice whispered.

Lan Wangji instantly stood.

"Wangji?" Lan Xichen asked, standing up as well and looking around for threats.

"No," Lan Wangji shook his head. "It's just… I — we-"

"And… A-Ying!" the child concluded.

When he appeared, he was instantly recognizable.

"Wei Wuxian?" Jiang Cheng asked, staring in disbelief at the dirty, ragged child sitting happily before them.

Despite his situation, the smile on his face was blinding.

'*Equally happy, regardless of whether he's in rags or riches,*' Jin Guangshan shook his head in disbelief.

However, a moment later, that smile seemed to fade. Not because of the frigid snow falling over his barely-covered body, but because of his barely-there memories of the family he'd once had.

Throughout the simulation, all the heirs had lost people. The Twin Jades had lost their father. Jin Zixuan, his father and himself. Jiang Cheng had lost his entire sect. Nie Huaisang, his brother. Not even Wen Chao had been unaffected, losing his brother, then concubine, then sect, then father.

They were all hoping to change their families' fates.

(But it was too late to change Wei Wuxian's.)

Then, the sounds of the rattle drum picked up, and little A-Ying glanced up in surprise. Noticing him, the child playing with the drum paused and glanced over.

It was a child Lan Wangji, in Yiling for a day.

"What?" Lan Qiren gasped out, turning to stare at his nephew. "You've already… how-"

The pair looked at each other in surprise for a few seconds, as if aware of how much they'd later change each other's fates. Then, a moment later, Wei Wuxian gave another

blinding smile. Without hesitating, Lan Wangji — still Lan *Zhan*, back then — walked forward so that he stood directly before Wei Wuxian. He held out the drum.

Wei Wuxian stared in surprise for a moment. Then, with that same warm smile on his face, he reached out and took it.

The scene faded away, returning them to the future.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then, Nie Huaisang gave the longest, most heartfelt cooing noise any of them had ever heard.

"Huaisang?"

"It's fate, Da-ge!" the boy responded. "Heavens, it's… it's like they're *destined* to be together!"

"They're not!" Jiang Cheng snapped, annoyance rising up in him at both Nie Huaisang and the way the now visibly-blushing Lan Wangji wasn't bothering to deny it.

"Hey, I'm just saying-"

"Hanguang-jun and Senior Wei continued their travels," Ouyang Zizhen interrupted. "Eventually, they arrived in Yueyang."

As much as Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang wanted to continue, the glares their mother and brother were sending their way reminded them of how important it would be to continue paying attention to the simulation.

They begrudgingly remained quiet.

Inside the city, the aforementioned pair walked side by side through a bustling crowd. Without any forewarning, Lan Wangji suddenly spoke:

"How is your curse mark now?" he asked.

With a small smile, Wei Wuxian sighed, "Jin Ling was buried too close to our dear friend-"

"Our what?"

"- and got stained with quite a bit of resentful energy. It faded a bit thanks to your brother's medicine, but it's not completely gone. The chances are we'll only be able to remove it after we find the whole corpse — or at least the head."

"What an annoying corpse this is," Nie Mingjue grumbled somewhat disbelievingly.

Although he agreed with most of what had been said, Lan Wangji couldn't help asking, "...Dear friend?"

“Yeah. We’ve only found the legs and an arm, so we can’t tell who our dear friend is at all. I figured we should give him an alternate name for now. Or do you have something else you’d like to call him?”

“No need," Hanguang-jun shook his head. Unlike Lan Qiren’s earlier disbelief, Lan Wangji’s steady silence could be interpreted as a silent approval, even if he’d never say the phrase himself.

After how long Lan Wangji had waited for Wei Wuxian to return, could that really be a surprise? He loved every bit of Wei Wuxian, and would take everything he could get.

(For the first time, the real Lan Wangji felt like he was finally starting to understand his older self.)

“How much is ‘a bit?’” Hanguang-jun finally asked.

Given what they had seen so far, Wen Qing was fairly certain that “a bit” faded was “not at all” in Wei Wuxian-speak.

As if to prove her point, Wei Wuxian responded, “A bit is a bit. How do you want me to explain it? What, should I take off my clothes and show you?”

Lan Wangji’s brows shifted as if he had suddenly become worried that Wei Wuxian was going to strip on the spot.

“Take them off after we return,” he finally replied, voice as even as ever. In response, Wei Wuxian laughed and whirled around to face his companion, a soft smile on his face.

Glancing to his side, Lan Xichen was able to witness a sight that had become almost impossibly rare in the past few years: a jealous Lan Wangji. The gaze Wangji was directing at Hanguang-jun spoke of uncertainty — no, a feeling of *inadequacy* — that Lan Xichen wasn’t sure the second jade had ever experienced before.

He moved closer to his brother, providing what little support he could.

However, a moment later, Wei Wuxian’s smile shifted into thoughtfulness: “Hanguang-jun, do you think the people who set our dear friend’s hand on Mo Village are the same as the people who sewed his leg onto that other corpse?”

As Lan Wangji thought over the question, Wei Wuxian’s thoughts drifted in another direction.

‘*All this time, I’ve been referring to him as ‘Lan Zhan’ in my mind, even when I was pretending to be Mo Xuanyu. But, after these last few days… calling him that title in such an exaggerated way is pretty funny, isn’t it? I quite like it!*’

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli laughed, delighted by her brother’s happiness. She couldn’t say she didn’t understand, however. Her recent attempts at referring to Jin Zixuan as “A-Xuan” had sent warm flutters through her stomach every time she did it.

Then, Lan Wangji looked up, having come to a decision:

“There are two groups.”

“I agree.”

“Oh?” Jin Guangshan asked, frowning in confusion along with most of the watchers.

“Going all the way to sewing the legs onto another corpse before hiding it in a wall means they didn’t want it to be discovered,” Wei Wuxian elaborated. “In that case, it wouldn’t make sense for them to toss out the hand and use it to attack Gusu Lan’s cultivators since that’ll inevitably lead to an investigation. One went to great lengths to hide everything, while the other attacked rashly, almost as if they want to be discovered. They’re probably not the same group.”

“Mn.”

“Those two are absolutely insane,” Jin Zixuan muttered.

“Maybe. But I have to admit, watching these two investigate is quite the experience,” Nie Mingjue confessed, to the great delight of Nie Huaisang (who had long since decided that this Wei Wuxian-Lan Wangji investigation deserved to be made into a book so that they could enjoy it again later).

Turning back around to face the direction he was going again, Wei Wuxian continued, “The people who hid the legs knew about the Qinghe Nie Sect’s Saber Halls, while the people who let the hand loose knew about GusuLan’s plans. I doubt either of them have simple motives; there are more and more secrets….”

“One step at a time,” Lan Wangji advised.

“How did you recognize me?”

“Think for yourself.”

“Nice try, Wei-xiong!”

Not discouraged at all by his failure to extract the answer from Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian simply switched topic: “You know, I’ve never been to Yueyang. Back then I’d always had other people to investigate for me. I think I’ll take a break this time while you go ask around. Would you mind, Hanguang-jun?”

Shaking his head once, Lan Wangji turned around and started walking away.

“Wait, Hanguang-jun, where are you going?”

Lan Wangji glanced back, “To this area’s cultivation sect.”

‘*...Obviously,*’ many of the watchers thought, unsure what the reason for Wei Wuxian’s confusion was.

Without hesitation, Wei Wuxian tugged at Bichen's tassel and pulled Lan Wangji in the opposite direction, asking "Why would you go looking for them? This is their area; even if they know, they won't tell you. They either couldn't deal with it and hid it so as to not damage their reputations, or tried as hard as they could, not wanting outsiders to meddle."

"Wha — a cultivation sect wouldn't do that!" Madam Yu protested. Shocked by the accusation, Lan Qiren, Madam Jin, Nie Mingjue, and Jiang Fengmian all nodded in agreement.

After all, the Wens were the exception. And demonic cultivation was so unusual that their own less-than-stellar reactions to it were more than understandable, especially given how Jiang Yanli had apparently died. It made no sense for such incompetence to be Wei Wuxian's *expectation.*

And yet Lan Wangji continued to allow himself to be pulled along as Wei Wuxian continued, "My honorable Hanguang-jun, it isn't that I'm trying to shame you, but you really can't do anything out here without me, can you? If you ask like that, I'd be *very* surprised if you actually managed to get results."

The rattle drum Lan Wangji had bought him bounced against his hip from where it had been tucked into his belt.

At that moment, both the simulated and real Lan Wangjis' faces turned unbearably tender to Lan Xichen's trained eyes.

(And just like that, Lan Xichen promised himself that no matter what the Yiling Patriarch did before his death, he would support Wei Wuxian's relationship with his brother at all costs.)

"Mn," Hanguang-jun agreed, the barest hints of a smile on his face.

Wei Wuxian laughed, "What did you 'Mn' for? That's not how you were supposed to respond!"

Despite the words, Wei Wuxian's expression was as bright as the sun.

***'It's like 'Mn' is the only thing he knows how to say. He's still so stuffy*,' Wei Wuxian thought. Despite his words, the radiant grin on his face made it clear to all that this was an observation based on affection, rather than annoyance.**

'*You would be happy, Changze,*' Jiang Fengmian thought. '*Your son and Second Young Master Lan are just as in love as you and Cangse were.*'

How long had it been since Jiang Fengmian himself felt something like that?

"How should I ask, then?"

"Go over there, of course," Wei Wuxian revealed, pointing to the side. When the watchers followed his gaze, they were able to see a street painted red with bright

banners fade into view. Every single shop had opened its doors widely, with round, black jars scattered about.

"Alcohol? *Now?*" Madam Yu demanded.

With a laugh, Wei Wuxian explained, "The waiters here are usually young and hardworking. With so many customers a day and so many mouths to spread gossip, nothing strange that happens around here will escape their ears."

"Really?" Jin Zixuan asked, having never done an investigation himself. Nie Huaisang and Jiang Yanli, who had rarely (if ever) so much as gone on a nighthunt, shared his surprise.

Wen Ruohan, on the other hand, nodded in approval, pleased at Wei Wuxian's continued competence (and wondering how he could have possibly messed up so much with his own son).

"Make sense?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Mn," Lan Wangji answered, although his expression very clearly indicated a judgement of 'you just wanted to have a drink, didn't you?' Not paying any mind to Lan Wangji's silent accusation, Wei Wuxian continued to pull him to the waiters.

Almost immediately, five or six men from different shops pounced on them, excitedly offering "Would you like a taste? The He family liquor is well-known all around this area!"

"You master, have a taste of this. You don't have to pay. But, if you enjoy the liquor, then come to our shop!"

"This one doesn't smell strong, but wait until you drink it up!"

"If you can still stand after you finish this, I'll adopt your surname!" the last one concluded.

"Really? Alright then!" Wei Wuxian laughed, taking the bowl and emptying it with a grin. "Adopt my surname?"

Lan Qiren sighed, but was far too accustomed to his behavior by now to be scandalized.

Surprisingly, the waiter wasn't even remotely intimidated, sticking his chin up and explaining, "I meant I'd do it if you drank up a whole jar!"

"Is that so?" Wei Wuxian hummed in thought. "Then give me… three jars!"

"He's still going to actually *investigate*, right?" Nie Mingjue asked, far too used to Nie Huaisang's excuses to trust Wei Wuxian's questionable strategy.

"Wangji wouldn't let him waste too much time," Lan Qiren assured him, but, going by the look Lan Xichen sent Nie Mingjue, the first jade wasn't completely convinced on that.

As the delighted waiter rushed back inside his shop, Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji and explained, "We're doing business here, aren't we? First we help their business, then we can ask them about other things. After we pay, it'll be easy to get them talking."

Nodding once, Lan Wangji took out his pouch of money.

Jiang Cheng, on the other hand, was still far from convinced.

The pair walked into the shop. As soon as the other waiters saw the way Lan Wangji was dressed, they straightened up and rushed to thoroughly wipe down one of the tables, unwilling to risk offending the young master before them.

The first waiter they had talked to quickly returned, expertly balancing three jars in his arms despite how quickly he was walking. He set them down next to Wei Wuxian and gratefully accepted the money Lan Wangji offered.

"Thank you, Young Masters!"

"Of course!" Wei Wuxian took a big gulp, then, before the waiter could leave, added, "Say, friend."

"Hm?"

"I wanted to ask, have you seen anything strange around here?"

"What do you mean by strange?"

With a deceptively careless shrug, Wei Wuxian elaborated, "You know: haunted houses, deserted cemeteries, cut apart corpses, and so on."

"Why do you sound so excited about that?!" Nie Huaisang shuddered.

Huffing fondly, Wen Qing muttered, "Well, if anyone is going to be comfortable talking about corpses…"

'*It would be the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation,*' everyone concluded.

The waiter's eyes darted back and forth between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, assessing them deeply as he asked, "...What do you two do for a living?"

"Haven't you guessed already?"

"Of course, it's obvious. You two must be cultivators, who fly through the clouds and Heavens."

It was always amusing to hear common people's interpretations of cultivators. Jin Guangshan especially liked it when he got to hear such descriptions from his favored *conquests.*

"Especially the one next to you," the waiter added, allowing his eyes to drift toward the still silent Hanguang-jun. "Among common people, I've never seen such a… such a-"

“Such a pretty person,” Wei Wuxian concluded with a nod.

A bright flush formed on Lan Wangji’s ears. He had heard similar sentiments all his life (and even then, Wei Wuxian had said it like it was a fact, rather than a compliment), but-

“That’s so sweet,” Lan Xichen cooed, watching emotions only he could see flash across Hanguang-jun’s face. Not even Jin Guangshan could disagree.

‘*Those two truly are the perfect pair,*’ he thought, his eyes going back and forth between them.

(A shiver ran up Jin Zixuan’s spine.)

Quickly getting over his shock, the waiter laughed, “If you say it like that, the young master will be displeased.”

“It’s fine; he doesn’t mind,” Wei Wuxian assured him.

Seeing that Hanguang-jun had indeed not commented on the description, the waiter cleared his throat and continued, “Ah, what were we talking about just now? It was… strange things, wasn’t it? Such things have happened around here, not now, but ten years ago. If you walk in that direction, about two miles beyond the city you’ll find quite a lovely residence. I don’t know if their signboard is still there or not, but that place is the Chang Clan’s residence.”

“The Chang Clan’s…” Lan Wangji repeated, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“Chang Clan?” Nie Huaisang asked. “Oh, like Chang Ling!”

“Who’s that?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“The Chang Clan is a clan of cultivators. Ah, Chang Ling and I both dislike night hunts, so when Da-ge makes me go and Chang Ling’s parents make him go… we often stick together.”

After thinking it over for a moment, Nie Mingjue frowned and asked, “Wait, is this the kid who kept sneaking you chestnuts that time you ended up getting crumbs all over your robes?!”

“That’s the one!”

“What’s wrong with the residence?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Well, this…” the waiter frowned. “I mean, I’ve just heard about it, but…”

With those words, the world shifted into another spirit’s memory. It was the dead of night under a moonless sky. Wind rustled by, but not even animals made any sounds.

There was a *crack* as someone slammed against a door.

Lan Qiren startled, “What-”

An agonized wail cut through the silence, and a pressure that the watchers had begun to know as resentful energy slammed into them like a tidal wave. It was preferable to the tsunami during the Burial Mounds and Wei Wuxian's revenge, but it was nonetheless potent enough to leave them breathless.

"Why are all these powerful resentful beings appearing one after another?!" Lan Qiren complained.

Struggling slightly to breathe, Lan Xichen responded (shouting so as to be heard over the screams), "Uncle, it's been years between all these events we're seeing. The simulation just skips forward in time-"

"It's still ridiculous!" Wen Qing complained, annoyed at the danger Wei Wuxian was constantly thrown in to.

An especially loud *bang* silenced the watchers, returning their attention to the vision before them.

"Wh-what's going on?!" a voice shouted. It was one of the villagers, who had been drawn out by the loud noise. "What is-"

BANG

"Did you hear that?"

"There's screaming inside!"

"What happened?"

An elderly woman hobbled to the center of the crowd, watching the door shake in the dark night.

"Why are they banging on the door?" she asked. "They can't open it from the inside?"

"They're screaming so horribly… what's happening in there?!"

'*They?'* Nie Huaisang mentally repeated. '*No… Chang Ling?!*'

A young man stepped closer to the wall and suggested, "How about we… go over the wall to see?"

"This is the Chang Clan's official residence," the old woman countered. "Their leader can fly through the sky. It's an entire clan of immortals. In the affairs of immortals… how could we possibly help?"

"But you…" Nie Huaisang trailed off, staring at the wall in horror. "No, you have to-"

Another scream made the villagers flinch back.

“They’re powerless,” Madam Yu briskly pointed out. “They can’t do anything against something like this! Keeping their heads down is the only option they have!”

(But wasn’t that exactly the mindset Wei Wuxian had proven time and time again to be wrong?)

“Then… we shouldn’t get involved in their business. It’s just… far too scary.”

“Yes, let’s leave.”

“Don’t mind it anymore. Let’s hurry and go.”

“Let’s go, let’s go!”

‘*We can’t all be Wei Wuxian,*’ she refuted. ‘*Holding everyone to that kind of standard would be ridiculous. Besides, they may not know what happened that night, but the people who were there are alive because they didn’t get involved. It’s fine.*’

(But, even if it was fine for them to do, perhaps it was just slightly less fine for a cultivator like herself to turn the other way when disaster struck.)

Then, at long last, the pressure weighing down on them let up.

Nie Huaisang instantly took several greedy gasps of air (or whatever they were breathing in while in the simulation), and saw the other heirs doing the same. The only exception was Wen Chao, who was currently shaking and curled in a fetal position by his father’s feet, memories of his other-self’s encounter with the Yiling Patriarch consuming his mind.

“So… the sound of the doors being banged over and over again?” Wei Wuxian asked, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s right! Banging so loud it almost reached the Heavens!”

“And the cries of the people who were locked in.”

“Right, right! The doors were bolted from within, so if the people inside had wanted to get out, they could have easily just opened it. Why bang on the doors?”

Nie Huaisang didn’t know, and didn’t want to know. Right now, he was perfectly happy to just sneak inside his Da-ge and pretend none of this was happening, and that he couldn’t hear Chang Ling’s voice among the screams.

(The scene was unnervingly similar to the Yiling Patriarch hunting down Wens. No matter how hard he tried, the Nie heir couldn’t get the image of Wei Wuxian’s many, many murder methods out of his head.)

“Alright, when happened then?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“The next day, when the sun came out, the Chang Clan’s doors opened on their own.”

Paling slightly, Jiang Yanli snuck a bit closer to Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, and Wen Qing, whose presences helped calm her.

“And? What was inside?”

“Inside… inside, the entire clan was dead! You asked for strange incidents, so of course I’m telling you the strangest of things! The entire clan was wiped out! I heard they’d been frightened to death!”

Hearing that, Lan Wangji was absorbed in thought, as if remembering something.

Wei Wuxian appeared confused, but the watchers knew all too well what Hanguang-jun was connecting the description to.

(They would never be able to forget.)

But Wei Wuxian didn’t even seem to notice the connection, asking, “Are there any cultivation sects stationed in this area?”

“Yes, of course there are.”

“Then, how did they deal with the situation?”

“Deal with the situation?” the waiter slung a cleaning rag over his shoulder and sat down, leaning close as if revealing a secret. “Young Master, do you know what the name of the cultivation sect in Yueyang was? It was Chang! They’re the ones who died! Who could be left to deal with this situation? None of them had been left alive! In that house, men and women — ten-or-so young masters and dozens of servants — some sat, some lay, vomiting their bladders out. They died-”

“*You’re* going to die!” another voice interrupted. “Why are you slacking off to tell people old tales about people dying?!”

It was the liquor shop’s owner, arriving with a vengeance. He lifted a hand as if to snatch the young waiter and drag him away, but Wei Wuxian raised his hand before the owner could.

“Five more jars, please,” he requested.

Lan Wangji set down enough money for ten jars.

All at once, the owner’s expression switched to beaming celebration and he scampered off, ordering his worker “Look after the customers properly. Don’t go running around!”

“Ah, so you *can* be taught about bribery,” Nie Huaisang teased.

“It wasn’t *bribery*-”

“It might have been, Wangji,” Lan Xichen pointed out with a laugh. “Though, considering how dangerous the things you’re investigating have been, I can’t say that it was a waste of money.”

Grumpy but refusing to lower himself to pouting, Lan Wangji simply stood up and gracefully moved himself to Jiang Cheng’s side, rather than his brother’s. He had hesitated for a moment when deciding where to go. His snickering brother could be avoided in many corners of the room, but going near Jiang Cheng was the easiest option. If he went somewhere else, it would need to be intentional.

Lan Wangji still hated the future’s Sect Leader Jiang, but the teenage one — the one who hadn’t *done anything* — didn’t deserve his animosity.

He sat down next to Jiang Wanyin and turned his attention back to the simulation.

“Uh, right. After that, for a long time, anyone who passed by the Chang residence at night would hear someone banging on the doors from the inside. I’ve heard that even after the victims were buried, you could still hear them banging on their coffins,” he revealed, then leaned back and shrugged. “That’s since stopped though, so I’ve never heard the banging myself.”

“He really does have a lot of information,” Jiang Fengmian acknowledged with a smile.

Frowning, Madam Yu disagreed: “For all we know, the stories he described might have been more fantasy than reality. Can we really trust what that man is saying?”

“Would the spirits show it to us if we couldn’t?” Lan Qiren countered. “Especially considering that the simulation displayed that night itself. Everything indicates that this is, indeed, what happened.”

Madam Yu clicked her tongue in annoyance, but no one could deny Lan Qiren’s words.

The waiter sighed, “I pity their clan head Chang Ping. He just happened to be away from home at the time and survived-”

“Wait, didn’t you say the entire clan died?” Wei Wuxian interrupted.

‘*Always looking for weaknesses in their stories,*’ Wen Ruohan smiled, then began inching himself away from his second son, who trembled on the floor. Some part of him almost wished he’d sent Wen Chao out instead; Wen Xu would be far more convenient to have by his side.

Then again, he wasn’t sure he could accept sending Wen Chao out unsupervised into a world with Wei Wuxian, either.

(‘*Heartless monster,*’ Wen Qing thought, watching Wen Ruohan’s blatant disregard for Wen Chao. He had always supported her in her studies and had given her influence few others would, but that didn’t blind her to the person he was.)

(She refused to allow those she loved to get hurt by him. Now, that included Wei Wuxian, too.)

"Don't get ahead of yourself, I was just about to mention how Chang Ping died," the waiter objected. "They did all die. I said he'd escaped from the calamity, but it was only temporary. After a few years, that clan head Chang Ping still died. This time… it was even more horrifying. He was killed via 'lingchi' — the flesh on his body was sliced off piece by piece by a knife or sword, totaling in 3,600 slices."

The more the watchers heard, the more their memories of the Yiling Patriarch resurfaced. What Wei Wuxian had done was horrifying and inexcusable, but…

After what they saw happen to him, no one could say they would have reacted differently. They resolved to keep an open mind.

Perhaps thinking the same, Wei Wuxian asked, "Friend, do you know why the Chang Clan was wiped out?"

"This… Young Master, are you joking? I'm an ordinary person! How would I know anything about that? I only vaguely heard that they'd offended someone they shouldn't have offended."

Nie Mingjue cursed, "What kind of villain would that be?"

"Someone they shouldn't have offended?"

"That's right," the waiter nodded. "The grudges of people in cultivation sects really are complex. And I've heard this business was related to an infamous villain."

"An infamous one?" Wen Ruohan asked.

Wei Wuxian smirked, "Let me guess, you're gonna say you don't know who that villain was?"

The waiter laughed, "Nope. I definitely know who this one was! He seemed to be called something like 'pecticular…' ah, right. 'Patriarch.' The 'Yiling Patriarch!"

Wei Wuxian choked on his wine.

'*Me again?!*'

"Wha — *him?*"

"Did he… unknowingly-"

"How could you 'unknowingly' destroy a sect?!" Madam Jin snapped.

"But… he was dead then… wasn't he?"

“Yes,” Wen Ruohan confirmed, a disbelieving expression on his face. “To be blamed for this… he became even more infamous than I’d realized.”

Even thirteen years after his death, Wei Wuxian was more well known known than the sun.

“I… what?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Yup, that’s right!” the waiter excitedly revealed. “His surname was ‘Wei.’ His name was ‘Wei Wuqian,’ I think. People always sound hateful and scared when they mention him!”

Wei Wuxian could only gape in response.

“Wei.. Wu*qian?!*”

Nie Huaisang snorted and collapsed into giggles, loving the waiter’s enthusiastic (and completely wrong) description of the events. The memory the spirits had added proved to the watchers that there had indeed been screams from the Chang residence, but it seemed everything else the waiter knew was as accurate as Jin Guangshan’s knowledge of how many children he had.

Proving Nie Huaisang’s assumption, the blank faced, speechless Wei Wuxian thought ‘*I’ve even been made responsible for this?! I’ve never been to Yueyang before, and I’ve never killed anyone using lingchi!*’

As if hoping for an explanation, he turned his gaze on Lan Wangji.

“We’re leaving,” Hanguang-jun declared, having been waiting for Wei Wuxian to look over for some time now.

“Eh? Already?” Jin Guangshan asked.

“Ooooh. Someone’s a bit overprotective-”

“Huaisang, I swear, if you finish that sentence-”

Standing up after Hanguang-jun, Wei Wuxian thought ‘*Lan Zhan must have something to tell me that can’t be said in public. We should leave, then. How much… oh, right. We’ve paid already.*’

“Wei Wu*qian*, indeed,” Jiang Cheng scoffed, hiding the bit of annoyance within him that *Lan Wangji* was paying for Jiang Cheng’s head disciple.

‘*Former head disciple,*’ a snide voice in his head whispered.

“I’m leaving the liquor here for now!” Wei Wuxian said. “I’ll finish drinking later. Make sure it’s still here when we get back~”

Noticing Wei Wuxian’s joking tone, the waiter grinned and responded, “Of course! Our shop is honest with everyone, from the old to the young! Just leave them here. Don’t

worry, we'll wait until you come back to close up."

"That must've been a weird day for him," Jin Zixuan smirked, enjoying the man's befuddled expression. Despite the waiter's enthusiasm, it was clear that he was quite confused by the hurricanes that had sat with him just a moment ago.

Jiang Yanli laughed, "That's the case for most people A-Xian interacts with. Especially given everything they asked about. The person who was responsible for the Chang Clan…."

"Though that's another interesting point," Lan Qiren speculated. "The man was completely convinced that it was a 'person' responsible for the massacre. I suppose demonic cultivation makes that *possible,* but wouldn't the culprit being a spirit be the most likely result?"

"Perhaps it's because he's a civilian," Jiang Fengmian suggested.

"Even then, it's strange," Madam Yu disagreed. "Even for non-cultivators, a spirit should be the obvious answer. Something like that… if it was a person, who other than Wei Wuxian could have possibly been responsible?!"

As Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji continued to walk farther away, the watchers fell into a contemplative silence.

"Oh, I see," Lan Wangji abruptly realized. "It's been thirteen years."

"Pardon?"

"It's the same as it was with Wei Ying's inventions. It's been hours for us; it's been years for them."

To the people inside the simulation, it had been thirteen years since Wei Wuxian had died. Around seventeen years since he'd invented demonic cultivation, but thirteen years since Wei Wuxian's secrets and inventions had been leaked to the greater public.

Their understanding of normal was very, very different than the watchers'.

However, right before Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji got out of hearing distance, the waiter called out to them again:

"Hey, Young Masters? Are you going to the Chang residence right now?" he bounded over, his curiosity and excitement temporarily overpowering his wariness. "Woah, that's so cool! I live here, but even I've never been there! I've only dared to sneak a few looks at it from far away. Are you two going inside? What are you going to do?"

Hoping to deflate some of the man's enthusiasm, Wei Wuxian shook his head and responded, "We're just going to take a few peeks from far away."

However, never one to be rebuffed, the overly-social waiter pranced forward and wrapped an arm around Wei Wuxian's shoulders.

Lan Wangji *froze*.

“Is the work that you two do hard? Do you earn a lot of money? Probably a ton, right? What a respectable job! Let me ask you something — is it difficult to get started? I…” he trailed off, then forcefully shut his mouth, looking nervously to the side. “Y-young Master… why is your friend… staring at me?”

Despite his best efforts, delighted laughter escaped from Lan Xichen at the identical expressions on the real and virtual Lan Wangji’s faces. Even to those who usually couldn’t read Lan Wangji’s face, the pair’s shared disapproval was clear.

(And, with the extra context they had access to, the reason for it was obvious as well.)

The simultaneous squeals of joy from Nie Huaisang, Madam Jin, Jiang Yanli, and Lan Xichen varied in pitch and volume, but all carried equal amounts of glee.

Right as Wei Wuxian looked over to observe Lan Wangji as well, Hanguang-jun stood up even straighter and walked outside of the liquor shop, too dignified to storm out, but too emotional to stay.

Of course, missing the context the watchers had, Wei Wuxian just shrugged and said, “Oh, him? My friend was brought up strictly. He absolutely hates it when other people are too comfortable around each other in front of him. Isn’t it strange?”

That wasn’t an unreasonable assumption, but-

The waiter awkwardly lowered his arm and replied, “Strange indeed. The way he was looking at me… you’d think I’d put my arm around his wife!”

As Lan Wangji heard deafening laughter erupt from all sides, he found himself wondering if it would be worth it to simply leave the simulation. Yes, he would miss out on the rest of it, but his Uncle could tell him later, and he’d be able to meet up with the real Wei Ying outside.

(Besides, literally *anything* would be worth avoiding the utter shame and embarrassment flooding him right now. Even his Uncle was laughing! Lan Qiren never laughed! But now….)

(Lan Zhan’s faith in humanity had officially dried up and evaporated into nothingness.)

Of course, given Hanguang-jun’s exceptional hearing, it was impossible for him not to have heard. Imagining the reactions Lan Wangji was trying to restrain, Wei Wuxian began laughing so hard his stomach hurt. Finally, he turned to the waiter and held out an empty container.

“I finished a jar.”

“I… I’m sorry?”

Wei Wuxian smirked and gestured at himself: “I’m still standing.”

“You’re actually going through with that?!” Jiang Cheng gaped disbelievingly. “You can’t tell him your name, you idiot!”

“Oh. Ooh! Wow… honestly, Young Master, this is the first time I’ve ever seen someone who can still stand properly after finishing a jar of that!”

“Of course he’d take his alcohol tolerance with him to his next life,” Madam Yu mumbled.

“Alright then, Young Master, what’s your surname?”

“Mo?” Jiang Yanli guessed.

“Or he could stick with Wei-”

“Or say Jiang.”

“My surname…” Wei Wuxian paused thinking for a moment, then brightened up. “Ah, my surname is ‘Lan!’”

Lan Wangji promptly tripped over a rock.

“Wangji!” Lan Xichen called out, both delighted and shocked to see his usually composed brother lose balance, even if just for an instant. He glanced back at his real brother, only to pause at what he saw.

“Alright then!” the thick-faced waiter declared. “From now on, my surname is Lan!”

“Wangji?” Lan Xichen repeated.

To his side, the second jade stood just as frozen as his name implied. Within his head, was an endless stream of alerts:

*[Warning: Wei Ying] [Warning: Wei Ying] [Warning: Wei Ying] [

By now, Lan Xichen was smiling so wide his cheeks were starting to hurt.

With each step the pair took, the number of people around them decreased, while the number of trees increased. They had exited the city and were walking in the direction the waiter had pointed them to earlier. By now, they had so completely removed themselves from the populous that their privacy was all but guaranteed.

"Back then, why did you stop me from talking to him?" Wei Wuxian asked.

It took a second too long for the watchers to realize he was referring to stopping the interrogation, rather than the hints of jealousy Hanguang-jun had shown at the end.

(Lan Wangji's ears were now redder than the brightest rose.)

"There was no need to continue asking," Lan Wangji responded. "I remember having heard of the incident at Yueyang before."

"Before you explain that to me, let me ask you something," Wei Wuxian began, glancing back at Lan Wangji with a serious expression. "Um, I wasn't the one who wiped out the Chang Clan, was I?"

"You have to *ask?*" Wen Qing gaped.

"Well…" Lan Xichen trailed off. "There *were* a lot of similarities…."

"No. It was not done by you."

"Oh."

Hearing that, Jiang Yanli let out a sigh of relief. It wasn't that she thought Wei Wuxian was responsible, but the confirmation that he wasn't was reassuring regardless.

'*I see. It's like it was right before I died,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*When I was despised by everyone — worse than a sewer rat. I'd played a role in everything; I was to be blamed for everything. If one's neighbor's grandson didn't eat properly and lost five pounds, it was because he was frightened by the stories of the Yiling Patriarch.*'

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji asked, stepping forward. It was wrong of the public to blame him for something he didn't do; any anger Wei Wuxian felt would be more than understandable.

But there wasn't any anger to be found. Just a steady, tired resignation.

'However, due to his demonic path and great power, some people feared him and had him set up,' Lan Sizhui had explained. 'He was thusly despised by the public, his home destroyed by his beloved shidi, and he died miserably.'

Finally, and thankfully filling the awkward silence, Lan Wangji elaborated, "Although you weren't responsible for the massacre, it was related to you."

"How so?" Wei Wuxian asked.

“In two ways. Firstly, one of the people involved was connected to your mother.”

Wei Wuxian stopped in his tracks.

Jiang Fengmian instantly straightened up, turning to stare in shock at the simulation. He turned to Lan Qiren, but the other man seemed to be just as surprised as he was.

“...My mother?” Wei Wuxian asked, his face open and expressive and *vulnerable* in a way that looked out of place on Wei Wuxian’s face. His eyes were wide, not in the fear that came around every time a dog was in his presence, but in hope.

Lan Wangji stepped closer to Wei Wuxian at once. Like a bucket of cold water had been poured on him, any flushed embarrassment or happiness in his expression had long since vanished. All that remained was concern for Wei Ying.

With an especially grumpy voice, Jin Ling began to explain:

“Wei Wuxian was the son of Wei Changze, a servant of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect, and Cangse Sanren, a rogue cultivator. Both Jiang Fengmian and his wife, Yu Ziyuan, were quite familiar with Wei Wuxian’s parents. Despite this, my grandfather never reminisced about his old friend in front of Wei Wuxian, and my… and Yu Ziyuan never spoke properly to Wei Wuxian at all.”

Hearing the change in address, Yu Ziyuan felt a sharp, stinging poison spread through her chest. Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng glared.

‘*How could A-Ling say that?!*’ he thought, fury surging through him as he remembered the look of his mother’s corpse being slapped to the ground by Wang Lingjiao. ‘*Whoever wrote this script… how dare they belittle my mother like that? It-it wasn’t that bad-*’

“Wei Wuxian would be lucky if she didn’t give him a few whips and send him to kneel in the ancestral hall to force him to keep his distance from Jiujiu. Because of that, other people had told Wei Wuxian most of what he knew about his parents; he really didn’t know any more than what the greater public knew.”

By now, Lan Qiren was pursing his lips together so tightly they seemed like they were going to fuse together. After thinking for a moment, he spun on his heel to face Jiang Fengmian.

“You need to talk to him.”

“I…” the man hesitated for a moment, glancing back at his wife, only for a firm determination to settle over his face. “I will.”

He tensed up, prepared for the inevitable outburst, but it never came. Yu Ziyuan simply looked away, not objecting to Jiang Fengmian’s plan, even if she didn’t offer to contribute either.

Relaxing in relief, Lan Qiren nodded and stepped back, rejoining his nephews. For once, Lan Xichan and Lan Wangji looked equally blank, becoming nearly impossible to tell apart.

(Was Lan Qiren really surprised? His nephews knew a little more about their parents than Wei Wuxian thanks to visiting their mother, but not much.)

(He mentally resolved to offer to tell them more, once they left the simulation.)

The whole world in the simulation was still, as if time had momentarily halted in it as Wei Wuxian processed the information he had been given. It lasted for an additional moment, before Lan Wangji turned completely to look at him.

"Have you heard the name 'Xiao Xingchen?'"

After pausing in thought for a moment, Wei Wuxian shook his head, "No."

Lan Wangji nodded, "He was quite well known when he left the mountain twelve years ago. Now, nobody mentions him."

"What mountain?"

"I do not know what mountain it was, but Xiao Xingchen was a pupil of Baoshan Sanren."

Hearing that, Jiang Cheng straightened up at once, alert.

"Baoshan Sanren's?"

"The immortal's?"

"Wow, that's insane," Jin Zixuan muttered, then, turning to Jiang Cheng, added, "It's a little funny, isn't it? Xiao Xingchen and Wei Wuxian never met, but they nearly did."

"Oh," Jiang Yanli realized. "You mean, when A-Xian brought A-Cheng to Baoshan Sanren?"

Her fiance nodded, and the Jiang siblings made eye contact with each other, excited by the fantastical prospect. At this point, it was entirely possible that Xiao Xingchen and Jiang Cheng had met. If so, his first meeting with Xiao Xingchen must have been more than a little awkward.

"I wonder what sort of expression he made when he realized you weren't Wei Wuxian," Nie Mingjue suggested, sparking laughter all around. He had expected his brother to join in, but Nie Huaisang instead narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. Although he wanted to share his opinions on the matter, the sudden change in expression those words had brought upon both Wen Ruohan and Wen Qing's faces raised several alarms in his head.

(Was there something they knew, that the other watchers didn't?)

Shaking himself out of his own thoughts, Wei Wuxian laughed and said, "I guess that means Xiao Xingchen is my Shishu, then."

Lan Wangji nodded.

There was a sound like the clearing of a throat, and Jin Ling began to speak again: "The two disciples who had already left Baoshan Sanren's mountain — Yanling Daoren and Cangse Sanren — did not die peacefully. Xiao Xingchen was no exception."

A cold feeling of anticipation began to spread through Nie Mingjue's body, and he unconsciously moved closer to Nie Huaisang, hovering over the boy protectively.

(Huaisang, who hated gory stories, greatly appreciated it.)

"Right, so…" Jin Ling cleared his throat again. "When Xiao Xingchen left the mountain, he was only seventeen. Hanguang-jun had never met him in person, but he had heard about Xiao Xingchen's talent from others. At that time, the Sunshot Campaign had ended only a few years ago, and the Siege on Yiling's Burial Mounds had only just ended. All the prominent sects were recruiting cultivators from all around to be part of them. Xiao Xingchen left the mountain in the hopes of saving the world! With his excellent talent and capable teacher, during his first night hunt he entered the mountain alone and claimed first place — making him famous overnight."

"Ah," Ouyang Zizhen gave a dreamy sigh. "A-Qing's Daozhang was so cool!"

"Shush! If I'm not allowed to interrupt, you aren't either!" Jin Ling snapped.

Snickers broke out across the watchers, but they were altogether muted. No matter how promising the start of Xiao Xingchen's story was, the conclusion had already been foretold to be a tragedy.

"*Anyways*," Jin Ling grumpily continued. "The sects, seeing such a bright, gifted, young cultivator, all invited him to join them. However, Xiao Xingchen turned down all their offers, saying that he didn't want to depend on any sects, and instead wanted to build a new sect with a close friend — one that didn't value bloodline."

As he heard that, Wen Ruohan couldn't help but allow his eyes to drift down to his son, still curled up on the floor. Although the shaking had (mercifully) stopped, the boy certainly wasn't anyone's idea of dependable.

And yet, it had been *his* ancestor who had initiated the change in values from the sect to the clan. Of everyone, Wen Ruohan was the last person who should be advocating for a change to the system. And besides, he had Wen Xu; regardless of Wen Chao's utter failure, Wen Ruohan still had a son to pass on everything to.

(And yet, how many times had he thought that the situation in the Jiang Sect would be much simpler if Wei Wuxian had simply been made the heir?)

(And besides, it wasn't like Wen Ruohan wasn't involved in Wen Chao's upbringing. If he was dissatisfied, he had no one to blame but himself.)

"Xiao Xingchen had a soft personality but a solid heart. He was gentle on the outside, but determined on the inside. Whenever someone had a difficult matter at hand, the

first thing they did was ask him for help. As a person of moral integrity, he never refused either, which was why he was always spoken of with approval.

"At least, until the destruction of the Yueyang Clan."

A grim air settled over the watchers, but that air seemed to be matched by the future's juniors as well. For a moment, they were surprised that no one was making fun of Jin Ling's overly-dramatic phrasing.

Then, Lan Wangji glanced over at his other self, who was still walking toward the former sect, and wondered if the juniors were a bit more personally involved in whatever incident was being described than they had been in the Sunshot Campaign. The tales of Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji defeating the Xuanwu had been all-but myths to the kids.

This, it appeared, was a story those juniors knew intimately.

"One day, the Yueyang Clan leader went out night hunting with a few family members for about half a month," Lan Sizhui explained, picking up where Jin Ling had left off. "In the middle of the night, without any warning, they received some bad news and immediately hurried back. Someone had purposefully destroyed their protective array and had let in a group of powerful evil spirits. However, other than that, they knew nothing.

"Although an incident affecting only a minor clan wouldn't usually gain much focus, the circumstances at this time were different. The siege of the Burial Mounds had only just ended, and, upon hearing this news, the entire cultivation world began bubbling with rumors, some even suggesting that it was the revenge of the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian!"

"How stupid could they possibly be to blame *him* for that?!" Jin ZIxuan demanded. "We'd at least *seen* him doing similar things. What is any of this based off?"

Jiang Cheng nodded, "Fools, the lot of them."

"Regardless, there hadn't been any evidence, so it had been impossible to find the real killer."

The further reassurance that it *hadn't* been Wei Wuxian comforted Jiang Yanli greatly.

"In such a situation, Xiao Xingchen couldn't sit by and do nothing. He volunteered to be responsible for the matter and find the truth for Chang Ping. A month later, the murderer was finally discovered. His name was Xue Yang."

"...Does anyone know who that is?" Jiang Fengmian asked. He was met with 'no's from all around.

"Xue Yang was even younger than Xiao Xingchen, nothing more than a boy. Despite that, his cruelty was unparalleled. Ever since he was fifteen, he had been a delinquent in the Kuizhou region, known far and while for his radiant smile, inhumane means, and

merciless personality. Everyone's expressions would change when he was brought up in conversation. When he was a child living in the streets, it was said he developed a hatred that lasted for years towards Chang Ping's father."

"His *father?!*" Ouyang Zizhen repeated. "I thought it was a grudge against Chang Ping, himself! That's even less justif-"

"Zizhen, please," Lan Sizhui begged.

"Living in the streets?" Jiang Yanli asked, eyes wide.

Once again, another connection between Wei Wuxian and 'Xue Yang.' They dearly hoped there wouldn't be any more.

"As I was saying," Sizhui continued. "Xue Yang committed the crime out of vengeance, and for… some other reasons."

"...Did you censor that?" Lan Jingyi whispered.

"No. It just says, 'for some other reasons.'"

"Pardon?" Jin Guangshan asked.

"Why are the spirits being so vague?!" Jin Ling whisper shouted. "Aren't we trying to *tell* the past Sect Leaders what's going on?"

"Maybe it makes it more dramatic? For a later reveal!"

"Doesn't matter," Sizhui forcefully cleared his throat. "After Xiao Xingchen discovered the truth, he went across three provinces to find Xue Yang, who was still happily picking fights with others. Taking advantage of the discussion conference happening at Koi Tower, Xiao Xingchen brought him over and demanded severe punishment. With his straightforward list of evidence, most sects didn't have any objections. The only exception was the Lanling Jin Sect."

A sinking feeling spread through Jin Zixuan's chest and he subconsciously found himself inching closer to Jiang Yanli for comfort.

"Objecting then would put him against the whole world," Wei Wuxian pointed out, having just been informed of the situation by Lan Wangji. "Could it be that Xue Yang was a favorite of Jin Guangshan?"

"A guest disciple," Lan Wangji answered.

A dozen gazes swerved his way, and Jin Guangshan could only laugh and say, "How mysterious. I suppose none of us remain the same in the future, do we?"

After the revelations of how different Hanguang-jun was, the Nie Secrets, and Jiang Wanyin's actions, no one could disagree.

“He was a foreign disciple?” Wei Wuxian confirmed. “Back then, the LanlingJin Sect was already one of the four great sects, wasn’t it? Why would they have invited a delinquent to be a guest disciple?”

After hesitating a moment, Lan Wangji turned his head to stare directly into Wei Wuxian’s eyes.

“...Because of the Stygian Tiger Seal.”

The watchers flinched.

Wen Ruohan had already become tense at the casual mention of *four* great sects, so not even he could stop himself from reacting when that name was uttered. None of the watchers had forgotten their glimpse into the Sunshot Campaign. Wei Wuxian forging the seal from a relic he had found — a sword that had soaked up *thousands* of years of resentment — had left quite the impression. Even putting aside the contextual importance of the event, the pressure that resentment had generated was not something any of them would be able to forget.

And if this was truly about Wei Wuxian’s strongest weapon….

‘*The Stygian Tiger Seal?*’ Wei Wuxian thought, his mouth twitching up into a grim, bitter smile. ‘*I only had to use it once to realize it did more harm than good. It was considerably more powerful than I’d imagined. I only wanted to use it to help me in battle, but its powers ended up exceeding my own. And it doesn’t have any loyalty either.*’

The more Wei Wuxian spoke, the more tense Jin Zixuan became.

Half of his mind screamed at him to stand by his father’s side and to not allow the other great sects to hone in on a possible weakness. The other half was trying to convince him to stand *with* them — against his father.

The confliction spun around in his body like a tornado, ultimately keeping him stuck in place.

‘*It’s not like I’d never thought about destroying it, it was just too difficult to destroy. Besides, back then, I’d already vaguely understood that I’d be hated by everyone sooner or later.*’

“Hated by everyone?” Nie Mingjue repeated. “What did he do?”

What could Wei Wuxian have possibly done to make all the great sects distrust him so much?

‘*So long as I had something as appalling as the Stygian Tiger Seal, the other sects wouldn’t dare act rashly. I separated it into two halves, making it so that they could only be used when put together. After I used it for the second time, I was able to destroy the first half, but the second half….’*

All at once, the image of a battle appeared before them. Thousands of cultivators from dozens of sects swarming up a giant hill — the siege on the Burial Mounds.

The more Wen Ruohan saw, the harder it was for him to believe that Wei Wuxian could have done any of the things he'd been accused of. The boy appeared entirely too aware of the political situation and the danger his powers posed to make a mistake like that, and too righteous to do so intentionally.

(What on earth had the world put him through?)

The pair waited in silence for a moment longer, then continued walking. Due to the speed they were travelling at, it would take them a not-insignificant amount of time to reach their destination. Perhaps because of that, Lan Jingyi's voice returned to give the watchers the rest of the lesson.

"In regards to the seal, Senior Wei was confident that even if the sects got hold of it, made a temple for it, and offered it incense every day, the remaining half of the Tiger Seal was just a piece of scrap iron. However, Hanguang-jun disagreed; it appeared that Xue Yang could rebuild the other half of the seal! Although he was young, he was clever, bizarre, eccentric, and a horrible, horrible person-"

"Jingyi, stick to the script."

'*Thank the heavens Lan Sizhui is there,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*I have no doubt we'd never get anywhere, otherwise.*'

"A-anyways, the LanlingJin Sect realized they could use the remaining half of the seal to piece together the first half. Even though the recreated version wasn't as powerful and couldn't be used for as long, it was still capable of terrible catastrophes."

"And the Jin Sect wanted it?" Lan Qiren narrowed his eyes.

Recognizing the tension, Jin Guangshan gave a friendly laugh and said, "Lan-xiong, you must understand, the future is a different culture. We've seen time and time again how normalized Wei Wuxian's creations are. If someone else managed to recreate the seal, wouldn't it be better for our sects to have something that can go against it?"

"...I suppose, but… to support this… 'Xue Yang?'"

"Sometimes, certain sacrifices must be made for the safety of us all," Wen Ruohan said. The Jiangs, Lans, and Nie nearly flinched back in disgust, but Wen Ruohan remained unphased. Regardless of whether he actually believed what he was saying, the words would serve their purpose. Now, if things went south for Jin Guangshan, the man would ally with Wen Ruohan — fixing the utter loss of alliances that had occurred when the Sunshot Campaign was revealed.

Besides, unlike the rest of them, Wen Ruohan had never claimed to be a good person.

"I see," Wei Wuxian said. "The LanlingJin Sect had to protect Xue Yang so that he could restore the Tiger Seal for them. Then… maybe what Xue Yang did to the Chang Clan wasn't just a grudge… it could have also been to test the power of the seal."

The complete and utter lack of surprise Wei Wuxian showed in regards to the detestable actions taken by the LanlingJin Sect left Jin Zixuan frozen in his spot. This whole time, it had been proven time and time again that Wei Wuxian would not attack people who were innocent. That was part of what had convinced Jin Zixuan that Wei Wuxian hadn't killed him. Now, a different question was starting to form in his mind.

'*What if I* did *deserve it?*'

He knew himself — he was sure he wouldn't do anything that would justify his death — but after seeing how different Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji's future selves were….

Seeing his confliction, Jiang Yanli moved even closer to him than she already had been, offering some support. It helped more than even she could have expected, allowing Jin Zixuan to relax at once.

(Right, regardless of what he did, there was no way *Jiang Yanli* could do anything that would make her deserve death in Wei Wuxian's eyes. He was being ridiculous.)

(Right?)

Wei Wuxian sighed.

'*No wonder all the rumors are connected to me!*' he thought. '*I can already imagine those cultivators clenching their teeth and going 'That Wei Wuxian! If he hadn't made this, our world wouldn't have encountered so many disasters!'*"

'*And what about what you went through?'* Lan Wangji thought. '*Who is responsible for that?*'

Lan Wangji continued to explain, but, hoping to save time, the spirits decided to return to a voiceover again. This time, it was once again Lan Sizhui who spoke.

"Although the LanlingJin Sect was determined to protect Xue Yang, Xiao Xingchen didn't waver either. As the stalemate continued, they finally startled Nie Mingjue, Chifeng-zun. Having not intended to participate in the Discussion Conference, he was forced to hurry over from far away.

"Despite Nie Mingjue being a junior to Jin Guangshan, he conducted himself in a strict manner and refused to tolerate Xue Yang no matter what. After an angry lecture, Jin Guangshan was left with no words and a great deal of embarrassment. Nie Mingjue, the irritable person he was-"

Said man flinched, receiving a deadly glare from his brother in regards to the truth behind that 'irritability.'

"-unsheathed his saber on the spot, intending to kill Xue Yang. Even when Lianfeng-zun, his sword brother Jin Guangyao, attempted to ease the situation, he just ordered him to leave. After a harsh scolding, Jin Guangyao just hid behind Lan Xichen, not daring to say anything else."

“Da-ge, have some compassion,” Lan Xichen whispered, his smile showing he was far too amused by the situation. “I’m sure A-Yao wasn’t trying to ally with Xue Yang. It’s just that he’d have to support his father, right?”

“...Right,” Nie Mingjue begrudgingly mumbled, inching away from his younger brother. Somehow, even after fifteen years of raising Nie Huaisang, it had never occurred to Nie Mingjue that his little brother’s glare could be so terrifying.

(Though, after watching what had happened to the Chang Clan, it wasn’t a surprise that both of them were a bit on edge.)

“Ever since Xue Yang had been brought to Koi Tower, he hadn’t shown the slightest trace of fear. Even with Nie Mingjue’s saber pressing against his neck, he continued to grin. Right before he was taken away, he turned to Xiao Xingcheng and told him, ‘Daozhang, you won’t forget me, will you? Well, let’s just wait and see~’”

The heirs all shuddered at those words, finding Lan Sizhui’s imitation of the voice to be even more horrifying with how juxtaposed it was against his usual mannerisms. They weren’t the only ones who felt that way.

“Sizhui, please never speak like that again,” Jingyi requested.

There was a sound like frantic nodding from Ouyang Zizhen and Jin Ling.

“Eh? I…” he cleared his throat. “I apologize.”

‘*Good, good,*’ Lan Qiren thought, nodding in (somewhat smug) approval. ‘*A perfect Lan for the next generation. It’s a good thing he’ll still be born. I can’t wait to teach him.*’

“Lanling Jin was indeed the sect with the thickest face,” Sizhui continued, unable to completely speak over the sound of Jin Ling clicking his tongue angrily in the background. “Although, in Koi Tower, it promised all the sects that Xue Yang would be executed, when it left Nie Mingjue’s sight, it immediately changed Xue Yang’s death sentence to a life imprisonment.”

“*What?!*” Nie Mingjue demanded, standing up. “You honorless-”

“Now, now,” Jin Guangshan placated, far more relaxed than before now that he knew Wen Ruohan was on his side. “I believe we’ve seen time and time again that the circumstances regarding the future are much more complicated than they appear. No need to point fingers when there’s so much we don’t know.”

Nie Mingjue snarled, wanting to protest, but unable to do so after the way they had all condemned Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation without understanding any of it.

“Hearing about Lanling’s decision, Nie Mingjue was enraged and pressured them again. The LanlingJin Sect rambled about, refusing to give him Xue Yang no matter how hard he tried. All the other sects watched from the sidelines, but, shortly afterward, Nie

Mingjue passed away from qi deviation. He had cultivated faster than anyone else in the Nie Sect, so he had died sooner than any of them."

Nie Huaisang was glaring at him again, and Nie Mingjue couldn't say anything in response. Yes, he was sorry for leaving Huaisang alone, but….

He had known the Wen were going to start a war sooner, rather than later. The power he could gain from the Nie Sect's style of cultivation — the power he *needed* to protect Huaisang — was more than worth that to him. And it all worked out; that power allowed him to gain two sworn brothers, who had continued to look after Huaisang after his death.

Unbeknown to Nie Mingjue, however, Nie Huaisang's mind was somewhere else.

'*Da-ge died while trying to pressure the LanlingJin Sect?*' he thought, frowning deeply. '*That's… something to keep in mind, I suppose.*'

"Now that the person who was the most difficult to deal with was gone, the LanlingJin Sect became more and more audacious. Jin Guangshan tried as hard as he could to get Xue Yang out of the dungeons so that more work could be done on the Stygian Tiger Seal. However, this wasn't exactly something to be proud of. It was impossible for him to free the murderer of an entire clan without a valid reason. Therefore, they turned their attention on Chang Ping."

'*The one most difficult to deal with was gone?*' Jiang Cheng repeated, frowning slightly. According to Lan Sizhui's narration, Nie Mingjue had been the only one to oppose the Jins. It was to the point where, after he was gone, Jin Guangshan could almost act however he pleased in regards to Xue Yang.

But what about-

'It doesn't mean anything,' Sect Leader Jiang had decided. 'I should first find an excuse to take him back… I've done things like this plenty of times already.'

'Young Master Mo, his Lordship is doing this for your sake,' Sizhui explained. 'Otherwise, Sect Leader Jiang wouldn't have let you go.'

'It's not the first time my Uncle's done something like this. He never lets any of them go, even when he's caught the wrong ones.'

Xue Yang took place after Wei Wuxian's death, and yet Jiang 'never lets any demonic cultivators go' Wanyin didn't say anything. On some level, of course he didn't. If the Jin Sect was defending Xue Yang, then, for all Jiang Cheng knew, standing up against them could bring about the Massacre of Lotus Pier all over again. Jiang Cheng more than understood his other self.

The adult Jiang Cheng was keeping the Jiang Sect safe, rather than playing hero for no reason.

But-

‘You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!’ she had shouted, and, despite it not being true, the simulated Jiang Cheng had accepted that explanation. He hadn’t corrected anyone’s assumptions or made the truth clear. Instead, he had choked Wei Wuxian himself.

Shifting awkwardly in his seat, Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but wonder, ‘*At what point does ‘doing what’s right’ become ‘playing the hero?*’’

He didn’t know.

However, while Jiang Cheng’s attention was ensured by his own thoughts, the other watchers had no trouble paying attention to the simulation. With fists clenched in anger or hands twiddling in anticipation, they allowed the simulation to explain.

“Using coercion and harassment, the LanlingJin Clan pressured Chang Ping into changing his story, invalidating all of his past speeches. He announced that the wiping out of the Chang Clan had nothing to do with Xue Yang.”

Lan Xichen clenched his fists, wishing he could join Nie Mingjue in cursing.

The simulation shone and then dimmed, revealing Xiao Xingchen speaking with Chang Ping. The former Chang clan leader could only shake his head, all fight leaving his body.

“What can I do aside from this?” he asked. “If I don’t, what’s left of my clan won’t be safe for long. I’m really grateful Daozhang, but… please don’t help me anymore. Now, any assistance will just be harassment. I don’t want the Yueyang Chang Sect to end just yet.”

Xiao Xingchen’s expression crumbled.

“And thus,” Ouyang Zizhen paused, sounding far more hopeless than they’d ever heard before. “...And thus, the tiger had been set free, allowed to roam the mountain once more.”

The simulation shifted, bringing them back to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji.

The simulation had assured them several times. Not all demonic cultivators were evil; many of Wei Wuxian’s inventions were being used to save lives. It was only appropriate then, that it also showed the times where that was not the case.

Lan Wangji took a deep breath.

And Wei Wuxian stayed silent.

'*If I'd been in Chang Ping’s position, I wouldn’t have let the matter go*,' Wei Wuxian thought. '*No matter how powerful the LanlingJin Sect was, or how much glory the road ahead offered me, I'd have gone into the dungeons myself and cut Xue Yang up until he was nothing more than a puddle, and then summoned his soul back to do it again, until there was nothing left of him.*'

Knowing what they knew about Wei Wuxian, no one could deny that.

'Stupid boy,' Madam Yu thought. '*It's exactly because you're like this that you get into so much trouble. Have you somehow forgotten the fact that you've died?!*'

'But... not everyone's like me — preferring to perish together with their enemies. Because of his decision, some of the Chang Clan's people were still alive. Chang Ping was also young, single, and childless, having only just taken the first steps into the world of cultivation. He had to think carefully. It makes sense, I suppose.'

Jiang Cheng nodded, feeling a phantom pressure of responsibility weighing on him as well.

They could hear someone take a deep breath. A moment later, Lan Jingyi was the one who continued.

"After Xue Yang was released, he quickly went to take revenge. However, the revenge wasn't on Xiao Xingchen himself. Xiao Xingchen had left the mountain alone and had no family. His only friend was a cultivator he met afterward, named Song Lan. He was a righteous, determined person who also wanted to build a sect based on common ideals rather than bloodlines. They were the closest and most like-minded of friends, and they were described as such. Xiao Xingchen was the bright moon and gentle breeze; Song Zichen was the distant snow and cold frost."

"...Do we really need to hear about all this?" Wen Chao muttered, quickly growing bored. Although he was grateful for a distraction from his own memories of the Yiling Patriarch, this lecture was far longer than he had expected it to be.

Unfortunately, given the glares being directed his way, he was the only one who thought that.

After hesitating for a moment longer, Ouyang Zizhen forced himself to continue, "Xue Yang repeated his past strategy. He wiped out BaiXue Temple, Song Lan's home, and used poison to blind his eyes."

A gasp escaped Jiang Yanli's mouth, and she paled considerably.

(This Xue Yang was using the techniques Wei Wuxian had created. It would be wrong to say it was Wei Wuxian's fault, but it would also be wrong to say he hadn't been involved at all.)

"This time, he was careful enough to not leave behind any evidence. With that, Jin Guangshan's protection, and Chifeng-zun's death, what could anyone do to him?"

The narration faded once again, allowing the watchers to focus instead on Wei Wuxian's expression. He was watching Lan Wangji closely, a slight frown on his face.

'*Really?*' he thought. '*Although I can't read any emotions from looking at Lan Zhan, that… doesn't seem right. He absolutely can't stand injustice, maybe even more than Nie Huaisang's brother.*'

Despite the grim topic, Lan Wangji felt his heart skip a beat at the praise.

‘*Back then, the LanlingJin Sect was acting rather dishonestly, and Lan Zhan never hid his opinion of them. Even now, he refuses to go to their sect’s discussion conferences. If two cruel massacres had happened, the news would have spread over the entire cultivation world. Lan Zhan definitely wouldn’t have turned a blind eye to them. Why didn’t he go to hunt down Xue Yang and-*’

Wei Wuxian’s thought’s cut off at once, as his memories pulled up the glimpse he had gotten at the cold spring’s pond. Large, violent scars intersecting and criss-crossing on Lan Wangji’s back — the result of a discipline whip.

Lan Qiren instantly paled. He didn’t know anything about how that had happened or why Lan Wangji had been given those scars. The Lan Sect would never do that to their second jade for no reason, but to do something so severe — so *permanent-*

With every mystery the future answered, it seemed like three more popped up in its place.

However, and although he cared a strange deal about the scars, not even Wei Wuxian was improper enough to blatantly ask about them. Instead, he returned the topic to the lesson.

“So, what happened to Xiao Xingchen after that?”

Once again, one of the future’s juniors picked up the story.

With clearly faked cheer, Lan Jingyi continued, “When Xiao Xingchen had left Baoshan Sanren’s mountain, he had sworn to never go back. He was a man of his word, but, as Song Lan was both blind and injured, he broke his vow and carried Song Lan to Baoshan Sanren’s residence and begged her to save his friend.”

‘Is this really where Baoshan Sanren is?’ Jiang Cheng had asked.

Wei Wuxian had just laughed reassuringly and responded, ‘It’s definitely where she is. Why do you keep doubting me?’

“I guess Wei Wuxian really was telling the truth,” Jiang Cheng muttered. Hearing that, Wen Qing and Wen Ruohan glanced at each other, but neither commented on the matter.

(Nie Huaisang, who had seen their reaction, frowned thoughtfully.)

“For the sake of her former pupil, Baoshan Sanren agreed to save Song Lan. Thus, Xiao Xingchen left the mountain once more, and was never seen again.”

‘*And the same thing almost happened to Wei Ying,*’ Lan Wangji thought, grimly. ‘*If he hadn’t invented demonic cultivation, he would have been eaten alive by the Burial Mounds, and my other-self would have never learned what happened to him.*’

Terror gripped at his heart, making him shake in his seat.

“A year later, Song Lan also left the mountain. To everyone’s surprise, his eyes, which had been completely blind, saw light again. However, it wasn’t that Baoshan Sanren’s

medical skills had created a miracle-"

"Hm?"

"Xiao Xingchen had…. Knowing that Song Lan was only involved because of him, Xiao Xingchen had dug out his own eyes, and given them to Song Lan."

The more she heard, the paler Jiang Yanli became.

"Thank god A-Xian didn't have to do that," she whispered. Pursing his lips grimly, Jiang Fengmian nodded.

"He might've not survived the Burial Mounds then."

There were nods all around. The only exceptions were Wen Qing, Wen Ruohan, and Nie Huaisang, who had turned to look at the former two, and had abruptly felt something click into place.

He flinched back like he'd been slapped.

(It had never made sense to him, that Wei Wuxian had suddenly remembered where Baoshan Sanren's mountain was. A little too convenient, and a little too perfect to make sense. It had also not entirely made sense to him that Wei Wuxian — the prodigy of the Jiang Sect — would completely abandon Suibian. But, if his theory was true….)

(Suddenly, Wen Ruohan's earlier comments made a lot more sense.)

Nie Mingjue glanced over and frowned, finding the absolute horror on his brother's face to be a bit of an overreaction, considering they didn't personally know Xiao Xingchen or Song Zichen.

"Uh, anyways," Lan Jingyi sniffed, genuinely worked up by the things he was saying. "S-song Lan initially wanted revenge on Xue Yang. However, by this time, Jin Guangshan had passed away and Jin Guangyao, the new Sect Leader Jin, wanted to show that things would be different. The first thing he did after gaining power was 'execute' Xue Yang."

Hearing that, twin smiles formed on Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen's faces. The former's was closer to a vindictive smirk, and the latter's more of a relieved cheer, but both contained a certain pride for the person they would one day call brother.

Jin Zixuan, on the other hand, deflated. Looking back on his past jealousy towards his half brother, he couldn't help but feel ashamed. Of course Jin Guangyao was going to immediately correct Jin Guangshan's errors. Jin Zixuan loved his father, but….

He most certainly hadn't agreed with what Jin Guangshan had said about Wei Wuxian.

Sounding vaguely sarcastic, Lan Jingyi continued, "In addition to never mentioning the Stygian Tiger Seal again, Jin Guangyao also spent time and effort restoring the sect's

reputation, suppressing unsavory rumors. As a result, the-I — are we really saying it like this?!"

"What?" Lan Qiren asked, wondering what Lan Jingyi was so upset about.

"The spirits gave us very specific instructions," Lan Sizhui whispered. "Just say what it says here."

"But it's… it's… I thought we were trying to *help* the people in the past!"

The Sect Leaders frowned, feeling their earlier jovial attitudes immediately give way to concern.

"I'm sure they know what they're doing," Ouyang Zizhen declared, sounding like he was smiling as he spoke. "Besides, worst come to worst, we'll just explain at the very end!"

There was another pause that increased the watchers' confusion by a power of ten.

"Fine, whatever," Lan Jingyi sighed. "But I'm skipping over the rest on the Jin Sect! So, back to Song Zichen, he went searching for his best friend! At first, there were still rumors about all the places he was travelling to. However, shortly after, those also disappeared. He had vanished just as Xiao Xingchen had. The Yueyang Chang Clan was small and unimportant to begin with, so the public's interest in the topic gradually faded away."

Lan Xichen frowned, pity for the pair of friends consuming his mind. It was truly unfortunate; he was just glad Jin Guangyao had been able to correct the travesty which had occurred.

As the story reached its conclusion, Wei Wuxian sighed softly.

'*Meeting an end like that due to uncontrollable circumstances… if Xiao Xingchen had been born a few years earlier, or if I'd died a few years later, things wouldn't have had to turn out this way. If I'd still been alive, how could I have not gotten involved in such a matter?*' he thought, then, immediately afterwards, gave a bitter laugh. '*I would've done something? What could I have done? If I was alive when the Yueyang Chang's case happened, there wouldn't have even needed to be an investigation before everyone decided that I'd done it. If Xiao Xingchen bumped into me on the streets, it's likely that he'd have chased me away with his horsetail whisk, rather than talked!*'

Lan Wangji flinched at the bitter words and mocking laugh. He wanted to console Wei Wuxian, or, at least for himself, find an argument that would write off the possibility Wei Wuxian had described. After all, the Lan Clan forbade gossip, and thoughtless accusations like that were the antithesis of the Lan Sect's core values. They wouldn't have accused him without an investigation.

And yet, he couldn't reject it. Wei Wuxian had been dead then, and the waiter they had talked to *still* attributed the massacre to him. If Wei Wuxian had still been alive at that time, could

Lan Wangji really say he wouldn't have been blamed?

(But the leaders of the Great Sects wouldn't accuse him without proof. Wangji's brother, and Nie Mingjue, Jiang Wanyin, and Wangji himself wouldn't allow Wei Wuxian to be unjustly punished for something he hadn't done.)

(Right?)

By now, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had walked past the Chang Clan's former residence and into a nearby cemetery. Wei Wuxian observed the somber surroundings for a moment, uncharacteristically muted in the face of the tragedy.

"How did Chang Ping die afterwards?" he eventually asked. "Who killed the remaining members of his clan?"

Lan Wangji breathed out, "He-"

BANG

Nie Huaisang jumped.

The bangs continued to shake the ground as though someone was slamming on a door. They were forceful, frequent, and endless, yet muffled, as though separated from the rest of the world.

All warmth instantly left Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's expressions.

Like that, Wen Chao could easily see how the soul inside Mo Xuanyu's body was the same as the one that had once been the Yiling Patriarch. Shivering, he wrapped his arms around his legs, curling up into a frantically wide-eyed ball.

'*This is… the people inside are slamming on their own coffins, just like they had when they'd slammed on the doors, unable to be let out. I thought it had stopped ten years ago!*'

Without saying a word to each other, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji both softened their breathing, moving forward without a sound.

Despite the tense situation, Jin Zixuan couldn't help but wonder how Lan Wangji was able to move so stealthily while being dressed in pure, blinding white. It was absolutely unfair; his golden Lanling Jin robes made him visible from a mile away. What was Hanguang-jun doing differently?

However, Jin Zixuan received no answer to his question. Instead, he simply watched as Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian moved against pillars of the pailou, the stone's grey sheen allowing both the white Lan Wangji and the black Wei Wuxian to hide. From there, they saw that, in the center of the cemetery, there was a large hole amid the tombstones.

Somewhat surprised, Wen Ruohan, Lan Qiren, Nie Mingjue, and Lan Xichen stepped closer, giving the hole a thorough investigation.

(Nie Huaisang just stepped farther back.)

It was rather large, and piles of dirt surrounded it on all sides. There were faint noises from within the hole. Someone was digging out a grave.

Lan Qiren's eyes widened, recognizing the man's attire as identical to what the cultivators who ambushed them at Qinghe's Saber Hall were wearing.

"The same group?" he suggested.

Frowning grimly, Jiang Fengmian nodded in agreement.

"One hour later," Lan Sizhui explained.

At that moment, two people hobbled up from the graze, one carrying the other. It took Wei Wuxian less than an instant to realize that the pitch black clothing of the one on the bottom matched his earlier attackers'. The one being carried, on the other hand, seemed lifeless.

'*That's only natural. After all, given where they came from, the one being carried is probably a corpse.*'

Nie Mingjue sighed, pitying the poor fool whose body had been chopped up and hidden in so many different places.

Right as he thought that, the gravedigger spun around and spotted Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. Once again, there was the mass of thick, black mist over the man's face, disguising his identity. Lan Wangji had already unsheathed Bichen and darted forward, beginning the fight.

In the half-second he had to react, the man swiftly made a hand seal and summoned his sword glare. He was extremely talented, but was still nothing in comparison to Hanguang-jun. Just like before, the man was quickly pushed back.

As he watched from the side, a memory resurfaced in Wei Wuxian's head. The traces of the Hundred Holes Curse he had spotted on the man's chest.

Wen Qing frowned again, stepping close. Why was Wei Wuxian focusing on that so much? Had a new discovery been made about the curse that she didn't know about?

Now that the fight was one on one, their earlier realization was made even more apparent: Lan Wangji's opponent was clearly very, very familiar with his sect's sword style.

Noticing that, a layer of frost spread across Lan Wangji's face.

And an ocean of nervousness enveloped Lan Xichen's.

The unknown man was quickly pushed back as Bichen pressed deeper and deeper. Soon, the man failed to entirely block a strike and received a cut on his arm. Shortly

after, he dodged and managed to escape with only a nick on his leg. A hasty defense allowed him to keep both his eyes, but he was still left with a scratch on his face.

If he didn't escape soon, he would undoubtedly be captured. With a curse, the man pulled out a talisman written out on thick, tan paper.

It was a teleportation talisman.

"*Damn it!*" Nie Mingjue shouted.

Seeing the same, Wei Wuxian clapped twice and slammed his hands on the ground.

The watchers jerked and straightened up, gasping for air as resentful energy zapped through their bodies.

And the corpses felt the same. From the earth, four arms shot out of the ground and snatched onto the man's ankles, grabbing him tight. In response, the grave digger instantly poured spiritual energy into his legs, blasting the corpses away.

Wei Wuxian then pulled out his bamboo flute. A shrill, piercing melody ripped through the curtain of darkness that had fallen.

A shudder ran up Nie Huaisang's spine.

And, a moment later, two human heads popped out of the dirt. They, along with their bodies, then twisted around and climbed up the man's body like snakes.

This time, Nie Huaisang was far from the only one who shuddered.

The gravedigger snorted in disdain and sent out another burst of spiritual power, blasting all the corpses away from him.

Including the one he'd been carrying.

"Clever, clever," Wen Ruohan muttered, finally understanding why Wei Wuxian had used so little power during this battle. Luring the other man into a false sense of security had made the subsequent manipulation easy to pull off.

Lan Wangji caught the sent off corpse with one hand, as Wei Wuxian was too busy laughing to be any help. Knowing that he couldn't win against Lan Wangji (especially with another person there as well), the unknown man cursed and hurled the teleportation talisman against the ground.

There was a *crack* and blue flames surged toward the sky. The man stepped into them, and vanished.

Two, simultaneous groans left Jiang Cheng's and Jin Zixuan's throats as they watched the man get away.

“He had a teleportation talisman,” Wen Qing pointed out. “There wouldn’t have been any point in trying to catch him; getting the body was more than enough.”

“Still!” Jin Zixuan complained.

However, completely juxtaposed against his shidi’s annoyance, Wei Wuxian just smirked and said, “Let’s see who he dug out, shall we?”

He glanced over, and his eyes widened slightly in surprise. The head of the corpse had already been split open, but, rather than brains or blood leaking out, there were wads of blackened cotten.

“Nope. No,” Nie Huaisang said, swiftly backing up to hide inside his brother’s illusionary-body. “No, no. Not seeing that.”

Wei Wuxian easily jerked the corpse’s head off.

“What’s this supposed to mean?” he asked. “A corpse made of cotton and rags is hidden in the Chang Clan’s cemetery?”

Wen Ruohan supposed that explained why Wei Wuxian hadn’t been able to control this corpse in the battle against the unknown figure.

“Not all of it is fake,” Lan Wangji corrected, having felt the weight of the body earlier. Wei Wuxian felt along the corpse, and discovered that the chest and abdomen were both real, with the other (fake) body parts having been added to disguise it. It was pretty clearly the torso of their “dear friend.”

“Looks like whoever hid the corpse has noticed we’re investigating the issue and came to move the corpse to somewhere we won’t be able to get to,” Wei Wuxian speculated, then, glancing at Lan Wangji, frowned. “Why was the mist-gravedigger so familiar with the Lan Sect’s style?”

In other words, ‘is it someone you know?’

The still-frigid expression on Lan Wangji’s face clearly showed that he was thinking the same.

There were only so many people in the Lan Clan who could even hope of competing against Lan Wangji. As Lan Xichen watched the simulated version of his brother think, he felt pride and pity warring inside him.

Wangji needed to suspect his own family.

“His cultivation must be quite high to use a teleportation talisman,” Wei Wuxian pointed out. “And he disguised both his face and sword. The face is understandable, but to have a recognizable sword…. Hanguang-jun, based off your fight just now and the one at the Saber Hall, do you think the leader was someone you know really well?”

Could it have been Lan Qiren or Lan Xichen?

“Why ask him?” Jin Guangshan asked, glancing over at the frozen teenaged version of Lan Wangji. “He can’t honestly expect you to sell out your own family, can he? He’s smarter than that.”

(Jin Zixuan flinched.)

“...No,” Hanguang-jun decided. Wei Wuxian nodded once.

Jin Guangshan did a double take, shocked by Wei Wuxian’s lack of protest. Lan Qiren pressed forward.

“Wei Wuxian trusts Wangji. If Xichen or I had truly been responsible, Wangji would have said so. Hanguang-jun’s honor is worth more than that, don’t you agree?”

“Ah, of course. I meant no offense,” Jin Guangshan smiled.

(Jin Zixuan looked down, unable to face everyone there.)

Without another word, Lan Wangji put the torso into another double layered Qiankun pouch. It rested heavily in his hand as he set it away in his sleeve.

The pair then began walking back to town, a bounce in Wei Wuxian’s step. There was a flash forward, and Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had already returned to the center of town. Without hesitation, they journeyed back to the liquor shop. It was one of the only shops with the lights still on, and the waiter they had seen earlier was still outside.

“You’re back!” he realized. “Look, I kept my word, didn’t I? Did you two see anything?”

“Not much!” Wei Wuxian laughed, walking back to his earlier table with Lan Wangji. The ten liquor jars were still there, waiting to be taken. Wei Wuxian licked his lips.

As soon as the waiter had turned around again (giving Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji a bit more privacy), Wei Wuxian recalled where their conversation had left off.

“Oh, right! Since we were interrupted by the grave digger, I still don’t know how Chang Ping died,” Wei Wuxian realized.

With simple, direct words, Lan Wangji explained, “Quite a few years after Xiao Xingcheng and Song Zichen disappeared, the remaining Chang Clan members died overnight from lingchi. Chang Ping’s eyes were gouged out.”

Nie Huaisang was supremely grateful that the simulation hadn’t felt a need to show them that.

“No one could deduce who the murderer was. Everyone who had been involved in the initial incident had already died or disappeared. However, one thing was determined: the sword used in the incident was Xiao Xingchen’s sword, Shuanghua.”

“Eh?”

“Revenge?” Madam Jin asked. “For changing his story?”

No one knew.

Wei Wuxian paused half way to taking a sip and asked, “He was killed with Xiao Xingchen’s sword? Then was he the one who did it?”

“Xiao Xingchen had disappeared. There was no conclusive evidence.”

Lan Qiren nodded once at his nephew, pleased by the Wangji’s need for thorough proof. Lan Wangji, on the other hand, couldn’t help but remember Wei Wuxian’s earlier comments regarding the blame against himself.

‘*What happened to him?*’

After thinking for a moment longer, Wei Wuxian asked, “If he couldn’t be found alive, then was there an attempted soul summoning?”

“Yes. Nothing could be found.”

Wei Wuxian had also died; nothing could be found of his soul either. Jiang Yanli sincerely hoped that whatever had ended up happening to her shidi wasn’t as bad as whatever Xiao Xingchen had gone through.

(Unfortunately, that didn’t seem very likely.)

As the world’s expert on souls, Wei Wuxian thought for a moment before commenting, “Something like soul-summoning… you shouldn’t rely on it too much. The time, place, and person involved are all factors to consider, so it’ll obviously fail sometimes. I’m guessing a lot of people think Chang Ping’s death was Xiao Xingchen’s revenge. Hanguang-jun, what about you? What do you think?”

Lan Wangji shook his head, “One should not comment without understanding the whole picture.”

Most of the watchers flinched at that, feeling thoroughly scolded.

Grinning at that answer, Wei Wuxian took another gulp of liquor right as Lan Wangji asked, “What about you? What do you think?”

“Lingchi is a type of torture. It’s meaning involves ‘punishment,’ anyways. Digging out the eyes makes it quite hard to not associate with Xiao Xingchen, but…” Wei Wuxian paused, debating with himself on how to phrase this. “I think… I feel that Xiao Xingchen hadn’t expected Chang Ping’s gratitude in the first place. I…”

In that pause, the waiter brought over two containers of peanuts, cutting off Wei Wuxian’s train of thought.

Wen Qing and Lan Wangji both frowned. What had Wei Wuxian been about to say? Something he thought about Xiao Xingcheng? Something he wondered about Xue Yang?

(Or maybe, just maybe, something *he'd* done without an expectation of gratitude. And something that had gone just as horribly for him.)

Wei Wuxian glanced up, then smiled, "Hanguang-jun, why are you looking at me like that? I'm not saying anything. Just like you, I don't know the whole picture, so there's nothing I can say. You're right. Before knowing all the twists and turns and causes and effects, you shouldn't presume anything about anything. I'd only ordered five jars, but you bought five more for me right after. It's impossible for me to drink all of these. How about you drink with me? We're not in the Cloud Recesses, right?"

"Still no," Lan Wangji answered, trying to hide the slight regret he felt about that. Then again, it wasn't as though Wei Wuxian would expect any other answer-

"Alright," Lan Wangji responded.

"...What?"

"I will drink."

"...What?!"

The world faded to black.

"You're going to drink?!" Jiang Cheng asked, gaping openly. Every head had turned toward Lan Wangji, but none were more stunned by the simulation than the boy himself. It was one thing for Hanguang-jun to be more tolerant of Wei Wuxian's actions — that could be excused as part of growing up — but *drinking?*

Yes, Lan Wangji had (in the privacy of his mind) wished he had been part of the numerous drinking parties and events Wei Wuxian had taken part in. That didn't mean he would actually *do it.*

Once again, the second jade found himself becoming certain that Hanguang-jun was not an older Lan Wangji, but was, instead, a demon who had come to the mortal realm to seduce Wei Wuxian.

Unfortunately for Lan Wangji, he seemed to be the only one who felt that way. To his left, Lan Qiren simply gave a long, hopeless sigh, quickly accepting the new reality of the devient his darling nephew had turned into.

"In all fairness, it isn't against the rules," Lan Xichen tried. "Wangji is allowed to drink, so long as he isn't in the Cloud Recesses. It just isn't his usual behavior."

"Understatement of the century," Nie Huaisang muttered, grinning at Lan Wangji.

"Regardless, it is fine," Lan Qiren said, looking as though the admission took years off his life. "Hanguang-jun is an… adult. He can use his own judgement. It is fine."

It very suddenly occurred to Lan Wangji that his uncle had *given up* on his future self, resigned to leaving Hanguang-jun to the wolves. He had been abandoned, and Lan Qiren would not doubt any story regarding the extents Hanguang-jun would go to. Now-

“Hi! I’m back!” Wei Wuxian declared.

“A-Xian?”

“Wei Wuxian?”

‘*Wei Ying?*’ Lan Wangji thought.

“Yup. Just checking in. I spoke with Mo Xuanyu for a bit. Figured out a few things.”

“Really?” Wen Ruohan asked, raising an eyebrow and leaning forward in curiosity.

“Mmhm. So,” he paused. “Time travel, huh?”

The watchers froze.

“You…” Madam Yu stuttered, then cleared her throat and forced herself to speak. “Are you serious, Wei Wuxian?”

“Should I not be?”

“You believe it?” Madam Jin asked.

“It would certainly explain a few things,” he laughed. “And besides, Mo Xuanyu brought along the future version of Jiang Cheng. With that and the reactions you’ve been having, it started seeming more and more likely.”

"...'Mo Xuanyu' brought me along?"

"Right."

That was an odd way to describe it. The name Wei Wuxian was continuing to use was ‘Mo Xuanyu,’ not ‘my future self’ or even ‘Wei Wuxian.’ Was he just testing them? Did he genuinely not know? Why hadn’t the future Wei Wuxian told him?

Then again, it was hard enough to make someone believe in the concept of time travel. Adding in ‘you became the Yiling Patriarch and were hated by the world and died a horrible death’ probably wouldn’t have gone over well.

“...What did they tell you?” Wen Ruohan asked. “Were you given instructions on what steps to take next?”

"Well, for one, I went and found the little version of him in our world!"

"Really?"

“Yup. And I was re-given instructions to take you all out of the simulation.”

“What?”

“I-”

"Wait-"

“There’s no need for that,” Wen Ruohan objected. “As you’ve already confirmed, staying in does not pose a danger to us.”

“But you don’t have much to gain from it either, do you, Your Excellency?” Wei Wuxian asked. “After all, you’ve already finished learning about the Sunshot Campaign. What else does the Wen Sect want to know? Your exit is right there; why don’t you just step out?”

‘*So Wei Wuxian’s told his younger self about some of it,*’ Wen Qing thought, her eyes falling to the array sealed onto the floor. ‘*That makes it even more difficult to predict what will happen when we leave.*’

Before, they had been sure that any one of them leaving would ensure that one side started a war. Now, even if one of them left, Wei Wuxian’s increased knowledge on the situation would prevent anyone from making hasty moves — especially given that it was *Wei Wuxian* who had found out.

Wei Wuxian couldn’t force the Wen out without Wen Xu’s permission, but the other sects no longer had a reason to prevent the Wen from leaving.

“I suppose you have a point,” Wen Ruohan acknowledged. “However, even without the Wen Clan’s direct involvement in these events, I can’t say the information is useless.”

“Is it more useful than serving as sect leader?” Wei Wuxian countered. “Unlike the other sects, you’ve left your son in charge. The question of who controls the Wen Sect after you leave-”

“Will not be an issue. A-Xu knows his place,” Wen Ruohan smirked. Going by Wei Wuxian’s subsequent silence, he hadn’t expected Wen Ruohan to be so shameless in regards to his son’s lack of individual goals.

The other watchers, who had gradually grown used to his mindset, had no such hesitation.

“So, you don’t want to leave?” Nie Mingjue asked, then, glancing at Lan Xichen, continued, “Maybe one of us should, then.”

“So I’ll be pressured into going?” Wen Ruohan asked. “I think you might be underestimating how useful this information is. A-Xu can take care of whatever you do outside. My priority will be finishing this.”

“Why?” Wei Wuxian asked. “I was told you were following along with an investigation that’ll happen over twenty years from now. How does that take precedence over now? I… Uncle Jiang, the… it would be much easier if you all were back.”

Jiang Fengmian hesitated, a war transpiring in his brain in seconds. He knew, logically, that it wasn't fair to leave Wei Wuxian to run the Jiang Sect. Wei Wuxian had never been trained for nor wanted such a role, and, due to the nature of his succession, had no system of support in place. In all honesty, him leaving probably *would* be the right choice. It might force Wen Ruohan to leave, would help take the burden from Wei Wuxian, and would sacrifice next to nothing, as the rest of his family could stay.

But-

But.

Jiang Fengmian didn't know what had caused his children to end up the way they did, and learning that was a goal that currently eclipsed all others. Wei Wuxian wouldn't kill Jiang Yanli for no reason. Jiang Cheng wouldn't hate Wei Wuxian unless something had happened. It was unfair to Wei Wuxian, but Jiang Fengmian needed to know.

'*Picking them over A-Xian again?*'

They were his children. The simulation had made it very clear that he had failed Jiang Cheng in his hesitance to speak up. That Jiang Yanli had turned herself into her brother's and shidi's mother because Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan hadn't been there. What he was doing now — prioritizing *them* — was exactly what he was supposed to do.

(So why did he feel so guilty?)

Although they weren't experiencing guilt, his reluctance to leave was matched by all of the watchers.

"I apologize, Wei Wuxian, but leaving now simply isn't an option," Jin Guangshan explained.

"What about the investigation is so interesting? So long as just one person stays, we'll be able to counter whatever caused the incident. You don't *all* need to be here."

"We do," Lan Qiren disagreed. "Not only are we still lacking some information about the near future, but the people involved in the investigation need our full attention."

After thinking for a moment, Wei Wuxian continued "Mo Xuanyu said the investigation was being done by Lan-er-gongzi and himself. Why would anyone other than the Lan Clan need to stay for that?"

Lan Wangji flinched. It made sense — they had never met, after all — but that cold, uncaring, empty 'Lan-er-gongzi' couldn't have been further from what it should have been.

'*Lan Zhan,*' he thought. '*Call me Lan Zhan. That's not — I'm not-*'

"Mo Xuanyu's actions matter to us all. None of us will leave until we've learned everything we can about him," Wen Ruohan answered, and was somewhat surprised to find out that what he'd just said was unquestionably true. Normally, after seeing Wei Wuxian's unfaltering loyalty to the Jiang Sect, Wen Ruohan would have lost interest. A threat would need to be

dealt with, of course, but he was something Wen Ruohan could deal with immediately. Logically speaking, there was no need for the Wen to continue watching.

But that was only if he was willing to kill Wei Wuxian.

(Wen Ruohan wouldn't risk destroying the boy, as so many others had done.)

It was ridiculous to change the plans he'd spent decades trying to complete for *one person*, but-

Who, other than himself and Wei Wuxian, could leave an impact on the world that persisted for decades after their respective deaths? Who, other than the two of them, knew what it was like to be the unquestioned strongest? Who, other than them, had been made into the enemies of the entire cultivation world? Was an empty war (that he had lost, the first time around) really worth giving that up?

If there wasn't a need to kill Wei Wuxian, then Wen Ruohan had no reason to try to.

"...Okay then."

"Okay, what?" Madam Yu asked.

"Now that you've already seen basically all of the Sunshot Campaign, Mo Xuanyu isn't in anywhere near as much of a rush to get you out. Diminishing marginal losses, and all that; he isn't giving up much by letting you stay a little longer. Right now, he's mostly just trying to set up a working relationship with those of us in the past. He asked me to talk to you, but also said it was fine if I couldn't immediately convince you to leave."

Because that would leave Wei Wuxian more time to deal with the outside world before they got out. If he felt they weren't about to learn anything that would make things hugely worse, then he might as well take advantage of the time he could spend without having them interfere.

"I'll be going then," Wei Wuxian offered. "Want me to do anything for now?"

'*Be safe,*' Lan Wangji thought.

'Take care of yourself,' Jiang Yanli agreed.

'Don't let the unworthy use you any longer,' Wen Ruohan mentally added.

"No, I don't think so," was all Jiang Fengmian said.

"Great. Bye bye, then!"

There was a click, and he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

You know, I wasn't planning on including MDZS Q ep 23, but then I rewatched it and squealed the whole way through, so now it's here. Unfortunately, that episode took place when Wei Wuxian was still pretending to be MXY (which we're already past), so I had to change a few things for it to make sense. Sorry! The same thing happened with the donghua, where I was manipulating the scenes to make sense when I hadn't included some build up. And a bit of the audio drama too. That's actually what the chapter title means — that I "stitched" together this chapter just like NMJ's legs were stitched to that corpse. 🤣
:)

Eating and Drinking: WangXian Edition

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Tintin for all his/her help!

Warning: This chapter gets a tiny bit disgusting (to a possibly triggering degree). If that bothers you, please tread with caution!

Also, there's now a way to buy English translations of Mo Dao Zu Shi! If you are able, please support the author here!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As he sat down in the in-between realm's vast plane of white, Lan Wangji found himself turning his thoughts inwards. In the past few segments of the simulation, he had found himself losing his prized composure time and time again — almost always in response to something Wei Wuxian had done. The fifteen year old version of his simulated self had reacted much the same, but the older version had not. Every time Wei Wuxian had acted out, Hanguang-jun had taken it in stride (in *gratitude* over the fact that Wei Wuxian was alive at all).

That composure was admirable.

(Such a lack of shame was humiliating.)

Hanguang-jun's reputation was impeccable.

(There were scars of a discipline whip carved into his back.)

And yet, despite all the conflict Lan Wangji was experiencing, there was one thing he knew to be true: if things continued like this, Hanguang-jun would be able to make Wei Wuxian happy.

(Unlike their twenty year old counterparts, who apparently argued so often that, upon resurrection, Wei Wuxian had been sure that Hanguang-jun was going to try to imprison him.)

Ever since Wei Wuxian had been brought back to life, the simulated Lan Wangji had shown no aversion to his demonic cultivation; the entire time, it had only been understanding and acceptance. Although the changed culture in that world was most likely a factor at play, the actions of the adult Jiang Wanyin showed that such tolerance was far from the norm. The simulated Lan Wangji was making an active effort to actually understand Wei Wuxian. In that context, was his decision to join Wei Wuxian in drinking really a surprise?

‘*Especially considering how, in that world, Wei Ying has already died once,*’ Lan Wangji mentally added, giving an unheard sigh in the noisy room. After the real Wei Wuxian had contacted them, various conversations had started up, but Lan Wangji had abstained from taking part in any. His emotions had been a chaotic mess at the time, and he had far too much on his mind. Now, after allowing himself to calm down, Lan Wangji could think more clearly.

The recent segments had taken nearly all logic out of the second jade’s reactions, leaving him blushing and gaping speechlessly at his other-self’s actions. Now, he finally had a moment to prepare himself for what was to come.

And yet he still had no idea how he *should* react.

“Wangji,” he heard from his left. “I would like to speak with you for a moment.”

“Of course, Uncle,” Lan Wangji responded, standing up gracefully and journeying closer to where his uncle was. Thanks to the low volumes both of them had spoken at, no one paid any mind to them (as even Xichen was busy with whatever he was discussing with Madam Jin, Nie Huaisang, Jiang Yanli, and Nie Mingjue).

As Lan Qiren watched his nephew approach, he noticed the perfectly-blank expression on the boy’s face. Clearly, Lan Wangji fully expected to be scolded for his other-self’s actions. They had agreed not to pushish for events that had yet to happen, but Hanguang-jun’s decision to drink was outrageous enough (in Lan Wangji’s mind) to warrant such a reaction.

Lan Qiren just shook his head.

“Wangji, I have no objections to your older-self’s behavior thus far.”

“Why not?”

“I…” Lan Qiren hesitated, remembering the ridiculous scene Wei Wuxian had made as he was dragged back to the Cloud Recesses (because, for some reason, Hanguang-jun wasn’t willing to simply *explain* that he loved Wei Wuxian and didn’t want to hurt him). “...I have no objections worth mentioning at the current time.”

After thinking it over for a moment, Lan Wangji nodded in acknowledgement.

“In fact, I would like to ask that of you,” Lan Qiren countered, and, upon seeing his nephew’s confusion, elaborated, “What do you think of Hanguang-jun’s behavior?”

There was a beat of silence as the second jade thought, wondering how to properly articulate his feelings. Then, he straightened up:

“Hanguang-jun’s actions have remained righteous. I… cannot see myself acting the same, but I trust him to not indulge in evil. I would need a greater understanding of what happened before Wei Ying’s death to say any more.”

Lan Qiren nodded, then glanced away. Although neither of them would admit to it, they could both feel the beast towering over every word in their conversation.

(Even without ever being present, Lan Qiren's brother weighed heavily on his and his nephew's minds.)

"Wangji," Lan Qiren began again. "What everyone here is about to watch is a private moment between you and Wei Wuxian. I apologize for the fact that this will be revealed for everyone to see."

"...Perhaps the concealment zone will take over during this segment."

"Even then, Wen-gongzi and Sect Leader Jin would remain, would they not?"

A trace of displeasure appeared in Lan Wangji's expression, but he made no comment on the matter. In some ways, being with just them was even worse than staying with everyone, as the concealment zone took away Lan Wangji's support as well. However, knowing that complaining would be futile, Lan Wangji kept silent.

Seeing that, Lan Qiren frowned deeply and said, "No matter what your older self does during this next segment, stand proud."

"Uncle?"

"We both have faith in Hanguang-jun's righteousness. So long as that remains the case, don't allow yourself to falter. Wei Wuxian is unruly and disorderly and ridiculous, but… he is also kind and brave and loyal and righteous. You do not need to feel ashamed for loving another person."

"But-" Lan Wangji began, then cut himself off, looking down.

"When we leave the simulation," Lan Qiren swallowed, "I will support whatever choice you make in regards to him. If you feel too uncomfortable around a version that does not know you, then you do not have to meet. However, if you wish for something else… I have no objections."

It was somewhat ironic that watching a simulated Lan Qiren who would sooner commit suicide than speak those words was what convinced Lan Qiren to say them. Then again, everyone seemed to be learning about themselves through watching, so at least he wasn't alone in that regard.

Then, before Lan Wangji could answer, the white void around them faded to black. When light returned, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were sitting across from each other, two empty cups and a jar of emperor's smile between them. In the candle-lit dusk, Wei Wuxian's surprised face was visible.

"I will drink," Hanguang-jun repeated.

Lan Xichen watched closely, certain that his real brother would never consent to drinking after whatever they were going to be shown, making this his only opportunity to see it.

Smiling in amusement, Wei Wuxian clicked his tongue: "Hanguang-jun, you really have changed. When we were younger, you would get so mad if I drank even a tiny jar in

front of you! You even threw me off a wall and hit me. And yet now you're hiding jars of emperor's smile in your room and secretly drinking!"

Forcing himself to resist the urge to sigh, Lan Qiren looked up at the ceiling and wondered how his other-self could have possibly allowed this to happen. Although he had now given in, he had no doubt his other self would have opposed such a corruption at all costs.

Fixing his collar, Lan Wangji responded, "I did not touch those jars of Emperor's Smile."

"What?" Jin Zixuan did a double take.

"Why did you hide them if you didn't want to drink them? What, were you saving them for me?"

"Oh. *Oh,*" Jin Zixuan's eyes widened in understanding, and the first words exchanged between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji flashed before his mind. "Wow, that's… really sad, actually."

Although Lan Wangji's face remained impassive, he felt his breath stutter at those words.

(The first thing the simulation had told them was that Wei Wuxian had died. Slowly, they were starting to understand what that had *meant* to them in this future that would never happen.)

Seeing that Lan Wangji wasn't about to answer his teasing, Wei Wuxian deflated and caved in: "Alright, fine. You didn't touch them. I believe you, okay? Let's talk about something else. Come on, now. I want to see how many cups it will take to make an abstinent member of the Gusu Lan Sect drunk!"

He enthusiastically poured a bowl for Lan Wangji, who picked it up and — without hesitation — drowned it in a single gulp.

Under a perfectly blank face, Lan Wangji's heart began beating at the speed of light.

Wei Wuxian leaned closer, impatiently awaiting a flush-faced Hanguang-jun.

The watchers did the same.

Seconds passed, and nothing changed.

"...Are you a strong drinker?" Jiang Fengmian suggested, but, having never had alcohol before, Lan Wangji could only close his eyes apprehensively in response. As far as anyone could tell, nothing had happened.

Wei Wuxian pouted in disappointment, and began reaching over to refill Lan Wangji's cup. However, right as he started doing that, Lan Wangji frowned and lightly rubbed between his brows. With one hand supporting his forehead, he closed his eyes.

'*Did he…*' Wei Wuxian blinked several times. '*Did he fall asleep?*'

“What?” Nie Mingjue gaped. “I — you-”

“Who on earth responds to alcohol like *that*?!” Nie Huaisang demanded, pointing at Hanguang-jun as though the illusion were of a strange, alien beast, rather than a human.

“That is not what I was expecting,” Jiang Yanli laughed with Lan Xichen (who found the obvious relief on the real Lan Wangji’s face to be quite amusing).

Although he was still sitting up, he had slouched slightly and was leaning his head against his propped-up arm. Slow, even breaths proved that he had genuinely fallen asleep.

Jin Guangshan glanced down at the now-empty cup by Hanguang-jun’s side and unconsciously began to smirk.

“Hanguang-jun?” Wei Wuxian asked, leaning forward to wave a hand in front of his face. “Hanguang-jun?”

No response. Eyes wide in disbelief, Wei Wuxian slowly lowered his hand.

“Maybe it’s all for the best that you didn’t drink with us in the Cloud Recesses,” Jiang Cheng muttered, receiving a glare from the real Lan Wangji in response.

Wei Wuxian stared for a moment longer, observing Lan Wangji’s perfect features with shock. As the seconds bore on, he finally couldn’t deny it anymore.

‘*He’s actually asleep!*’ Wei Wuxian realized with a laugh. ‘*I can’t believe it!*’

Stars seemed to shine in his eyes as his whole face lit up into a rosy flush, his excitement growing. Unable to withstand the adorableness of what was before him, he covered his mouth in an effort to keep himself from squealing in excitement.

‘*Most people get drunk before they fall asleep! How could Lan Zhan skip right over that part? But ‘drunkenness’ was exactly the step I wanted to see! I can’t believe he’s so bad with alcohol!*’

Lan Wangji was *indescribably* grateful that he was “so bad” with alcohol. Every other watcher was at least somewhat disappointed by the result, so he alone was left to feel thankful that nothing had happened.

‘*Maybe this won’t be as bad as Uncle and I feared.*’

Still smiling in delight at what had happened, Wei Wuxian slipped one of the unconscious Lan Wangji’s arms over his shoulder and wrapped his own arm around Hanguang-jun’s waist, pulling him up. The gesture was completely platonic and even necessary, considering the situation. It was certainly far better than Lan Wangji’s earlier bridal carry.

And yet the expressions Nie Huaisang, Jin Zixuan, Lan Xichen, and Jiang Yanli were sending Lan Wangji’s way clearly implied a different interpretation of the event before them. An

interpretation the second jade was starting to realize Lan Qiren had no real objections to. Lan Wangji's ears flushed bright red.

(Jiang Cheng, on the other hand, just sighed, disappointed but not surprised by this end result.)

"Could we get two rooms, please?" Wei Wuxian asked, shamelessly reaching over to pull out Lan Wangji's money pouch again. After paying, he went to one of the rooms and laid Lan Wangji down on the bed, took off his boots, and tucked him in.

If anyone thought the series of actions had made the pair look like a married couple, they were smart enough to not mention it out loud. Lan Wangji was in the middle of a transitional phase, and dealing such a heavy blow to his mind would surely cause irreparable damage.

After ensuring that Lan Wangji was still genuinely asleep, Wei Wuxian blew out the candles and slipped into the night. Rather than going to his own room, he left the building and walked around until he reached a desolate grotto.

'*I finally have time to come out here alone,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*I wonder how Wen Ning is doing.*'

"I…" Lan Qiren frowned. "Was getting Wangji drunk a *ploy?*"

Wen Ruohan shook his head, "Unlikely; he was just as surprised as we were. He's just highly adaptable to any situation."

Wei Wuxian scanned around one more time, ensuring that no one was close enough to see him. Luckily, given the late hour, the streets were completely desolate. Resentful energy in the surrounding area jerked to a halt, then gathered towards Wei Wuxian like sharks around blood-filled water.

Wei Wuxian raised his flute to his lips, and Lan Wangji's song began to play.

"So, here's what I don't understand," Nie Mingjue turned to Lan Xichen. "I could accept not realizing that Wangji's money pouch was MianMian's, but how could he not remember that while remembering the *song*. He was basically hallucinating back then, wasn't he?!"

"And he didn't remember A-Ning," Wen Qing pointed out.

"Don't bother trying to find an explanation," Jiang Cheng objected. "Wei Wuxian's memory just makes no sense."

Before too long, the eerie sounds of rattling chains could be heard in the night. Out of the shadows, Wen Ning's corpse stepped out, its head lowered in death.

Wen Qing was up in an instant. She walked close and simply *looked* at him. Her brother stood before her. His pupil-less eyes were a glaring, hideous white; his dirt-filled, tangled hair was littered with branches; his pale, bloodless skin, the color of the moon; the obvious stiffness in a body without a beating heart.

Tears filled her eyes, but she forced them down with a shaky breath.

“Wen-guniang,” she heard from her right, and saw Jiang Yanli step close. Wen Qing could only shake her head, unable to face the sympathetic looks directed at her by all the present older siblings.

Wen Ning wore all black, making it nearly impossible to see him. For a full inspection, Wei Wuxian set his hands behind his back and began to circle around, observing closely.

Wen Ning shifted as if to follow after Wei Wuxian-

“Stand properly,” the Yiling Patriarch commanded.

And Wen Qing’s brother didn’t mind at all because he was a *corpse.* His soul was gone — he was *dead* — and even though she’d heard from him just a few hours ago, her doubts resurfaced once more.

(What if, while she was in here, something happened to the real version of her brother outside. What if, in trying to prevent his death, it happened even earlier?)

But then-

“Say… we still don’t know how Wen Ning died, right?” Nie Huaisang asked. “If he died in the Sunshot Campaign, I feel like Wei Wuxian’s ‘Ghost General’ would have been mentioned before-”

“Don’t *call him that!*” Wen Qing snapped, making Nie Huaisang instantly back off. Nie Mingjue bristled at the harsh tone, only to recall the look that had been on Nie Huaisang’s face when he found out about Nie Mingjue’s own prophesied death. He glanced at Wen Qing again, and quickly found his hate being replaced by something else:

Sympathy. Pity. Understanding.

And a horrifying realization that Nie Huaisang was right; they didn’t know how Wen Ning had died. In having returned to the future, it felt like they’d seen everything there was to know about the past.

Clearly, that was far from true.

“Hand,” Wei Wuxian commanded, and Wen Ning extended his right arm.

‘*I can see why Wen Ning was referred to as the Yiling Patriarch’s dog,*’ Wen Ruohan supposed. ‘*I’m a little surprised Wei Wuxian would do that to Wen Ning, though.*’

What had happened in the past to prompt it?

As Wen Ruohan thought to himself, Wei Wuxian began inspecting the iron cuffs around Wen Ning’s wrists. They were extremely thick, allowing them to remain strong despite their obvious age. Even at just a glance, it wouldn’t be shocking to assume they’d been there for the full 13 years Wei Wuxian had been dead.

‘*It’s not ordinary iron, either,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*Wen Ning is capable of twisting iron into sludge. He wouldn’t have these chains dangling if it was ordinary metal. They were probably created specifically to restrain Wen Ning.*’

Jin Guangshan raised an impressed eyebrow at the description of Wen Ning’s abilities, and looked upon Wen Ning in a new light. He wondered if he could convince Wen Ruohan to let him borrow the boy for a bit. Maybe Wei Wuxian could turn him into the Ghost General again, once they got out.

(Wen Ning had already betrayed the Wen Sect, after all. There was no future for him there.)

Wei Wuxian ran a hand along the chains and Wen Ning’s own hand, feeling the coarseness of the uncared-for skin. He then faltered, gripping Wen Ning’s hand tightly.

“What have they done to you all these years?”

Wen Qing’s breath faltered.

“Though, I guess I don’t have a right to criticize them,” he muttered, shaking his head.

‘Wei… Wei-gongzi… I’m here to help you,’ Wen Ning declared, his eyes earnest and kind despite the tight grip Wei Wuxian had on his throat. ‘Don’t worry Master Wei! I won’t harm you.’

‘How dare you hide people?!’ Wen Qing had asked, but then had helped hide Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng regardless.

“You shouldn’t have gotten involved in all this,” Wei Wuxian spoke aloud. “You shouldn’t have had… to suffer like this. And yet I turned you into a killing machine.”

Wen Qing pursed her lips. Even without knowing how her brother had died, one thing was clear: Wei Wuxian would never maliciously attack him. A possibility that had seemed so obvious throughout the first few segments was laughable now; Wei Wuxian was not the person who killed her brother.

So then, who was?

As though Wen Ning could understand him, Wei Wuxian continued speaking out loud: “The sects agreed to force me to hand you and the Stygian Tiger Seal over to them. I tried to destroy the amulet before I died, and you… it was said you’d been turned to ashes by the LanlingJin Sect.”

“I see. So Xue Yang wasn’t the first time then,” Nie Mingjue growled, the only one audacious enough to say that to Jin Guangshan’s face. “And I suppose you *also* don’t have an explanation for this one?”

Before Jin Guangshan could say a word, Wei Wuxian’s thoughts continued, ‘*Of course. They were trying as hard as they could to restore a damaged piece of the Stygian Tiger Seal. Why wouldn’t they salvate at the thought of having the Ghost General as well?* ’

“Don’t talk about him like that,” Wen Qing whispered, shaking in both fear and unbridled fury at the mere thought of people wanting to have *ownership* over her brother. Dead or not, Wen Ning was Wen Ning; she would never let them have him.

‘With things as they were, how could the sects let Wen Ning be turned to ashes? **Wei Wuxian thought, giving a bitter laugh.**

Nie Mingjue’s glare began to sear two holes through Jin Guangshan’s head, so he thought quickly and said, “Given Wei Wuxian’s description of the corpse-”

“Of my *brother?*”

“Ah, yes. Of-of Wen Qionglin. Given Wen Qionglin’s power, it seems likely to me that he was fairly difficult to destroy. Don’t you think it’s better for the world at large to believe such a weapo — such a *man* was gone? If they thought he was still around, certain people would tear the world apart trying to find him. And it’s only due to Wei Wuxian’s return that he was found at all.”

Nie Mingjue scoffed, but a look from Lan Xichen reminded him to back off.

(They still knew almost nothing about what happened at the end of Wei Wuxian’s life. They should reserve judgement for now.)

Wei Wuxian’s eyes narrowed, “I want to see who was responsible for these past ten years.”

He raised two fingers and set them against Wen Ning’s forehead, gathering a whirlpool of resentful energy around that point. The energy sparked and grew hungrily, then surged forward over Wei Wuxian’s arm and into his head.

His eyes snapped open.

Instantly, the world *changed.* The watchers were all in a first-person point of view, staring at a crowd of Nie, Jin, Lan, and Jiang cultivators, who glared with disdain. They felt themselves growl.

“The Ghost General is going crazy!” someone shouted.

The simulated Nie Mingjue raised his saber and leapt forward-

“*A-Ning!*”

They were in a cave. Chains held tightly to their ankles, wrists, and torsos. Three figures walked forward from the distance.

“Any progress?” the leader asked.

“Everything’s going well.”

“Jin Guangshan!” Madam Jin hissed, furious that she wasn’t as shocked as she should have been. “You-”

“Lan?” Lan Xichen breathed out, having recognized the clothing on one of the other men.

The memory vanished and returned them to the future. Wind blew wildly in all directions, sending Wei Wuxian’s hair flying back and giving the watchers a perfect view of the uncontested *rage* on Wei Wuxian’s face.

Wen Qing gave a mocking laugh.

It was a little ironic, she supposed, that Wei Wuxian (the man reviled for the disrespect he showed the dead) was the person showing the most courtesy to her brother. Between the leaders of the Great Sects and Wei Wuxian, she knew who she trusted the most with her brother’s body.

After all, the reason the other sects hadn’t raised similar armies was a lack of ability, rather than a *moral* disagreement.

A growl cut off the rest of Wen Qing’s thoughts as Wei Wuxian’s control over Wen Ning faltered. The Ghost General groaned and began to move, clutching at his head as though trying to endure tremendous pain.

Frowning, Wei Wuxian ran to Wen Ning and grabbed onto his head, running his fingers through Wen Qionglin’s hair. He searched and searched, until he finally managed to find what he was looking for.

Two black lines were pulled out of Wen Ning’s hair.

At first, the watchers thought the lines were branches that had been tangled into the corpse’s hair. However, upon a closer look, it was obvious that was not the case.

Long, thin, black nails had been hammered into acupuncture points on Wen Ning’s head.

Wen Qing froze.

(She was the leading expert on acupuncture in the world. And someone had used *her* chosen trade to hurt her brother.)

(She swore she would find whoever was responsible and make them pay for this.)

Clutching the nails tightly in his hand, Wei Wuxian glared and hissed, “The LanlingJin Clan and the GusuLan Clan.”

The words were said like a curse, but even Lan Qiren couldn’t bring himself to blame Wei Wuxian for it. Someone from the Lan Sect had done the unthinkable-

Wen Ning grunted again, trying to break free of something, and Wei Wuxian reacted instantly. He clapped his hands together, and a crimson array made of resentful energy

spread out above Wen Ning. The Ghost General grunted again, resistance clear in its body language.

A drop of sweat slid down Wei Wuxian's face as he narrowed his eyes in concentration.

'*Those skullpiercers sealed his mind. Whoever made them sure is something.*'

Wen Ning growled again, straining against his own body to the sound of cracking bones.

***'I'd never heard of anyone who could do something like this.*'**

He clapped again. The array became blinding-

Black pupils swirled into existence in Wen Ning's eyes.

"Eh?" Wen Qing asked. As soon as his eyes had changed, Wen Ning's body had completely stopped its struggle.

The Ghost General collapsed onto its knees, arms hanging limply by its side. Then, slowly, those dead eyes widened, softening into something resembling their former state.

Breathing heavily, Wei Wuxian leaned against a tree and greeted the corpse: "Long time no see, Wen Ning."

"Huh? I… why does he keep talking to… is he actually-"

The corpse looked up, its eyes somehow focusing on where Wei Wuxian was. Sweat dripped down Wei Wuxian's face, but his smile was indescribably warm and comforting, visible even in the darkness of night.

"It's you… Master," the corpse said.

The corpse. Said.

The *corpse*.

"...A-" Wen Qing took a shaky step forward. "A-Ning?"

Two far-too aware eyes looked up at the panting Wei Wuxian. Eyes that could focus in on something, and a face that showed emotion. Corpses weren't meant to have emotion.

'Wen Ning was the most powerful corpse I created before I died,' Wei Wuxian had explained to them in the second segment. 'Aside from how he doesn't fear injuries, heat, cold, poison, or anything else humans fear, he could also think on his own. He was truly one of a kind. And yet the Wen Ning right now clearly lacks his own free will!'

"So… when he said free will-"

"He actually meant it," Lan Xichen concluded. More than one jaw was gaping open in disbelief.

“Wait, wait-” Jiang Cheng shook his head. “But Wen Ning was *dead*. That’s a *corpse!*”

Wen Qing flinched but didn’t disagree.

“He was gone. So if his soul is still there — if he’s alive….”

Then Wei Wuxian had brought the dead back to life. Mo Xuanyu had been willing to sacrifice his own soul to accomplish the same, but Wei Wuxian could raise the dead with a snap of his fingers.

So then-

“What the…” Madam Yu shook her head, unable to believe what was before her. “That — he’s-”

“The Yiling Patriarch,” Wen Ruohan concluded, feeling his lips twitch up into a smirk. “A man who creates miracles.”

‘*Those skullpiercers were tricky,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*It’ll take quite some time for Wen Ning to heal completely. Even now, he’s probably having a lot of trouble thinking. I should make this fast.*’

Right as he was about to step forward, Wen Ning suddenly kneeled down so that he was kowtowing before Wei Wuxian like a servant before a king. Wei Wuxian huffed and tried stopping him, but was too physically drained to move from the tree. Then, continuing to defy all laws of physics, the corpse spoke again.

“I’m sorry, Master.”

The first thing Wen Ning wanted to tell Wei Wuxian after regaining consciousness was an apology.

(What had happened at the end of Wei Wuxian’s life?)

But Wei Wuxian just huffed a laugh.

“Do you have to talk to me like this?” he asked with a smile, suddenly swaying on his feet.

“Gongzi!” Wen Ning exclaimed, rushing forward to brace the exhausted Wei Wuxian.

Smiling kindly, Wei Wuxian continued, “We’ve finally reunited. You should be happy.”

He reached into his robes and pulled out the two black nails which had been embedded into Wen Ning’s skull.

Wen Qing nearly growled at the sight of them.

“I have something to ask you. Do these look familiar to you?”

Wen Ning shook his head.

The movement was stiff and awkward, but it was movement nonetheless. Beyond even that, it was *communication.* The Lan Sect was famous in-part for its knowledge of inquiry, which allowed it some measure of communication with the dead.

This went far beyond that.

"I can't remember anything that happened after I got caught," he explained, his voice hoarse and raspy (from both disuse and rigor mortis), but still so uniquely kind and soft that it was unquestionably *Wen Ning*. "I only remember Jin Guangshan and two other people."

"I saw them," Wei Wuxian confirmed. "Jin Guangshan was bent on becoming the leader of all clans. Maybe he studied you in the hopes of creating an army of high-level fierce corpses to the shock and awe of the other clans."

"What?"

"I wouldn't do something like that," Jin Guangshan denied. "Considering the presence of other clans, I'm sure it was a collaborative effort among the higher-ups of the sects to ensure our collective safety."

"Was it?" Jin Zixuan couldn't resist asking. In that moment, Jin Guangshan's polite mask vanished and he turned to his son with an outraged expression. Horrified, Jin Zixuan flinched back, an horrified understanding of the absolute *betrayal* he had just committed overtaking his mind.

"I-I mean-"

"Though, what confuses me is the presence of the GusuLan Sect. I can't figure it out…" Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully. "How did you escape your imprisonment?"

Startled by the sudden topic change, Wen Ning hesitated for a moment before responding, "I… don't know. I just heard your voice vaguely, and then broke the chain and got out."

'Still sleeping?' Wei Wuxian asked, his eyes flashing red.

With their newly increased sensitivity to resentful energy, the watchers could now feel the unquestionable power behind that line. A power so great that Wen Ning had heard it even hundreds of kilometers away.

'*How was he able to train such loyalty into the Ghost General?*' Jin Guangshan wondered. '*I must have failed to gain his loyalty if he was just being kept in the dungeons. And yet without even knowing Wen Ning still existed Wei Wuxian was able to wake him up — and the skullpiercers were still there too!*'

Truly, his other-self had made a mistake allowing such a brilliant mind to die (taking many of the boy's existing inventions with him too). He would be sure to not repeat that error.

“I see,” Wei Wuxian nodded. “Then-”

He cut off, hissing as the curse mark on his leg flared yet again.

Jin Zixuan had the stupidest son in the world, and he would never be able to repay Wei Wuxian for this. It didn’t matter that Wen Ning and Wei Wuxian both felt there was something to apologize for; he was certain in their intentions.

(Which made his curiosity that much stronger.)

“Don’t worry,” Wei Wuxian whispered, panting from where he kneeled. “I’ll be fine soon. This body is just too weak. I miss my old body. Do you want to know… what’s happened over the past few years?”

“I’ve… heard a few things,” Wen Ning responded. “All the people who were in the Burial Mounds are gone now. Sect Leader Jiang had his disciples kill you.”

Jiang Cheng flinched back, wincing as if something had stabbed him in the chest and then twisted the blade when he tried to get up.

“Ah, I need to clarify that,” Wei Wuxian shook his head. “Jiang Cheng didn’t kill me.”

"But-"

Wei Wuxian shook his head.

At those words, all four Jiangs breathed out simultaneous sighs of relief. It didn’t change everything — it was still a fact that Jiang Cheng had spent 13 years hunting down and torturing people who reminded him of Wei Wuxian — but at least there was that. Wei Wuxian’s death had been….

Had been something.

Contrarily, Lan Wangji and Nie Huaisang both frowned. By now, they could be relatively sure that Wei Wuxian hadn’t been personally killed by Jiang Cheng. That didn’t mean that the adult Sect Leader Jiang wasn’t involved.

(He had *led* the siege, after all.)

“Sorry, master,” Wen Ning said again.

“You just followed my orders,” Wei Wuxian countered. “None of this is your fault.”

“Orders?” Lan Qiren repeated. He glanced to the left and right, but everyone was just as confused as him.

“It was just… my destiny, to die like that.”

Lan Wangji shook his head, quickly walking to stand next to Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian wasn’t suicidal; he had proven time and time again that he knew exactly what he was doing

when he faced strong adversaries. However, it was also true that he hadn't shown any strong aversion to death.

He had been just as chipper as always from the second he came back to life.

His resilience was astonishing. And somewhat worrying.

(He shouldn't *have* to handle everything by himself. But he had no one he could turn to for help, so he did.)

"I… also heard that you managed to seal the Stygian Tiger Seal," Wen Ning pointed out.

Wei Wuxian laughed, "Maybe I was too confident. You know me. I'm always overconfident."

There was a beat of silence between them, and Wen Ning began to sway on his feet. It was clear that the lingering effects of the skullpiercers were quite strong. Seeing that, Wei Wuxian frowned.

"We should do something about those chains of yours."

"Hm?" Wen Ning asked, blinking as though he was having trouble focusing.

Wen Qing clenched her hands tightly.

And Wei Wuxian frowned as well, worry for Wen Ning overcoming him.

'*Maybe I could use Bichen,*' he thought. '*It's the best option I have. Though it feels wrong to use the second jade's spiritual sword in such a way.*'

Someone coughed.

"Hypocrite."

Cough, cough.

"...Is that one word really all we have to say?" Zizhen whispered.

"Don't look at me. I'm just relaying the commands of the spirits," Lan Jingyi protested.

Everyone frowned at the odd addition, wondering what was wrong with what Wei Wuxian had said. Was it because he'd used Bichen to clear away the dirt in Qinghe Nie's saber hall?

Mysterious.

Wei Wuxian looked down at Wen Ning again, and decided that he really couldn't allow Wen Ning to carry around such burdensome things — especially while his mind wasn't at 100%. It had taken him so long to meet up with Wen Ning to begin with; if he didn't act now, who knew how much longer it would take.

‘*Okay, I’ll go back to the inn first. If Lan Zhan is awake, I won’t do anything. But, if he’s still asleep, then I’ll quietly borrow Bichen for a while.*’

Nodding to himself, he turned around.

And found Lan Wangji staring back at him.

Nie Huaisang screamed.

“How long have you been there?!” Jiang Cheng demanded.

“Your future self is quite good at hiding his presence, Wangji,” Lan Xichen acknowledged, his heart beating quickly from the adrenaline rush he’d just gained.

In that time, a million thoughts flashed through Wei Wuxian’s mind at once:

‘*Ah! How long has Lan Zhan been standing here? What if he was never drunk, and just followed me all the way out here from the beginning? That’s too awkward even for me. I didn’t mention Wen Ning earlier, but then snuck out to meet up with him as soon as Lan Zhan fell asleep — but it’s not my fault! Every day I’m stuck with him and have no alone time! And I couldn’t meet with Wen Ning while he was here! No matter how nice Lan Zhan is to me, even I don’t have the audacity to summon Wen Ning in front of him. Wen Ning is responsible for the deaths of some members of Gusu Lan. I’m shameless, but not that shameless!*’

The Lans sucked in startled gasps at those words, but, remembering the Lan uniform on the man standing with Jin Guangshan, quickly deflated. Their sect rules told them to not make assumptions; they swore to learn what had actually happened before judging.

“H-hanguang-jun, hear me out,” Wei Wuxian began, only to falter when Lan Wangji stormed forward, straight past Wei Wuxian, and slammed his hand into Wen Ning’s chest.

The *smack* of the hit rang out in the plaza.

“...What?” several people turned to look at Lan Wangji, but he could only turn to Lan Qiren.

“Uncle, I… what is happening?” he asked, praying desperately that this was an adult thing, rather than a Hanguang-jun thing. Those hopes were dashed a moment later, when Lan Wangji saw his uncle’s unchanging bewildered expression.

It was another Hanguang-jun thing, it appeared.

To the great relief of everyone present, Wen Ning had refined enough of his consciousness to not want to fight Lan Wangji, merely lowering his head in response.

Normally, Wen Qing would be furious at anyone who was bullying her brother.

But now, knowing that this was *Hanguang-jun*, she was just confused.

As if he didn't feel like his rage had been properly expressed, Lan Wangji then began pushing Wen Ning until he was at least thirty feet away from the thoroughly-confused Wei Wuxian.

Although his face was its usual blankness, annoyance could be heard in his voice as he spoke:

"Go away," Lan Wangji ordered.

"I… what?" Lan Xichen asked, too stunned to mind the lack of grace he was currently exhibiting. Not that there was anyone to judge him; even Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan could only stare in wide-eyed befuddlement.

"Maybe… Wei Wuxian's asleep? And dreaming this?" Nie Huaisang suggested, giving a forced laugh. "How romantic that Hanguang-jun appears even in his dreams."

Perhaps feeling the same, Wei Wuxian furrowed his brows and thought, '*Something feels off. This is far too… childish.*'

No one could deny that.

Finally, apparently satisfied with how far he'd pushed Wen Ning away, Lan Wangji spun around on his heel and walked back to Wei Wuxian. The latter scrutinized him carefully.

'*He looks normal,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*His face isn't flushed or anything, and his expression is just as serious as ever. In fact, Lan Zhan looks even more serious, proper, and flawless than usual-*'

And now the real Lan Wangji was faced with a terrifying debate: was it more embarrassing to focus on his idiotic other-self, or the use of the adjective 'flawless' in Wei Wuxian's description of him?

He decided both were equally bad, and resolved to shut down his mind until the scene was over, instead.

As Lan Wangji walked forward, there wasn't any wobbling or unsteadiness in his stance. He was still the calm, righteous, impervious cultivator Hanguang-jun.

Then, Wei Wuxian glanced down.

'*Are his boots… on the wrong feet?*'

The watchers glanced down as well.

They were.

"Jiang-xiong, pinch me," Nie Huaisang ordered. "I think I'm dreaming."

"We're in the simulation. I can't pinch you. We basically *are* dreaming!"

“That *would* explain this,” Lan Qiren admitted.

Lan Wangji swore he would never try alcohol, regardless of how tempting Wei Wuxian looked while he was offering.

An awkward but nonetheless determined expression on his face, Wei Wuxian held up two fingers and asked, “Hanguang-jun, how many fingers am I holding up?”

In response, Lan Wangji carelessly dropped Bichen to the ground and stepped closer-

“Wangji?”

-And solemnly wrapped his hands around the two fingers, gripping them tightly.

There was a snort. Then two giggles.

Then, the juniors, Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, Jiang Yanli, and Wen Qing all *erupted* into laughter. Some, such as Jiang Yanli, Wen Qing, and Lan Xichen, tried to hide their laughter behind coughs, or at the very least keep it down. The rest of the audience had no such courtesy.

All around Lan Wangji, the hysteria of the traitors he had temporarily been foolish enough to believe were his friends rang in his ears. Among them, the amusement of his brother and the resignation of his uncle speared into him the hardest, leaving him pinned where he stood and unable to move.

His earlier conversation with his uncle regarding their mutual decision to accept Hanguang-jun’s actions now seemed like the ignorant babblings of two children who didn’t understand how horrible the real world could be.

Wei Wuxian could only blink at the perfectly calm face of the person holding onto his fingers, the awkward silence stretching out.

‘*This… definitely isn’t the normal Lan Zhan*,’ he finally accepted.

As much as Wen Qing wanted to let out a sarcastic ‘No, *really?’* she had to admit that he had a point; looking at Hanguang-jun’s expression, even she would never have guessed that. But the fact remained that….

“Hanguang-jun, are you drunk?”

“No,” was the decisive answer.

With an amused expression on his face, Wei Wuxian took back his hand and reached down to pick up Bichen from where it had been dropped to the ground. Lan Wangji’s hand remained in its previous position.

Meanwhile, the real Lan Wangji began working to master the art of filtering out everything around him.

Not bothering to hand Bichen to Lan Wangji again, Wei Wuxian began pulling the second jade back to the inn, thinking '*I've had countless drinking buddies and seen thousands of drunk antics, but it's the first time I've ever seen someone like Lan Zhan, who keeps a straight face and doesn't make a fuss, all while doing ridiculous acts.*'

"Isn't that nice, Wangji-xiong? He thinks you're unique!"

He was resolutely ignored in response.

"Alright, let's go back," Wei Wuxian said, dragging Lan Wangji along and followed by Wen Ning shortly after. They hadn't made it more than two steps before Lan Wangji spun around and wacked Wen Ning. On the head, this time.

The Ghost General was sent stumbling back.

Without hesitating for even a moment, Lan Wangji bowed lowly in apology to Wen Qing.

"...We agreed to not punish for events that have not happened yet," she said, then, in an unusual act of pettiness, added, "Besides, I doubt this is the only thing you'll end up regretting tonight."

The genuinely-visible horror that immediately blossomed across Lan Wangji's face was just the right amount of punishment for Wen Qing to forgive his future-self's crimes.

"What are you hitting him for?" Wei Wuxian laughed.

"Go away!" Lan Wangji shouted in a threatening tone he would never have used if he was sober.

"Oh, I see," Nie Huaisang grinned. "Jealousy, is it? That's so cute!"

Lan Wangji didn't dignify the words with a response.

"This is going to confuse Wei Wuxian so much," Madam Jin sighed.

"Okay, okay, whatever you say," Wei Wuxian accepted, knowing how futile it was to try and reason with someone who was drunk. "If that's what you want, I'll make him go away."

He grabbed his flute again and brought it to his lips, only for Lan Wangji to snatch it from him and growl, "Do not play for him!"

"Why are you being so pushy?" Wei Wuxian laughed.

"Do not play for him!"

Even Wen Ruohan could admit the interaction was adorable. Upon seeing his father's expression, Wen Chao quickly switched his sneer into a neutral face. Now that Wen Chao knew what the Yiling Patriarch was capable of, he knew sticking close to his father was even more important than before.

If Wen Chao's father valued the relationship between those two *freaks*, Wen Chao wouldn't say a word against them.

'*Oh, I get it!*' Wei Wuxian's eyes widened in understanding.

"Do you?" Jiang Cheng asked, skeptically.

'*Lan Zhan has always been opposed to demonic cultivation. I bet he doesn't like me using my flute to control Wen Ning. I see, I see. Gotta pet him in the direction his fur goes.*'

Remembering the intolerance for demonic cultivation the simulated Lan Wangji had shown upon the Yiling Patriarch's return, Lan Xichen sighed. He couldn't blame Wei Wuxian for the boy's interpretation of events, but it was a little frustrating nonetheless.

"Alright then, I'll only play for you, okay?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Mn," Lan Wangji agreed. Despite that, he continued to play with the flute in his hands, refusing to give it back. Several seconds passed, and Wei Wuxian's expectant expression soon shifted into an indulgent understanding.

"I see," he laughed, then raised two fingers to his mouth and gave a sharp whistle.

♪

'*Keep on hiding,*' the sound ordered. '*Make sure nobody finds you, especially while you're still not thinking at 100%.*'

Most of the watchers had to grit their teeth to resist the command, but Wen Chao had been unprepared and quickly gave in. He ran off away from the center of the room, only to cross the dimension's boundary line and end up on the opposite side, next to where Lan Wangji was.

Wen Chao froze as soon as he realized who he was next to, vividly recalling the second jade's fury as Wei Wuxian was thrown into the Burial Mounds. He quickly backed up to his original position with the rest of the Wens, nearly tripping over his own feet in the processes.

(Wen Ruohan sighed.)

Meanwhile, looking as though he'd much rather continue following after his master, Wen Ning began dejectedly walking away, his head hanging low. The chains clinked on the ground behind him as he dragged them along.

There was a transition, and Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had returned to the latter's inn room, Bichen still slung over Wei Wuxian's back. They had both sat down on the bed, though the formality of Lan Wangji's posture was clearly juxtaposed against the casual lean of Wei Wuxian's.

(Especially ironic given which of them was drunk.)

“Lan Zhan,” the Yiling Patriarch began. “Why don’t you blush even when you’re drunk? That makes no sense. Looking at you right now, no one would be able to tell-”

Before he could finish, his wrist was snatched by Hanguang-jun’s hand and his body was pulled into Lan Wangji’s arms.

“Ah!” he exclaimed as his face was squashed against Lan Wangji’s ample chest.

“Heavens above!” Nie Huaisang sat straight up. “Wangji-xiong, you-”

“*What?!*” Jiang Cheng shriked.

“The heartbeats,” Lan Wangji explained.

“What?” Jiang Cheng repeated, this time in synch with Wei Wuxian.

“The face doesn’t show anything. Listen to the heartbeats.”

Jaws snapped open, unable to resist gaping before what they were seeing.

“That’s-”

“Oh, my-”

Thump. Thump.

“That…. He-”

“Hanguang-jun is-”

“So romantic!” Nie Huaisang squealed. “Wangji-xiong, you should get drunk more often! Anyone would be falling at your feet after just a few minutes with this version of you!”

“No. Need.”

“Aw,” Nie Huaisang whined.

Though that did raise a question: Hanguang-jun clearly knew he loved Wei Wuxian, so why hadn’t he ever tried flirting until he was drunk? Why was the rational version of the second jade suppressing this side of himself? Was he just scared of rejection? Him? *Hanguang-jun?*

Strange.

As the fast-paced thumps of Lan Wangji’s heart continued, Wei Wuxian finally understood: “I won’t be able to tell from your face, so I should listen to your heartbeats to help me understand?”

“Mn.”

Wei Wuxian bent over in laughter.

“Uncle, Xiongzhang,” Lan Wangji gasped out, turning to the older men for guidance. Luckily, they were already standing in the same place as Lan Xichen had moved closer to Lan Qiren out of a fear that his uncle would start coughing up blood.

However, to the great surprise of both of them, Lan Qiren simply looked resigned.

“Wangji, I… I do not take back what I said,” Lan Qiren forced himself to admit. “This was meant to be a private moment between the two of you. How you acted… you do not need to feel ashamed.”

Lan Xichen nodded as well, giving an encouraging smile: “I know this is a hard transition of acceptance for you to make, Wangji. You don’t need to rush yourself, but you don’t need to regret it either.”

Those words would be far more comforting if it weren’t for the fact that Lan Wangji could *still* hear Wei Wuxian’s and the watchers’ laughter surrounding him on all sides.

When Wei Wuxian managed to look up again, he found Lan Wangji staring unblinkingly at him. A light flush dusted Wei Wuxian’s cheeks, and an elated grin spread across his face.

‘*Lan Zhan really is drunk. And he’s drunk in such a fun way! Wouldn’t it be a waste if I don’t tease him?*’

Lan Wangji paled, looking between the simulated Wei Wuxian and the surrounding watchers at a frighteningly fast speed. So many emotions were warring within him that he couldn’t even begin to describe how he was feeling.

Then, the simulated Wei Wuxian sat on Hanguang-jun’s lap, practically laying across his chest and using one finger to lift his chin.

And Lan Wangji felt his brain promptly shut off.

“What are you looking at me for?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Am I pretty?”

“Mn.”

“The prettiest,” Jiang Yanli laughed, making eye contact with Jin Zixuan and promptly breaking into giggles with him.

“Then, Hanguang-jun, are you going to do whatever I tell you to do?”

“Mn.”

“Wait-”

“Answer whatever question I ask?”

“Mn.”

Jiang Cheng quickly backed up. It was one thing for Wei Wuxian to be annoyingly close and touchy; he was like that all the time with his shidis in Yunmeng, so that wasn't especially noteworthy. However, this — that *obnoxiously* flirty tone — made it undeniable that this was not what it was supposed to be.

The simulated Hanguang-jun was clearly drunk, so he couldn't be entirely blamed for his actions; Wei Wuxian, however, could probably drink an ocean of alcohol without getting drunk, and had no such excuse.

"What are you *doing*, Wei Wuxian?" Jiang Cheng hissed, looking around at the way every watcher was observing the simulation terrifyingly closely. "I swear, if you don't stop right now-"

"Alright then!" Wei Wuxian lit up, having finally found a question to ask. "Have you ever secretly tasted the emperor's smile that's in your room?"

"No."

Considering that Lan Wangji was drunk right now, the watchers who had somehow (foolishly) doubted Hanguang-jun's integrity could be put at ease.

(With the exception of the few who noticed the dozens of loopholes that question contained.)

"Got it. Do you like rabbits?"

"Yes."

"Only because *you* got them for him," Wen Qing pointed out, smiling with a fond exasperation. Lan Xichen, Jiang Yanli, and Nie Mingjue's expressions all matched hers to a T.

"Hmm… Oh, have you violated any rules before?"

"Yes."

Lan Qiren really wished he could be surprised.

'*He really does answer any question I ask!*' Wei Wuxian beamed. '*Alright then, let's cut to the chase.*'

He cleared his throat.

"Have you ever liked anyone?"

"Yes."

"How about Jiang Cheng?"

A frown, "Hmph."

Wei Wuxian grinned.

The two glanced at each other awkwardly, neither really knowing what to say.

(If Sect Leader Jiang had actually been hunting down demonic cultivators, then Lan Wangji's dislike of him wasn't necessarily unwarranted.)

"Okay, then. What about Wen Ning."

The frown gave way for indifference as the drunk Hanguang-jun gave a simple, "Huh."

Wei Wuxian smiled even wider and pointed at himself, asking, "And how about this one?"

"Mine."

A dozen mouths opened up to gape in sync with Wei Wuxian, while the rest were filled with delighted squeals and amused chuckles. Contrary to everyone's expectations, once the initial shock wore off, Lan Qiren once again just sighed.

Lan Wangji felt despair consume him. His life — both inside and outside the simulation — was officially over.

'*Oh, I see,*' Wei Wuxian thought, glancing over at the sword swung over his back. *'When I pointed at myself, Lan Zhan probably thought that I meant Bichen.'*

"He thought-"

"What-"

"No,*you idiot!*" Lan Xichen sighed, flinching back a moment later and amending, "I apologize. I didn't mean-"

He cut off, staring in disbelief as Wei Wuxian stood up and walked to the left and right with Bichen, seemingly confirming his theory.

"It's… fine," Jiang Yanli accepted, laughing lightly. "Even I have to admit that was a little much, even considering the situation. I apologize for the trouble, Lan-er-gongzi."

"No need," Lan Wangji responded, his ears cooling from their earlier embarrassment to a much more subdued shade. "My other self played a significant part in this as well."

'*Get lost!'*

'Don't you see how much he hates you?' Jiang Cheng demanded.

'Wei Ying, you really are… the kind of person I hate the most.'

'It is bad for your body and mind…. Some things are beyond your control!'

'Everything is within my control!' Wei Wuxian had shouted back.

Everyone could acknowledge that, before Wei Wuxian's death, the second jade had certainly seemed to dislike him. The only reason Wei Wuxian might have thought differently was the affectionate actions the current Hanguang-jun directed his way.

(His indescribably humiliating, shameless, and audacious actions?)

(They had worked, hadn't they?)

Smiling brightly, Wei Wuxian held out Bichen and asked, "Do you want it?"

"I want it," Lan Wangji instantly replied, snatching Wei Wuxian's wrist and tugging it close. "I want it."

"I don't think you're talking about the same thing," Nie Mingjue muttered.

Jiang Cheng scoffed and looked away.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian seemed to sway on his feet, as if the earnestness of the words (and the person they were from) were enough to take away all his strength.

'*Lan Zhan. Oh Heavens, this is too much!*' Wei Wuxian thought, raising a hand to cover his gasping mouth as an overjoyed blush spread across his cheeks. '*If he was this sincere towards a girl, then what a man he'd be!*'

As Lan Wangji's ears turned darker than autumn leaves, Wen Ruohan sighed. Despite Wei Wuxian's obvious interest in the possibility of such a relationship, it was clear that his understanding of his own feelings was slim to none.

A pity, especially considering the hesitance sober-Lan Wangji had in regards to confessing.

However, even Wei Wuxian could realize there was something unique about the emotions he was experiencing. Recovering from the blow Lan Wangji had dealt him, he took a deep breath and spoke:

"How did you recognize me?" he asked. "Why did you help me?"

"Because he loves you!" Nie Huaisang whisper-shouted.

Lan Wangji opened his mouth to respond, and Wei Wuxian shifted closer in anticipation. However, a moment later, Lan Wangji's expression shifted, and Wei Wuxian gasped as he was abruptly shoved on the bed. Lan Wangji's fingers intertwined with his, keeping Wei Wuxian pinned against the mat.

"I see; a practical demonstration rather than a verbal response-"

"Huaisang! Stop terrorizing Wangji!" Nie Mingjue shouted, glancing in concern towards Wangji's rapidly reddening face.

The candles were snuffed out, and Bichen was thrown onto the ground once again.

Concerned, Wei Wuxian sat up in the darkness: "Lan Zhan?"

A familiar pressure point on his back was tapped once, and he was paralyzed just like he had been during 'Mo Xuanyu's' first night in the Cloud Recesses. Without explaining, Lan Wangji pulled open the blankets, tucking Wei Wuxian and himself in for the night.

"It's nine. Rest."

'*So it's the scary bedtime routine of Gusu Lan at work,*' Wei Wuxian realized.

"You can't honestly expect *him* to go to sleep at nine, can you?" Jiang Cheng asked. Knowing it was rhetorical, Lan Wangji didn't bother to respond. Jin Zixuan, however, couldn't help but chime in:

"To be fair, it's not like it's never been useful. It helped them keep track of the days in the Xuanwu cave."

"Don't remind me," Jiang Cheng requested, sighing heavily. If there was one thing to be grateful of in this further-future, it was that the overall atmosphere of every event had become far lighter. The Xuanwu cave-onward had been more than a little stressful for the watchers.

This was much more enjoyable.

"Can't we just rest and chat at the same time?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"No."

The Yiling Patriarch sighed, '*Oh, well. I'll have another chance to get Lan Zhan drunk again later. The answers will probably be revealed soon enough.*'

He struggled once again against the paralysis, and frowned in annoyance.

"Lan Zhan, remove it. I got us two rooms. We don't need to cram ourselves into the same bed."

After a pause, Hanguang-jun's hand reached over and, after fumbling around in the blanket for a while, started to untie Wei Wuxian's silk belt.

Jiang Cheng *screeched*.

"Okay! Yes! I'm lying! I'm sleeping!" Wei Wuxian immediately cried out. "Enough! Alright! I didn't mean to remove that! I finally understand why alcohol is banned in your sect-"

Without even looking, Lan Wangji raised his hand to cover Wei Wuxian's mouth, silencing him. To top it all off, Hanguang-jun even quietly shushed him, making his opinion on the matter clear.

Noticing his brother's distress, Lan Xichen smiled warmly and suggested, "Perhaps, when you try alcohol in our world, you should have it with me so that I can help you if something starts to happen."

"I will never drink."

"Don't be like that, Wangji. As Uncle and I told you, this is private; you don't need to feel ashamed for what your other-self chooses to do with Wei Wuxian."

"I. Will. *Never*. Drink."

"But-"

"Thank you for the offer, Xiongzhang," Lan Wangji finished, forcefully ending the conversation in the most polite way possible.

Mouth still covered by Lan Wangji's hand, Wei Wuxian glanced to the side and thought, '*Ever since I've come back to life, every time I want to tease Lan Zhan like before, I end up digging my own grave instead. That can't be right! Where did I go wrong?*'

"Poor A-Xian," Jiang Yanli laughed, delighted by what had been shown. She made eye contact with her fiance, sharing yet another smile with him.

(They knew full well that what they were doing was a grievous inversion of privacy, but the Concealment Zone hadn't recognized the scenes as part of what needed to be avoided, and no one was willing to risk something important by activating it again. They forcefully pushed their discomfort aside, trying to focus on the positives of what had been shown instead.)

"The next morning," Lan Sizhui declared.

The earliest rays of sunlight were just barely beginning to shine through the windows, painting the room a golden hue. Wei Wuxian frowned, grumbling in discomfort, and shifted in his spot.

'*When two people are in the same bed it gets way too hot,*' he thought, pulling off his outer robe.

"This isn't going to end well," Madam Jin sighed, trying to hide a smile that was rapidly forming on her face. Noticing that amusement, Jin Zixuan sent a sympathetic look Lan Wangji's way.

The robe was carelessly tossed on the ground, but Wei Wuxian remained under the covers of the bed. The only reason he was awake earlier than Lan Wangji was because he hadn't been able to sleep at all, so his decisions didn't necessarily contain his usual levels of foresight. After a moment, he glanced over at the still peacefully-resting Lan Wangji and frowned.

'*Doesn't Lan Zhan feel uncomfortable sleeping with so many layers? No, he's drunk; there's no way he was thinking clearly. Alright, I'll be a good person,*' he thought, sitting

up enough to peel off Hanguang-jun's robes.

"Wha — Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji protested, scandalized.

"What's the problem? He's 'yours,' isn't he? Or did I hear that wrong?" Nie Huaisang teased.

Jin Zixuan and Lan Xichen simultaneously snorted, and Jiang Cheng gave an annoyed grumble.

"Do not laugh for no reason," Lan Wangji scolded, having nothing else he could say after his other-self's actions from the previous night. That warning only made Nie Huaisang, Jin Zixuan, and Lan Xichen laugh even harder than before.

'*Oh,*' Wei Wuxian suddenly thought, pulling the watchers out of their conversations. Glancing over, they saw what had caught Wei Wuxian's attention.

The Wen Sect's seal which had been branded into Lan Wangji's chest, exactly where Wei Wuxian's had been once upon a time.

All at once, the good humor in the watcher's expressions disappeared (with the exception of Wen Chao's, who, after careful consideration, decided his father might get annoyed if he laughed out loud, and resolved to remain silent).

"That's… *exactly* where A-Xian had his," Jiang Fengmian pointed out, stepping closer.

And, unlike the alcohol, *this* reminder of Wei Wuxian was not a product of warm nostalgia. They didn't know for sure why it was there, but the watchers were certain that this was a symbol of heart-stopping grief.

An image flashed into Wei Wuxian's mind of the discipline whip scars he had seen carved into Lan Wangji's back. He shook his head at himself.

'*I shouldn't go any further,*' he thought, moving to pull back from Lan Wangij.

Then, Hanguang-jun's sober eyes snapped open, and Wei Wuxian froze.

The watchers paused and, in a quarter second, analyzed the scene before them at a frightening speed. They knew the buildup to the current situation hadn't been romantic (hearing Wei Wuxian's thoughts allowed them to be certain that Wei Wuxian had truly just been concerned about the temperature). And yet, looking at it now….

The shirtless Wei Wuxian stared down at Lan Wangji, surprise evident in his expression. His glossy black locks framed his face and spilled over his shoulders toward the bed, allowing them to surround Lan Wangji's face as well. Although he had begun to pull back, Wei Wuxian's hand was still on Hanguang-jun's chest, right on the edges of his robe.

And Wei Wuxian was. Still. Shirtless.

Jiang Cheng sucked in a breath, "Oh, no-"

"Oh, *yes*!" Nie Huaisang squealed.

Lan Wangji shot up, practically tumbling off the bed in his haste and promptly crashing onto the floor.

The laughter Lan Wangji heard echoing around him would scar him until the end of time.

"You…" Lan Wangji gasped.

"Hm?"

Although he was still smiling widely, Lan Xichen's laughter began to taper off at what he saw.

"Last night…" he looked down. "I…"

Realizing what Lan Wangji was worried about, Wei Wuxian smirked, winking at Lan Wangji and resting his chin on one hand as he said, "You were so bold last night, Hanguang-jun."

Lan Wangji was completely silent.

"Do you… really remember nothing about last night, Hanguang-jun?"

It seemed he truly didn't. Even with just this, Lan Wangji's face had become as pale as snow.

And it was *horror* on his face there. Laughter continued throughout the watchers, and even the real Lan Wangji seemed to not recognize the emotion on his other-self's face. But Lan Xichen could see it clear as day.

That was fear.

And Lan Xichen had no idea why it was there.

'*Well, I guess it's a good thing he doesn't remember,*' the ignorant Wei Wuxian supposed. '*If he asked me about sneaking out to meet Wen Ning last night, neither lying nor saying the truth would make my situation better.*'

Wen Qing frowned, torn between gratitude that her brother was a thinking, feeling human soul again, and anger at how he still needed to hide like a rat from the world at large. Doing that to a corpse was one thing, but her sweet, *stupidly* kind brother needing to cower in fear made her blood boil.

"I…" Lan Wangji hesitated once again, a haunted look in his eyes. "Wei Ying-"

He cut off as Wei Wuxian began to laugh.

"What a man! Hanguang-jun, I was just kidding," he took off the blanket, showing that his pants and boots were still on. "I just took off our clothes. Your chastity is still intact;

you haven't been tainted. Don't worry so much!"

Despite that reassurance, Lan Wangji was still frozen.

Something shattered behind them.

"Why do you always ruin their moments together?!" Nie Huaisang complained, glaring at the restless Qiankun pouches.

'*Oops. With the drinking and everything, we completely forgot to duet Rest for them last night,*' Wei Wuxian realized. He looked back at Lan Wangji, and found the shocked man still sitting still.

Jin Zixuan, seeing the distress his fellow romantic disaster was experiencing, sent Lan Wangji a sympathetic gaze.

By this point, the ropes on the pouch had come loose, and half the arm had already crawled out of the tiny opening. Reaching forward, Wei Wuxian began searching around through Lan Wangji's semi-open clothes, knowing the other man was too frozen to react. A few seconds later, he had retrieved his flute.

"Hanguang-jun, don't be scared, alright? I'm not going to do anything to you," Wei Wuxian explained. "It's just that you took away my flute last night, and I need it back."

The number of pitying gazes being sent Lan Wangji's way nearly tripled in quantity.

Although Lan Wangji quite clearly wanted to ask questions about the previous night, he would never do so while he had a job to complete. As such, he instead pulled out his guqin, and walked towards the three pouches.

They played Rest.

🎵♪🎵

And played it again.

🎵♪🎵

And again.

🎵♪🎵

And finally, after the third time, managed to get the agitation to cease.

"That corpse is… quite powerful," Jiang Fengmian admitted, rubbing his eyes tiredly. To his right, his daughter had nearly completely zoned out, the lull caused by the calming notes of rest affecting her greatly.

Madam Yu clicked her tongue and rapidly shook her head, trying to wake herself up from the half-asleep drowsiness the musical cultivation had left her in.

After waiting a moment to ensure the corpse was truly settled, Wei Wuxian walked over to gather the body parts, only to suddenly comment, "Our dear friend really hasn't been missing any of his workouts."

The sash on the torso had been opened just enough to reveal a heavily muscled chest.

"*Why* are you focusing on that right now?!" Jiang Cheng complained.

Grinning, Wei Wuxian reached over and smacked the chest a few times, exclaiming, "Hanguang-jun, look at him! If I hit him while he were alive, the impact would have bounced back and hurt me! Just how on earth did he train?"

Lan Wangji's brow twitched as Wei Wuxian smacked a hand against the body once again.

Nie Mingjue felt a strange shiver run up his spine as he watched, perhaps as a result of the annoyed glare the real Lan Wangji was trying (and failing) to keep down.

Finally, having overcome some of his shock, Lan Wangji stepped forward to put the Qiankun pouches away, being sure to tie each of them multiple times. The thick, heavy knots were quite an overreaction.

'*It's jealousy,*' Nie Huaisang mouthed at a grinning Lan Xichen.

Then, hesitantly, Lan Wangji glanced back at Wei Wuxian.

"Hanguang-jun, why are you looking at me like that? Are you still worried? Trust me, I really didn't do anything to you last night. Of course, you didn't do anything to me either."

After hearing that, Lan Wangji thought for a few moments before looking up and, in a low voice, asking, "Last night, other than taking your flute, I…."

"What else did you do?" Wei Wuxian assumed. "Nothing much really. You just said a lot of things."

"...What sort of things?"

"Oh, no."

"Nothing too important. Oh, though you did say you like…"

Hanguang-jun froze.

"Wei Ying, *please!*"

A smirk, "You said you like rabbits!"

"Why do you feel a need to lead him on like this?" Jiang Cheng scowled, doing everything in his power to resist the urge to facepalm.

(He failed.)

Noticing that Hanguang-jun had looked away at his words, Wei Wuxian cheerily added, "It's okay! Rabbits are so cute — who doesn't like rabbits? I also like them. For eating that is!"

Madam Yu and Jiang Cheng gave simultaneous tired groans as the simulated Wei Wuxian erupted into laughter.

~~There may or may not have been a tiny smile on Lan Wangji's face that formed at the sound of Wei Wuxian's joy.~~

"Here, Hanguang-jun. You drank so much last night… er, you got so drunk last night. You're probably not feeling too good now. You can wash your face, have some water, and rest for a while before we set off again."

"Oh, right. There's still the investigation," Jin Guangshan blinked.

"This time it's pointing us Southwest. I'll go down and buy some breakfast while you're doing all that."

"Wait."

Wei Wuxian glanced back.

"Do you have any money?"

"What?"

Lan Wangji stared at him calmly, repeating, "Do you have any money?"

Wei Wuxian grinned, "Of course! You think I don't know where you keep your money? I'll grab some breakfast for you too, alright? Hanguang-jun, you can take it slow. We're not in a hurry."

Jiang Cheng sighed.

"I apologize for him. He's too used to using our money however he wants. Now, even though he's not a Lan-"

"Oh, don't worry about that, Jiang-xiong!" Nie Huaisang laughed. "Even beyond the bond of a sect, one husband's money completely belongs to the other, right?"

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue shouted as Lan Wangji's ears turned a bright, flaming scarlet and Lan Xichen, Jiang Yanli, and Wen Qing nearly doubled over in laughter.

Jiang Cheng just scowled deeper.

(Wei Wuxian was a member of the Jiang Sect. Now, *everyone* seemed to be working together to take him away from them.)

Wei Wuxian danced downstairs and exited the inn, picking up various snacks as he went sightseeing. He then sat down on some stairs, bathing in the sunlight as he ate.

After waiting for a while, he saw a group of thirteen to fourteen year old children run across the street.

Jin Guangshan backed away with a disgusted expression on his face, especially wary of the grabby hands of commoner children without his usual entourage (even if he consciously knew that they wouldn't be able to touch him).

The child in the lead sprinted forward like he was flying, holding onto the long string of a kite with one hand. Behind him, the rest of the children ran carrying toy bows and arrows, shouting as they chased down the kite.

Laughing, Jiang Yanli turned to her fiance and asked, "They're only a little younger than A-Ling. Do you think he's done something like this too?"

"No need. He can *actually* use a bow," Jin Zixuan pointed out, trying desperately to not think about the bullying he had seen his son dream about going through while Wei Wuxian tried to heal the curse mark. He deeply, truly hoped Jin Ling's imagined lack of friends wasn't an accurate representation of the situation.

(And yet, time and time again, Jin Ling had been put in danger because he went on nighthunts alone.)

Several shots were fired, but the flimsy faux bows were unable to shoot fast enough to pierce the rapidly twirling target. As Wei Wuxian watched the kite shooting, he couldn't help but reminisce about his own experiences.

'*Back in Lotus Pier, I almost always won first place when we were doing this. Jiang Cheng, on the other hand, was always second. His always flew too far to shoot, or not as far as mine.*'

Jiang Cheng flushed, remembering the few times Wei Wuxian had 'let' him win while Madam Yu had confined him to Lotus Pier.

(Right before it went up in flames.)

He frowned at the memory, but took a deep breath and forced himself to keep watching.

'*Our kites were almost twice the size of other people's kites,*' his thoughts continued, and the memory formed. '*It was in the shape of a flying beast. With bright, exaggerated colors, a large, gaping mouth, and sharp tails that flapped in the wind… from a distance, it was bright and lively and a little bit silly. Jiang Cheng and I both loved them. Whenever we took them out to compete, we were so proud…. Uncle Jiang had assembled the framework for us, and Shijie was the one who painted it.*'

Knowing that Wei Wuxian still referred to her as 'Shijie' despite not being part of the Jiang Sect anymore filled Jiang Yanli with warmth. On the other hand, Madam Jin and Madam Yu

both frowned.

For years and years and years, Madam Yu had accused Jiang Fengmian of betraying her and siring Wei Wuxian. Those claims were never serious (if someone had actually believed them, Jiang Cheng's position as heir would be much more tenuous; Madam Yu would never do that to her son), but they had still been spoken. Over and over again, she had claimed that Jiang Fengmian — the man who personally put together a kite for her son — was neglectful and unloving.

Well, he had made a kite for Wei Wuxian too-

What did that change? He had put in the same amount of work for Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng had believed her claims without opposition. There must be some merit to them-

Or he had just started to believe her because she had the loudest mouth.

'Jiang Fengmian! Do you really think that anything will change just because you've raised your voice?' Madam Yu had screamed.

Slowly, Madam Yu's eyes drifted to her former friend, the fierce scowl on her face quite clearly conveying her message:

'*I didn't know about the kite. How am I supposed to take something I'm not aware of into account*?'

The steady, unfaltering look Madam Jin sent back more than answered that.

'The only reason you don't know is because you were never there. If you weren't meeting with me, you were on nighthunts. If you weren't doing that, then you were terrorizing everyone at Lotus Pier and making them miserable. You never saw them happy, so you never thought it might be you that caused the change.'

A raised eyebrow: '*And you think you're any better? I at least allowed the boy to stay; your son has never even seen his half siblings!*'

In response, a tired huff: '*Yes. I know that now. We're both wrong, and we* both *need to change.*'

As the two Madams had their silent conversation with each other, Wei Wuxian's attention was occupied by a far more important matter: determining what the children's kite was supposed to be a picture of.

'*...If it's not a stone, then maybe it's a pancake?*' he thought, furrowing his brows in concentration. '*Or a beast I don't know about?*'

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew the kite over, sending it crashing onto the ground.

"Oh, no! The sun fell!" one child cried out.

Wen Ruohan immediately tensed, realizing what was going on. In the face of such blatant disrespect toward his sect from the *powerless*, he would normally take a stand. Unfortunately, this was a simulation, and there was nothing he could do.

(And besides, *he* started a war, and then lost. It may have been from betrayal, but he knew he only had himself to blame.)

'*I see,*' Wei Wuxian thought, realizing the same thing Wen Ruohan had. '*They're playing an imitation of the Sunshot Campaign.*'

"They were in the area of Yueyang," Lan Sizhui narrated. "When the QishanWen Sect was at the peak of its prosperity, it abused its powers everywhere. Since Yueyang wasn't far from Qishan, its people suffered greatly."

Glares were being sent Wen Ruohan's way from all sides, but, as a person who had always preferred giving his disciples the power to make their own choices on how to handle matters, he was indifferent.

His son, on the other hand, wilted into a puddle at Nie Mingjue's fury.

Lan Sizhui had paused for a moment, as if needing to think over the lines he'd just said. Then, with a voice that sounded even more solemn than before, he cleared his throat and continued:

"Its people had suffered greatly, having been troubled by their unleashed beasts or bullied by their arrogant cultivators. After the Sunshot Campaign, the Wen Sect was… it was annihilated by the combined force of the other sects. The hundreds of years old foundation came crumbling down. In the areas around Qishan, many places enjoyed activities which celebrated the Wen Sect's destruction to the point where they had turned into traditions. This game was one of them."

Happy wasn't nearly enough to describe the sheer, ravenous *glee* that formed on Nie Mingjue's face at those words. He had more than gotten his revenge; in that world, Wen Ruohan would never hurt anyone again.

But, as he glanced to the side and saw Wen Qing frowning deeply, he couldn't help but wonder what happened between 'Wen Ruohan's death' and 'the Wen Sect's annihilation.'

The children stopped the chase and gathered around the fallen flag, wondering "What should we do? We didn't even shoot down the sun, it fell off by itself. Now who's the leader?"

"Me, of course!" one child raised his hand. "I'm Jin Guangyao! I killed the Wen Sect's biggest villain!"

Wen Ruohan clicked his tongue at the reminder, while Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang cooed. Having been reminded of the accomplishment of their to-be sworn brother, Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen made eye contact, smiling warmly.

Wei Wuxian matched their smiles as he watched the kids argue with one another. Then, the world froze. The memory was being put on pause by the spirits to give Jin Ling time to narrate appropriately:

"In these types of games, the head of all cultivators, Lianfang-zun, who was currently the most successful of all, was of course a popular character. Although his family background was a bit disgraceful-"

"That's not the only disgraceful thing about-"

"Jingyi, shut up!" Jin Ling fired back.

As the juniors began arguing, Madam Jin heard a soft "A-Niang?" from behind.

She glanced back, and saw her son looking up at her hesitantly. Seeing his wide, open, hopeful eyes, she couldn't help but look away.

"A-Niang, later…."

"I know," she responded, not elaborating.

(Yes, she had acknowledged that there was something wrong with the way she had been acting. Now, she had to figure out what to do about it.)

"-And besides, it's not disgraceful," Lan Sizhui commented. "This is just about the general public's opinion of him. Like Senior Wei said, his mother has nothing to be ashamed of."

"Okay, but what about his fath-"

"*Anyways,*" Ouyang Zizhen said, and there was a sound followed by a 'hey!' like he had snatched the script out of Jin Ling's hands. "Anyways, um. Although his family background was a bit disgraceful, the fact that he'd later climbed to such a high rank was exactly why people respected him."

'*Of course,*' Nie Mingjue smirked. '*If he's my sworn brother, he has to be the most capable there is.*'

"During the Sunshot Campaign, Jin Guangyao spent years secretly working undercover in the Wen Sect, deceiving them and uncovering a tremendous amount of information."

'*Years,*' Wen Ruohan mentally repeated. '*No wonder I grew to trust him.*'

"After the Sunshot Campaign, Jin Guangyao used flattery, wit, and countless other methods to rise to the rank of Chief Cultivator, fully deserving of the title. Such a life could be considered a legend!"

It sounded like Lan Jingyi was gagging in the background.

‘*If I’d been playing, I’d definitely want to be him too,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, time resuming. ‘*Choosing this boy to be the leader would indeed be reasonable.*’

“Ah, Er-ge, doesn’t this work out great?” Nie Huaisang grinned. “Your to-be brother in law already likes your to-be sworn brother!”

“Oh, wonderful,” Jiang Yanli clapped her hands together. “When that happens, I’ll really be related to A-Xian through A-Xuan!”

Because Wei Wuxian’s husband’s brother’s sworn brother’s actual brother would be her husband.

“We’re closer than that!” Jiang Cheng protested. “He’s our martial brother! You don’t *both* have to marry to be related.”

“But it would all work out so perfectly then,” Jiang Fengmian pointed out to his son, and Lan Qiren gave a heavy sigh in the background.

However, by now, the other children had raised their objections to the first’s suggestion.

“But I’m Nie Mingjue! I won the most battles and captured the most people. I should be the leader!”

The boy who had taken the role of ‘Jin Guangyao’ responded, “But I’m the Chief Cultivator.”

‘Nie Mingjue’ threateningly raised his fist, “So what if you’re the Chief Cultivator? You’re still my youngest brother. You’ll have to run away whenever you see me anyways.”

Nie Huaisang collapsed into laughter at (what he felt was) a flawless impersonation of Nie Mingjue.

‘Jin Guangyao’ decided to stick to his character, flinching and quickly running away.

“You short-lived idiot,” someone else grumbled.

“‘Jin Zixuan!’ You died earlier than I did! You’re even more short-lived!” ‘Nie Mingjue’ responded, feeling defensive of the character he’d chosen to be.

The two made eye contact with each other, finding their earlier humor made awkward by the reminders of their deaths.

Huffing, ‘Jin Zixuan’ replied “So what if I’m short lived? I still ranked third.”

“Even if you’d ranked third, it’s only for your face!”

Jin Zixuan flinched (remembering his less-than-chivalrous treatment of Jiang Yanli during the ‘soup-incident’) and shrank in on himself slightly. When Jiang Yanli glanced over in concern at his reaction, he flushed and looked away.

‘*Sorry,*’ he mouthed to her.

She tilted her head in confusion.

One child seemed to be tired of all the running and fighting, so he sighed and sat down on the stairs: “Okay, okay. Let’s stop fighting. I’m the Yiling Patriarch, so I’m the strongest. If you guys insist so much, I can be the leader.”

Wei Wuxian was speechless.

By the boy’s waist, there was indeed a wooden stick meant to be Chenqing. This was the Yiling Patriarch.

“Shameless,” Lan Qiren muttered, looking between the boy and man sitting next to each other. “He certainly plays his part well.”

‘*A tiny Wei Ying,*’ Lan Wangji realized looking back and forth between the real and pretend one and wishing he could stop the idea of children from entering his mind.

‘*Wangji, calm down!*’ Lan Xichen mentally responded, seeing what his brother was feeling. ‘*You’re only fifteen! Adopting children can come later!*’

“No, no!” someone objected. “I’m Sandu Shengshou. I’m the most powerful.”

Jiang Cheng startled.

“Jiang Cheng, how is it possible for you to be better than me? Is there even one time you didn’t lose to me? How dare you say you’re more powerful? Aren’t you embarrassed?”

Madam Yu and Jiang Cheng both rolled their eyes.

“That’s definitely Wei Wuxian,” Nie Mingjue muttered.

“Hmph. Why can’t I be better than you? Don’t you remember how you died?”

All the light left Wei Wuxian’s face at once.

There was a beat of silence. The children continued arguing, but the watchers’ attention was occupied by Wei Wuxian’s expression.

“It was as if he had been pricked by a poisonous needle. A sharp, faint pain came from all around his body,” Lan Jingyi explained, sounding quite confused.

The watchers *wished* they shared his confusion.

‘The Yiling Patriarch Wei Wuxian is dead!’

‘Really? Who killed him?’

‘Who else? His old friend Jiang Cheng, the leader of the Jiang Clan.’

“He’s not denying it,” Wen Ruohan pointed out.

“And who would there be to deny it to?” Madam Yu hissed. “He knows what really happened. Being reminded of that doesn’t mean he has to think about it! Besides, he already told Wen Qiongling that wasn’t what happened!”

“Then what do *you* think happened?”

The boy playing the Yiling Patriarch was suddenly shoved to the ground, the "Stygian Tiger Seal" cracking on impact.

"Hey! Why did you guys push me?" he sat up and pointed accusingly. "It was all of you against just me! That's not fair!"

Frowning, Jiang Fengmian commented, “They said his ghost army backfired on him. I don’t see why that wouldn’t be the case, even if…”

Even if Jiang Cheng led a siege against him. A siege that the four remaining great sects had all participated in.

‘Everyone said you were consumed by your ghost army,’ Hanguang-jun had said. ‘Is that what happened?’

‘I died,’ Wei Wuxian responded. ‘It doesn’t matter… how it happened.’

But then-

From his spot beside Wei Wuxian, the ‘Yiling Patriarch’ clapped his hands twice, gathering the attention of the whole group. He stood up and grinned.

“Look at me! Chenqing on my left, the Stygian Tiger Seal on my right, and the Ghost General! I’m invincible!” he cackled, ignoring the fact that the "seal" was now broken. “Where’s Wen Ning? Come out!”

A child from the back of the crowd raised a hand and feebly replied, “I’m here… uh… I’m just saying, when the Sunshot Campaign happened, I wasn’t dead yet.”

“Doesn’t matter!” another person responded.

“...Does anyone else think these children’s impersonations are unnervingly accurate?” Nie Huaisang asked.

Lan Xichen, Lan Qiren, Nie Mingjue, Wen Qing, Wen Ruohan, the Jiang parents, Madam Jin, and Jin Zixuan all raised their hands.

“Cultivators, may I ask you a question?” Wei Wuxian spoke up. The preteens froze and turned to face him, not used to an adult interfering with their game in such a relaxed manner.

The 'Yiling Patriarch' looked at him with both wonder and caution as he asked, "What is it?"

Wei Wuxian did a visual sweep over the crowd of children and asked, "Why isn't there anyone from the GusuLan Sect?"

Jiang Yanli giggled knowingly at the question, and Wen Qing gave a fond smile.

"There is."

"Where?"

Frowning, the 'Yiling Patriarch' pointed at a child who hadn't said anything the entire time: "That's him."

The child had delicate features — the seedling of a charming, handsome man. A white rope was wrapped around his forehead, replacing a forehead ribbon.

"Who is he?" Wei Wuxian asked.

The 'Yiling Patriarch' scowled in disdain: "Lan Wangji."

'*...Fine. The children understand the essence. Someone like Lan Wangji should indeed shut his mouth and stay silent,*' Wei Wuxian thought. Then, out of the blue, Wei Wuxian's lips curled upward again.

"The poisonous needle had been pulled out and tossed in a far away corner. All the pain he was feeling was instantly wiped away," Lan Sizhui explained.

As Lan Wangji blushed, Jiang Cheng couldn't help but flinch. Once again and even without actually being there, his future self had brought Wei Wuxian misery, while Lan Wangji's….

"How strange," Wei Wuxian muttered. "Why can someone as stuffy as him always make me so happy?"

Warmth rapidly spread across Lan Wangji's chest, and he felt his heart rate quadruple in an instant. He glanced back at his uncle, and found nothing but approval in the man's gaze.

After another moment of hesitation in which he looked back and forth between Wei Wuxian and his uncle, Lan Wangji relaxed, a genuine smile spread across his lips.

The watchers were brought inside to where Hanguang-jun was descending the stairs (finally having composed himself enough after the panic Wei Wuxian had instilled in him earlier). As he stepped outside, he was greeted by the sight of Wei Wuxian and a gaggle of children eating steamed meat buns together.

Taking another bite, Wei Wuxian looked at the two children standing back to back before him and instructed, "Now, in front of you, there are thousands of the Wen Sect's cultivators! All of them are heavily armed and surround you so closely that even a

single drop of water wouldn't be able to get past. Your eyes should be sharper — yes, that's it!"

Lan Qiren had always been an educator first and foremost, but he had also all but raised his nephews single handedly. He had seen countless parents throughout his life, and could now more than understand what Jiang Yanli had meant when she said Wei Wuxian's role as head disciple had made him good with kids.

Which, horrifyingly, meant that Lan Qiren had officially run out of reasons to prevent his nephew from trying to court Wei Wuxian. A certain levity rose up within him at that realization, but it was accompanied by a sense of dread.

It would be quite a mess when they left the simulation.

Meanwhile, unaware that he was being watched (by either Lan Wangji or the watchers), Wei Wuxian continued, "Okay, Lan Wangji, pay attention here! You aren't how you usually would be. You're covered in blood! There's a lot of killing intent! You look really scary! Wei Wuxian, move closer to him. Do you know how to spin the flute? Let me see you try; use only one hand. Be cooler! Do you know how to look cool? Come, let me show you."

'Wei Wuxian' handed the stick that had been dubbed Chenqing over, and the real Wei Wuxian expertly spun it with one hand (to the gasps, awe, and applause of the children).

"Can you imagine how they'd react if they found out they were being directed by the real Yiling Patriarch?" Jin Zixuan excitedly asked, making Jiang Cheng give a reluctant smile and causing Nie Huaisang to snicker at the possibilities.

"Okay, now you try," Wei Wuxian directed, handing the stick back. At that moment, Hanguang-jun stepped close, finally alerting Wei Wuxian to his presence. Seeing that he was down, Wei Wuxian dusted off his trousers and said a quick goodbye to the children, laughing as he returned to Lan Wangji.

"Sorry Hanguang-jun. I gave them all the breakfast I'd bought for you," Wei Wuxian explained.

"I can't believe you gave him your money," Jiang Cheng sighed, finding Lan Wangji's acceptance of the situation unbelievable.

"Really? I think it's rather nice," Wen Qing countered. "After all, it means Wei Wuxian currently has access to a surplus of food."

Understanding instantly, the watchers felt their good moods get washed away by the tide of those words.

As if agreeing with Wen Qing, Wei Wuxian continued, "Say, don't you wish we had this during the war?"

"Had what?"

“Food this good! And plenty of it! Shijie did her best to help me, but you know there wasn’t much that could be done.”

Jiang Yanli blushed a rosy pink as Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, Wen Qing, Nie Mingjue, and Lan Xichen gave her a round of applause for her effort.

“It’s a good thing they went all out for the post-victory banquet. I was wasting away before then,” Wei Wuxian cried out. “Though I guess you Lans didn’t get the full experience since Lan Qiren insisted on vegetarian food for all of you.”

As Wei Wuxian shivered in visible disgust, Lan Wangji allowed his lips to relax into a genuine smile.

The world shifted once again, bringing them to a crowded military camp filled with cheers. Just outside the walls of the Nightless City, cultivators and servants alike were raising toasts and bringing out the wine Qishan had kept in its storages. Blood drenched the cultivator’s clothes, but even the injured had bright smiles on their faces, warmed by the setting sun.

“Directly after the war?” Wen Ruohan assumed, eyeing the cheap tents and injured crowd with a terrifyingly blank expression. He turned to the Nightless City he could see just a few li away, and wondered if his corpse was still laying there.

(Or if his ashes had already been scattered.)

Although the lower-ranking soldiers were free to move around as they pleased, the ones truly being celebrated were all gathered together in the largest tent, sitting at tables far too expensive for the non-building they were currently inside. Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, and Jiang Cheng all sat with their highest ranking disciples and clan members, creating pockets of each sect’s colors in the area. At the head of the seats was Jin Guangshan, his robes as pristine and golden as always — the only ones without any obvious stains.

Nie Mingjue scowled. Since the various revelations regarding Xue Yang, he had found his patience for the Jin Sect rapidly decreasing.

At that moment, Jin Guangshan stood, raising a cup in toast: “For the past few years, our sects have all worked tirelessly to defeat the tyranny known as the Wen. Today, our victory has at last been won!”

There were cheers from all around as the various disciples celebrated. The Sect Leaders (expected to maintain their composure) did little more than smile, but their joy was equally clear.

“In celebration of this momentous occasion, the Jin Sect has prepared a feast for all!” Jin Guangshan revealed.

“Thank you, Sect Leader Jin!”

“Thank you!”

“Thank you!”

Jin Guangshan nodded at the people who had spoken to them, accepting their thanks with grace. Meanwhile, young women wearing the uniforms of the Jin Sect’s servants filed in, leaving a plate at every person’s table. Their eyes shone with awe as they approached Nie Mingjue; their respect was unparalleled around the twin jades; going to the Jins had blush forming on many of their faces; Jiang Cheng was given his food enthusiastically.

If the servant hesitated for a moment before approaching Wei Wuxian with his food, no one was willing to comment on it.

“Oh, wonderful,” Jiang Yanli lit up, seeing what had been on the plates. “A-Xian loves pheasant!”

Which made it perfectly appropriate that the Jiang Sect had been given an expertly prepared plate of heavily seasoned pheasant (wonderfully showcasing the care Jin Guangshan had put into customizing the dishes for each sect).

Watching steam rise from the juicy meat, some of the watchers were forced to swallow. The simulation ensured they couldn’t get hungry, but it had been quite some time since they had last eaten anything.

Wine was passed around as well, and, before too long, the hall was filled with the sounds of excitement and laughter. The war had just ended; everyone was ready for the celebration.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian was easily draining his wine glass like it was water, showing a great appreciation for the sweet taste. To his left, Jiang Cheng was trying desperately to remain as composed and elegant as his father had been before him (but even he couldn’t help but react with joy when he took a bite of the food).

Upon a closer inspection of the meal, Jiang Yanli was overwhelmed by a certainty that she had been consulted about the best spice combination to use when preparing dishes for Yunmeng. In fact, given the way Jiang Cheng spun around to look back at her other self with awed gratitude, she was sure that was true.

Finally, Wei Wuxian took a bite. He chewed once, then twice, then brought a hand to his mouth, a troubled expression on his face.

“Aw, is the food too nostalgic?” Nie Huaisang suggested.

“You think he’s getting emotional about Lotus Pier?” Wen Qing asked, observing the tremble in his hands.

Looking at Wei Wuxian’s now-wide eyes, Lan Xichen added, “That does seem to be-”

Wei Wuxian stood up, jostling the table before him in his haste. A cup tipped over and shattered against the ground.

“Wei Ying?” the real Lan Wangji asked, standing up as well.

“Ah, Wei-gongzi,” Jin Guangshan cleared his throat, looking awkwardly around the now-silent room. “Is something wrong? Was the food not to your liking, or was it the drink?”

Without bothering to respond, Wei Wuxian spun on his heel and stormed out of the tent.

Everyone else was left speechless.

“That… he didn’t even dismiss himself,” one cultivator muttered to his friend. She nodded in equal annoyance, and turned to glare at the place Wei Wuxian had just departed from. The original speaker, however, turned to stare at the gaping Jiang Cheng, who was quickly becoming aware of the number of eyes on him.

“Stupid Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng muttered, wishing he could hide himself under a rock. Sighing in agreement, Madam Yu silently cursed Wei Wuxian’s foolishness.

“What do you think he’s trying to say by leaving in the middle of the banquet?” someone else asked.

Eyes glanced back and forth between where Wei Wuxian had left from and where the sect leaders sat. Although the Lan Sect’s rules against gossip kept that particular group from saying anything, it was clear that they were in agreement with everyone else’s outrage.

“What? Is he too good to eat with us?”

“Does he think he won the war by himself?”

“Well, him and his corpses.”

Lan Wangji frowned deeply.

(Was Jiang Wanyin not going to say anything to defend his head disciple?)

“Corpses and ghosts and *beasts.*”

“Yes, yes, his monsters. Doesn’t need humans if he has them, huh?”

“How arrogant-”

The scene changed — sky darkening at once — and gagging replaced the gossip.

The watchers flinched back, startled by the sudden change in scenery. They were outside the tent, and far away from the crowds they could hear in the distance. The pitch black sky above them showed the that sun had already set, which made the only sound they could hear appear that much louder.

Someone was gagging and hacking and coughing below them, unable to throw up despite his attempts. A lump in the shadows shifted — nearly impossible to make out from behind their pitch black hair and clothes.

They heaved again, barely able to sit upright as they desperately tried to expel the contents of their completely empty stomach.

"...Wei… Ying?" Lan Wangji asked, recognizing the figure at last.

Wei Wuxian curled over again, coughing acid and bile onto the dry grass.

The darkness spread out, overwhelming their vision and taking over the entire simulation. When it cleared, it was instantly obvious that they were in another memory.

After all, to someone who could sense resentful energy, it was impossible to not recognize the Burial Mounds.

Jiang Yanli gasped, feeling as though her lungs were being crushed by the tremendous pressure weighing down on her. She had no time to worry about that, however; she knew *she* was fine.

The simulated Wei Wuxian, struggling to move forward, wasn't so lucky.

Crows cawed mockingly overhead, and Wei Wuxian crawled across the dry ground. He breathed in heavily, obviously exhausted by the few simple movements he could do.

Wen Qing kneeled down beside him at once, and, as she inspected him, quickly became pale. As the other watchers saw the change in her skin tone, they felt their own dread rise as well.

Demonic cultivation allowed Wei Wuxian to deal with corpses fairly easily, but it in no way helped with what was now a far more pressing problem: food. His cheekbones were sharp enough to cut glass, and he had lost so much blood from the few corpses who had gotten close enough to bite him that his skin was practically translucent, now. His veins were far too easy to see. Wei Wuxian had always been thin and muscular before being thrown in.

(Not much fat to sustain him in a situation like this.)

When Lan Wangji had seen the child Wei Wuxian starving in the streets, he thought nothing could be worse than that. However, as the simulation loved to remind him, when it came to Wei Wuian, Wangji's predictions had a tendency to be wrong.

Wei Wuxian stopped, unable to move anymore, and brought a hand to his forehead. If he wasn't already lying on the ground, he would have surely fallen over. Nausea and dizziness rose up within him from the lack of food and water, and the world around him blurred.

The simulation blurred as well, making Wen Chao feel dizzy just from looking at it.

Wei Wuxian clutched his own stomach next, breathing out shakily. He could feel it eating him from the inside out, his stomach acid burning through his flesh for lack of anything better to do. It rose up within him, crawling its way to the top-

He gagged, bile spilling out of his mouth onto the dirt below.

Then, he looked to the side, and found something on the ground next to him. It was a dead crow.

Food.

"Wait, A-Xian that-"

The reasoning behind Jiang Yanli's objection was obvious. What was before them was barely identifiable as a crow. There was more rot than bird now. Feathers were scattered — bones stuck out — there was a growth of fungus and moss crawling up the side. Bugs and maggots had nearly eaten it clean, and some were still squirming around in its head.

But they were food too.

Wei Wuxian snatched the bird and brought it to his-

He doubled over again, and the watchers realized they had been brought back to the post Sunshot Campaign celebration. Wei Wuxian coughed against the ground, unable to throw up when he hadn't eaten in over a day.

His throat burned with the action like a thousand knives were spearing at him from the inside.

"Oh. The pheasant," Wen Qing realized. "No wonder he couldn't eat."

"But-but A-Xian loves pheasant," Jiang Yanli protested. "He-that's… I-"

Even she had no idea what she was trying to say. All she could do was attempt to voice the absolute feeling of 'that's impossible' that was rising up inside her.

Jin Zixuan stepped close, setting his hand next to hers and wishing he could embrace her this time.

Then, to the watcher's growing dread, the memories began again.

Wei Wuxian was standing now, having eaten just enough to regain that energy. The few roots or weeds he had managed to have were just barely enough to keep him alive from one bird to the next. Normally, it would be child's play for him to shoot a bird down with a well-thrown rock.

Now, he could barely keep himself upright as he stumbled forward.

At first it looked like Wei Wuxian was trudging through a damp swamp colored red with resentment. However, a moment later, the watchers remembered that the Burial Mounds was a wasteland with barely any water.

What Wei Wuxian was trudging through was a soup made of bodies and blood.

These were some of the newer ones. They had not yet decomposed into skeletons, instead becoming a sludge of rotten flesh and guts and liquids. Thousands of bodies were piled on top of each other at the bottom of the Burial Mounds, making a perfect feeding ground for vultures and fungus.

Just a short while ago, Jin Zixuan had wished the simulation included smell so that he could fully experience the pheasant the sect's had been served. Now, words could not describe how grateful he was that that was not the case.

"Senior Wei knew, based off the stars, what direction Yunmeng was in," Lan Sizhui explained. "He was fully aware of where he had to go, and how far it was to get there. Without Suibian, it would take a significant amount of time. He had understood that. Or, at least, he thought he had."

"Ominous," Jingyi commented.

A few bitter smiles appeared, but the return to the worst time in Wei Wuxian's life sucked out any joy they might have had.

From the sludge, a half decomposed arm rose up, eager for human flesh.

"*Down*," Wei Wuxian ordered.

The command reverberated through the watchers just as much as it did through the corpse, and several people fell to their knees. It was clear, by now, that Wei Wuxian had gained mastery over the initially deadly Burial Mounds.

"How long has it been?" Lan Xichen asked.

Looking at the gaunt, bloodless, impossibly-thin limbs on Wei Wuxian's once-muscular body, Nie Huaisang decided he didn't want to know. Corpses were no longer a problem for him, but…

Food most definitely was.

Wei Wuxian walked forward again, ignoring the blood that had soaked through his robes and the rotted flesh that clung to his skin. Then, suddenly, he stumbled.

"Wei Ying?"

Nothing had grabbed onto him — his command over the dead was now uncontested — and nothing had gotten in his way. His body was now just too weak for him to control. He gasped and straightened up, making sure to keep his mouth and nose out of the rot

that surrounded him. An intestine and a half-destroyed finger were nearly close enough for him to taste.

Corpses covered every centimeter of land in this section of the mounds, making it impossible to find a weed or root or bamboo shoot to stave off his hunger. Weakly, he trudged over to a nearby rock and crawled on top of it, just barely high enough to escape the sludge.

'*A-Chao is the one who threw him in there,*' Wen Ruohan recalled. '*After attacking Lotus Pier on my orders.*'

His war was the reason Wei Wuxian was struggling like this. *He* was the reason that brilliant mind was crawling through guts and flesh and starving on a rock.

He looked down, unsure of what to do with that information.

And Wei Wuxian remained still, panting heavily on the rock as the world spun around him. There was only so long someone — even a cultivator — could go without food and sleep. His eyes fluttered closed, then snapped open.

For all he knew, if he closed his eyes now, it might be for the last time.

Wen Qing cursed. The gauntness of Wei Wuxian's body was all the more obvious now that he was laying still. If she had thought he looked bad upon his return to civilization, it was *nothing* in comparison to now.

'*Some of those* corpses *have more flesh on them than you do!*' Wen Qing mentally shouted.

Wei Wuxian curled up into a ball, feeling his stomach clawing at him from within. His mouth watered and thoughts of warm, thick soup filled his mind. He could smell the spice and could see the steam and could taste the way the rich, filling broth would spread across his tongue-

His stomach growled dangerously, and Wei Wuxian's eyes nearly fluttered closed yet again.

'*It's fine,*' Lan Wangji reminded himself. '*The real version of Wei Ying is outside the simulation with all the food he could ever need. And even then, the simulated version gets out. But-*'

"If he doesn't move soon…" Wen Ruohan trailed off, glancing over at Wen Qing expectantly. She pursed her lips, then looked back at Wei Wuxian with a firm expression.

"Unless he does something soon, his death wouldn't be a surprise."

Lan Wangji felt his heart freeze.

"I wouldn't worry too much though," Wen Qing continued, sounding as though she was speaking to herself more than them. "Wei Wuxian might seem exhausted now, but we know

he gets out of the Burial Mounds. Besides, he… already has experience with starvation; he knows what to look out for in terms of his body."

(And how wrong was the world for *that* to be even remotely comforting?)

Wei Wuxian's mouth watered even more as the salty spice of soup consumed his mind, and his stomach gave another whine of protest. Even the revolting smell surrounding him wasn't enough to curb his hunger.

He swallowed again.

The sun traveled forward, and hours passed as Wei Wuxian laid on that rock, unable to move. His torn-up robes had shifted slightly during that time, falling off just enough to reveal the set of ribs nearly bursting through the skin blanketing them. It truly seemed like any second now Wei Wuxian would wither away.

Jiang Fengmian sat down, burying his face in his hands. He had spent years searching for Wei Wuxian, hoping to stop him from having to experience too much starvation. He had succeeded, even if it had taken longer than it should have.

And, less than a week after his death, Wei Wuxian had gone right back to experiencing the same things.

'*Useless,*' he thought. *'I stopped whatever happened to him while he was in front of me, but as soon as I looked away, they just started up again. First with San-niang's punishments, and now….*'

(And that was without taking into account everything that was happening while they stayed in the simulation.)

The sun was starting to set, and Wei Wuxian was still lying on the rock, clutching his stomach.

"He's… okay, right?" Nie Huaisang asked, turning to Wen Qing. After hesitating for a moment, she shook her head:

"Wei Wuxian has experience with starvation. I highly doubt he would be stuck like this if it wasn't serious," she pointed out, remembering his tolerance for pain with increasing annoyance. "It's entirely possible this will leave him with lasting damage even after he gets out. In some ways… I'm almost grateful he managed to get a new body."

Lan Wangji nodded in agreement, frowning deeply at the sight before him.

'*Hungry,*' Wei Wuxian thought, swallowing again.

The world was still spinning, and Wei Wuxian's stomach cried out to him again, sending insistent pain signals to his brain like an annoyed, over-privileged client.

"Yes, yes," he muttered through chapped lips, patting his belly. "I know."

“This is *not* something to laugh about!” Wen Qing shouted at him.

Wei Wuxian winced, gripping his stomach even tighter as pain signals began to cut through him like he was being stabbed from within. He panted heavily, swallowing again as thoughts of food rose up once more.

Then, he looked down, and saw the swamp of meat below him.

“No,” Lan Qiren whispered, eyes widening in horror. “No, no-”

Wen Ruohan’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Slowly, Wei Wuxian’s hand began to fall toward the ocean of flesh surrounding the mini-island he laid on. He scooped some up, observing the rot like it was a delicacy prepared by a master chef.

Like the revolting soup around him had been a specialty prepared by his shijie.

Wei Wuxian crashed to the ground. It was the older him — the one who had already escaped the Burial Mounds — and who had stormed out of the post war party to try to throw up in the woods.

“Did he… did he actually….”

“Do you blame him?” Lan Wangji asked. Not a single person responded, too caught up in their shock to even try putting together a coherent sentence.

Back inside the tent, anger at Wei Wuxian was reaching its peak.

“He always left at meals during the war too,” someone pointed out. “What do you think could possibly be occupying his time so much? What, is he just not human enough to need food anymore?”

“Maybe he wants to spend time with some of those female corpses of his,” someone whispered.

“Excuse me?!” Nie Mingjue stood up, aghast, and was shocked to find that his other-self hadn’t reacted at all. This sort of sentiment had been building for a while, and his other-self had done nothing to stop it.

(Might even believe it, himself.)

“You know, I heard that Wei Wuxian stays with them every night.”

“Really? How fresh do you think the corpses have to be for him to take them? Or do you think he *prefers* them rotted? It sure would explain a bunch.”

Sect Leader Jiang Cheng shook in his seat at the baseless gossip occurring on the edges of the room, but tried to stay focused on the conversation he was having with Jin Guangshan. He wasn't joining in…

But he wasn't stopping it, either.

"Does he think himself above the sect leaders?" someone asked.

Jiang Cheng clenched his cup nearly hard enough to shatter it.

"I…" Jiang Cheng shook his head, looking at his other-self in disbelief. "No… you can't *believe* that. That isn't what's happening at all! You saw how different he was after the Burial Mounds, didn't you? He's not-"

"A-Cheng, don't blame yourself too much," Jiang Yanli whispered. "A-Xian didn't explain when he left, and you can't leave in the middle of the banquet. Your other self doesn't even know A-Xian was in the… in the Burial Mounds. He might think A-Xian is going somewhere to have fun."

"But that's not what's happening at all!" Lan Xichen frowned, clenched his fists. "Everyone here couldn't be more wrong-"

"You think he enjoys taking dead women that much? Even more than having live ones?"

"Why not?"

"Hm. I wonder what those corpses taste like."

Everyone flinched.

(Their other selves were just going along with this. They weren't partaking in the gossip — they had more important things to talk about — but they were allowing it to continue nonetheless.)

(And it truly *couldn't be more wrong.*)

"Apparently, that's what he was doing every night during the war."

"Oh, yes. I remember. He was never with us, was he?"

"Say, do you think doing *that* with the dead is what gave him his power?"

Laughter sparked up from all around, the loudest of which was from Jin Zixun.

Jin Zixuan stared at his cousin, shock written clearly across his face.

"It's possible."

"Likely, even."

"Did you see how he didn't bow to even his own sect leader on the way out?" someone else whispered, and Jiang Cheng clenched his fist until the nails drew blood. "How good do you think the corpses have to be to distract him like that?"

Both Lan Wangji and the simulated Hanguang-jun began to grit their teeth together.

“Well, I wouldn’t expect him to have that kind of respect for anyone,” a member of a smaller clan whispered, then, lowering his voice even further, added, “I have a friend who’s a servant in the Jin Sect. From what I heard, Wei Wuxian’s the reason the Massacre of Lotus Pier happened.”

All the blood left Yu Ziyuan’s face at once.

She cleared her throat, quickly making her skin return to its normal hue, but the stunned expression on her face remained. It wasn’t like she hadn’t known what sort of power her words could have.

But to see it like *this*....

(Wei Wuxian had done nothing to deserve this fate. If his death was caused in part by this, then she might as well have been his murderer.)

(If the version of her from before the Great Sleep had heard that, she would have been overjoyed. Now, that very thought sickened her.)

“Can you believe his audacity?”

“His shamelessness?”

A girl nodded in agreement and asked, “Why aren’t the Sect Leaders doing anything?”

“I’ve heard that even Sect Leader Jiang can’t rein him in.”

“I’ll believe that,” someone laughed. “I mean, he just stormed off.”

“Not even a word to the rest of us-”

Hanguang-jun abruptly stood, unable to listen anymore. He turned, bowing deeply to each sect leader, and walked out without another word.

This time, not even Nie Huaisang could find any humor in Lan Wangji’s protectiveness of Wei Wuxian.

“Hanguang-jun is leaving?”

“Well, he’s never enjoyed inner-sect conferences and such.”

“And the Lan Sect does forbid gossip. I suppose he saw it fit to simply remove himself from the situation. Where do you think he’s going?”

“Ah, he must be going to help with the clean up.”

“I see, how honorable.”

“Truly, a ‘Light-bearing lord.’”

“Indeed. I suppose that’s to be expected of Hanguang-jun.”

The simulated Lan Wangji left the tent, not bothering to acknowledge the comments.

“Are you kidding me?” Jiang Cheng asked. “They literally did the exact same thing! Why is it only the Jiang Sect that’s being attacked for it?!”

Glaring with a force that rivaled a thousand suns, Lan Wangji nodded in agreement.

The watchers were then brought along with Lan Wangji as he walked though the paths leading away from the Nightless City (and the celebrations going on inside). After about two minutes of travel, he finally found what he was looking for.

Wei Wuxian had made it from the spot in the woods he’d been curled up in to a liquor storage run by the Jin Sect. If he noticed Lan Wangji’s approach, he didn’t show it, instead continuing to gulp down a jar of wine as fast as he could.

And, as Wen Ruohan looked back at the celebrations occurring in ~~his home~~ the distance, he couldn’t help but remember the agony that had been written all over Wei Wuxian’s face while he was in the Burial Mounds.

Agony that had been there, in part, because of him.

(Yes, there was a high chance Wen Ruohan would be able to succeed in the war if he tried again with this new information. He’d be able to spread the Wen Sect’s influence as far as he pleased, and ensure the idiotic leaders of the other sects didn’t continue to mess everything up.)

(But was any of that worth putting the Yiling Patriarch through what was happening to him now?)

He frowned deeply, watching Wei Wuxian drown himself in alcohol with unwavering eyes.

Finally, realizing that Hanguang-jun wasn’t just passing by, Wei Wuxian lowered the jar and turned his way with a raised eyebrow. The two stared at each other for a moment, neither saying a word.

Then, Wei Wuxian grinned and held out his jar: “Care to join me?”

For a moment, Lan Wangji could almost see their fifteen year old selves standing there, officially meeting for the first time.

“...You shouldn’t drink so much,” Lan Wangji responded.

“Ah, that’s right. Your rules say-”

“Wei Ying. It isn’t healthy for you to be doing this. At least eat first.”

And now the differences between Hanguang-jun and the twenty year old Lan Wangji were more obvious than ever before.

"...And how is that any of your business?' Wei Wuxian asked, retracting his offered jar and switching his expression to a glare.

And once again, Lan Wangji's earlier realization resurfaced full-force: as embarrassing as Hanguang-jun's actions were (especially while drunk), they served him far, *far* better when it came to Wei Wuxian.

Which meant…

Wei Wuxian sighed, "Whatever. It's not like I'm addicted. It wasn't a problem during the war, and it isn't a problem now. If you're worried about what I'll get up to while I'm drunk, don't be."

"Wei Ying-"

"Lan Zhan, I'm *fine*. Just washing out the taste, I promise," he gestured to his jar. "It's no Emperor's Smile, but it tastes much better than the food Jin Guangshan's *generosity* offered us. They tried, but there was nowhere near enough spice."

As Wei Wuxian shrugged in a 'what can you do' fashion, the watchers couldn't help but remember the young boy who had excitedly nawed on discarded watermelon peels.

He did genuinely love spice, but they couldn't help but wonder how old he had been when he learned spice could cover up the taste of a bad memory.

Then, Hanguang-jun's mouth settled into a determined frown.

"I know several songs with a calming effect. If you're drinking because of stress-"

"*Excuse me?*"

"You should stop using demonic cultivation so much," Lan Wangji elaborated, holding out a hand in an offer of help. "Wei Ying, come back to Gusu with me."

The watchers froze — all the air leaving their lungs — as Wei Wuxian's eyes flashed red.

"Oh, that was *not* the right thing to say," Nie Huaisang muttered.

In the next instant, the resentful energy that had crashed into them like a large wave turned into an avalanche, crushing the unprepared against the floor. The simulation mercifully moved farther away from the ensuing argument, lessening the effect slightly. What they had been brought to was a pair of cultivators drunkenly wandering off from the party into the woods. As soon as they heard the distant shouting, they froze.

"Wei Ying, stop!" Lan Wangji shouted from afar.

"You — Who do you think you are? If you take one step closer, I-"

"Listen to me!"

The two wandering drunks gaped dumbly at the scene.

“Is tha’ Hanguang-jun?” one asked, blinking in the direction of the argument.

“An’ Wei Wuxian,” her partner agreed. “They’re always arguing, ar’n’t they?”

“Mmhm,” the girl nodded. “What do you think Wei Wuxian did this time?”

“What *he* did?!” Jiang Cheng stood. “Wei Wuxian was minding his own business. Hanguang-jun’s the one who came and-”

“In all fairness, Jiang-gongzi,” Lan Xichen interrupted. “My brother was just trying to offer help, especially since no one else was providing any to Wei-gongzi.”

(Especially since *you* weren’t offering any to him.)

Madam Yu bristled and Jiang Cheng flushed, looking away, but Jiang Fengmian just broke eye contact, thinking Lan Xichen’s words over.

“Honestly, the war is over by now,” the girl muttered. “Why are we still letting Wei Wuxian do these things? It’s not like we need him anymo-”

“Shh, don’t say that,” her partner responded. “You never know when one of his spirits are watching.”

Sighing in annoyance, Jiang Cheng growled, “If people hate his demonic cultivation so much, why doesn’t he just switch back? It’s not like he doesn’t have powerful spiritual cultivation!”

Wen Qing pursed her lips, Nie Huaisang looked down, and Wen Ruohan rolled his eyes at those words. However, not noticing that, Madam Jin offered an answer:

“The power demonic cultivation reveals is unique,” she pointed out. “I would assume he’s just scared that something like the Massacre of Yunmeng will happen again. The Yiling Patriarch is an even more powerful deterrent than the Core Melting Hand once was.”

There were nods from all around as people accepted the obvious explanation.

When the world shifted again, it brought the watchers back to the far future, where Wei Wuxian (in Mo Xuanyu’s body), was walking through town with Lan Wangji, watching the kids become smaller and smaller in the distance as they departed. After pausing for a moment, Wei Wuxian shook himself out of his memories and turned to Lan Wangji with a bright smile.

“What do you think? Were those kids cute? Guess who the one with the rope tied around his head was pretending to be,” Wei Wuxian laughed.

After a moment of speechless silence, Lan Wangji finally couldn’t hold it in anymore: “...What did I really do last night?”

“No, no, no, you didn’t do anything. I’m just being ridiculous!” Wei Wuxian laughed.

Lan Wangji sighed at the reminder, making Jin Zixuan — the other member of the embarrassingly-in-love-with-a-Jiang club — send him a pitying glance.

“Well, let’s see where the hand takes us this time, shall we?” Wei Wuxian suggested, beginning their trek southeast. “Is this the right direction?”

“It is,” Lan Wangji confirmed, feeling the pull of the arm within the Qiankun pouch.

“How exciting. Has the pull gotten stronger since we retrieved the other pieces?”

“No. There is more force overall, but each piece has remained consistent in its strength.”

“Got it, got it. So, how did you recognize me?”

“Think,” Lan Wangji responded without missing a beat.

Jiang Fengmian chuckled, turning to Lan Qiren and commenting, “After seeing your nephew’s past self again, Hanguang-jun’s behavior is quite a shock.”

Lan Qiren nodded in agreement, gazing upon the adult version of his nephew with a strange sort of resigned pride.

Annoyed at the constant refusals, Wei Wuxian scampered over to Lan Wangji and leaned in until his face was less than a foot away from his partner’s.

“Lan Zhan! I’ve tried so hard to get answers out of you on the way here. Can’t you fall for it just once?”

Lan Wangji had continued walking forward, not bothering to respond to Wei Wuxian’s whining.

“Good luck, Wangji,” Lan Xichen whispered. “You have big shoes to fill.”

There wasn’t so much as a twitch from the second jade, and, if Lan Xichen wasn’t able to see his now-crimson ears, he might have thought his brother had turned deaf.

(Lan Wangji absolutely refused to give into Lan Xichen’s teasing. He would not react to the words of a traitor.)

Similarly, Hanguang-jun’s unchanging stride had brought him quite a distance forward, leaving Wei Wuxian behind. Changing his expression to an even more adorable pout, Wei Wuxian followed after him.

“Just once,” he complained again, raising a finger toward Lan Wangji to emphasize his point. Lan Wangji sent him a terrifyingly blank look, and Wei Wuxian deflated as if he had just been scolded.

‘*How is it even possible for those two to be this cute?*’ Madam Jin wondered, mentally putting together a list of matchmakers she could bribe to ensure the two would end up together.

“Okay,” Wei Wuxian cleared his throat. “Hanguang-jun, I’m going to talk serious business now.”

“Speak.”

A nod, “Well, the coffin slamming noises of the Chang Clan had stopped for ten years. Suddenly starting again now can’t be a coincidence; there must have been another cause.”

“What do you think the cause is?”

“It must have been the corpse being dug out.”

“Mn.”

As Wei Wuxian glanced over and saw Lan Wangji’s attentive, serious expression, he couldn’t help but recall the way Lan Wangji had looked the previous night while holding both of Wei Wuxian’s fingers. His shoulders shook with barely-suppressed laughter.

The watchers, of course, had no reason to hide their amusement, and Lan Wangji soon found himself yet again surrounded on all sides by the snorts, chuckles, and giggles of an ever-growing number of traitors.

Just to deprive them of any reaction, he put extra effort into making sure his expression didn’t change at all.

Forcing himself to calm down with deep breaths, Wei Wuxian continued, “I think the dismemberment of the corpse probably wasn’t simply to seek revenge, but was a malicious manner of suppression. The person who cut up the corpse intentionally chose places haunted by evil spirits to place the body parts.”

Both Nie brothers reacted at once to those words, tensing greatly.

“Combating poison with poison,” Lan Wangji agreed. “They balance each other out to keep the other in check.”

Lan Qiren sighed; even Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation would be preferable to something like this.

“That’s right. So, since the gravedigger dug out the torso yesterday, there wasn’t anything left to suppress the Chang Clan’s spirits anymore. Thus, the banging started again. It’s the same thing the Nie Sect does in their saber halls; the technique might actually be derived from the Nie Sect’s saber hall in the first place.”

“Just the torso was equal to all the Chang Clan’s spirits?” Wen Qing wondered.

Lan Xichen nodded, “I suppose we’ve been taking that corpse too lightly. I can now understand why the simulation would want to focus on it.”

“Whoever this perpetrator is, they’re probably connected to both the Nie and Lan Sects. They won’t be easy to beat.”

“There are only a few people like that,” Lan Wangji commented.

“Yup. The truth is slowly being revealed. And, since our opponent has started to move the corpse parts already, it means that they’re already starting to become anxious. They’ll definitely move again soon. Even if we don’t go for them, they’ll come find us, leaving us with more clues. But we’ll probably need to move faster as well. Only our dear friend’s right hand and head are left; we need to arrive before they do.”

Jiang Yanli took a deep breath, calming the growing tension in her body.

“And with that,” Jin Ling revealed. “Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian began their trek to Yi City.”

The simulation faded to black.

As the silence spread out, expressions ranging between ecstasy and despair appeared on the watchers' faces. Some, like Wen Qing, found the horrors Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning went through to have overwhelmed any happiness she could have had. Others were far more casual.

“What a ridiculous mess,” Madam Yu commented. “Whose corpse could that possibly be?”

“I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough,” Madam Jin sighed. “In the meantime, it was quite nice to see Wei-gongzi and Lan-er-gongzi interact like that.”

If Lan Wangji were anyone else, he would have squeaked at the comment.

“I can’t believe you drank alcohol!” Nie Huaisang agreed, bouncing over to Lan Wangji fearlessly. “And I can’t believe you’re such a bad drinker! Wangji-xiong, go drinking with me when this is over.”

“No,” was the simple answer.

“Aw, but you were so cute when you got all jealous like that!”

Lan Wangji was about to respond when a terrifying thought consumed his mind. In the simulation, his other self had gotten jealous of Wen Ning, and had swiftly moved to separate him and Wei Wuxian. It was the illogical behavior of a drunkard, and, luckily, it seemed no one thought Wei Wuxian had any romantic interest in the fierce corpse.

But right now, outside the simulation, was a fully-alive Wen Ning spending time with a Wei Wuxian who had never met Lan Wangji.

Which meant-

“Wangji, are you okay?” Lan Xichen asked, moving close.

“Xiongzhang…” Lan Wangji began, then paused, finding himself unable to continue.

Unaware of the gravity of Lan Wangji’s concerns, Lan Xichen sat down with his brother and leaned close to whisper “Now that you’ve seen what Hanguang-jun did while drunk, do you regret it?”

Lan Qiren looked over as well, vividly remembering his earlier conversation with his nephew, and praying he hadn’t accidentally made it worse. The longer Lan Wangji paused in thought, the more Lan Qiren’s stress grew. Luckily, before a minute had passed, Lan Wangji responded:

“I do not. That… shouldn’t have been shown to everyone here, but, just between Wei Ying and myself, I don’t believe I crossed any lines. And besides, it was….”

“Effective?” Lan Xichen suggested.

Lan Wangji nodded. When compared against the actions of the twenty year old Lan Wangji, there was no denying that the thirty five year old one’s were far more positive. Drunk or not, the real Lan Wangji had trouble believing he’d ever have the ~~courage~~ audacity to be so shameless, but it was certainly something to consider.

“Well, perhaps watching more from Hanguang-jun will help you come to a firmer opinion,” Lan Xichen suggested. “Despite the time we have spent watching him, I still feel as though there is a significant amount for us to learn.”

“...Do you think watching him will allow me to do the same?” Lan Wangji hesitantly asked. He still wasn’t sure he *wanted* to do the same, but it would be comforting to feel capable of that.

“I do. Are you willing to try?”

Lan Wangji nodded in agreement, and Lan Qiren relaxed at once. It was a good thing he let his older nephew talk to Wangji; Xichen always knew what to say.

Lan Xichen sighed quietly, wondering how he could even begin to articulate his thoughts. However, no matter how much he wanted to find an excuse to avoid this meeting, he knew it was something he had to do.

(Especially since he had already been invited inside.)

It was clear that Wei Wuxian was somewhat concerned about seeing Lan Xichen out of seclusion, but Wangji had apparently informed him that Lan Xichen was planning on slowly taking over more and more of his responsibilities again. Thanks to that, Wei Wuxian wasn’t as concerned as he could have been. His increasingly frequent meetings with Lan Wangji had helped with that as well, making the current situation less awkward than it could have been.

Lan Xichen cleared his throat.

“Wei-gongzi, I would like to apologize.”

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian lit up. “To whom? How can I help?”

“To *you*,” Lan Xichen corrected, wondering if the confusion on Wei Wuxian’s face was a good or bad thing. “During our first discussion with… Sect Leader Nie…. I feel I used you against him in an unfair way. I would like to apologize for that.”

Wei Wuxian just laughed, “Zewu-jun, there’s really no need. I didn’t take offense.”

“Regardless, you are now my brother in law,” Lan Xichen pointed out, privately delighting in the way those words brought a pink blush across Wei Wuxian’s cheeks even now. “I… had felt like if I didn’t speak up in Meng Yao’s defense, *no one* would — whether that be our other versions in the past or us in the present. I still believe he deserves a chance, but my desperation in what I had felt was me against the world led me to say certain things that I now regret, in hindsight.”

After thinking about his words for a moment, Wei Wuxian nodded once, his smile turning terrifyingly understanding: “I see. You had done nothing that would require an apology, but I accept yours nonetheless.”

‘*If only your husband could forgive me so easily,*’ Lan Xichen thought. ‘*Wangji may love me, but it will take quite a bit for him to accept what I said to you.*’

Well, now that Lan Xichen was slowly starting to pull away from seclusion, he would have plenty of time to earn that.

“While I’m here….”

“Zewu-jun?” Wei Wuxian asked, frowning in concern, but Lan Xichen felt as though his mouth was sealed shut. Even in the years he had blamed Wei Wuxian for the whipping, he had logically known that what happened to Wangji was not Wei Wuxian’s fault. It had been his own choice, and, in part, the Lan Sect’s fault for not having intervened before the Nightless City. But thirteen years of bitterness didn’t simply vanish upon realizing the truth.

Now that Lan Xichen had spent some time with Wei Wuxian, however, he couldn’t say he felt the same way.

(So he needed to say it, but….)

As he hesitated, Lan Xichen found himself glancing around, and quickly noticed the pile of talismans laid out across Wei Wuxiain’s desk. Alongside them were reports and papers Wangji had been working on with Wei Wuxian not too long ago. Glancing down, Xichen noticed Wei Wuxian’s ink-stained hands and traces of cinnabar that hadn’t been entirely wiped off yet.

(Right. He may have been in seclusion until now, but the rest of the world was continuing. Taking up any more of Wei Wuxian’s time would be inexcusable.)

"...I also apologize for what I said to you in Guanyin temple."

Wei Wuxian flinched back.

'Wangji was a model for the disciples when he was young, and a prominent cultivator when he grew up! His whole life he had always been honest, and righteous, and immaculate — you were the only mistake he ever made.'

Although Wei Wuxian's expression had wavered at the memory, a blinding smile soon overtook his expression and he said, "It feels a bit strange to have you apologize for the thing that got me and Lan Zhan married, but, if you insist, then I accept this apology too."

Lan Xichen nodded once, thinking back on the tired expression his brother had the last time he'd visited, and continued, "I don't know how quickly I'll manage to resume my duties as Sect Leader, but know that you have the Lan Sect's full support if you should need it, regardless of what decision you make regarding Meng Yao."

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened in shock, before he grinned back with the enthusiasm of a child being brought salvation.

"Sure," he laughed. "I'll take you up on that offer then, Da-ge!"

Chapter End Notes

The "what did Wei Wuxian eat in the Burial Mounds" scene was an original scene (not based on any versions of MDZS, though I did take inspiration from other fans' theories). However, I think that's okay because MXTX left his time in the Burial Mounds up to us to fill in with fanfiction and the like. If you're annoyed at how I deviated from canon, don't worry; this scene probably won't be relevant later. On another note, this interview is more than a little terrifying:

MXTX: Luo Bing-ge made Shen Jiu a human stick! Xue Yang cut out A-Qing's eyes and destroyed Xiao Xingchen's will to live! Wei Wuxian died a horrible, miserable death and Lan Wangji was whipped! And look at everything I did to Hua Cheng and Xie Lian!

Me, terrified: It's like there's nothing MXTX won't write about! Does she have no limits?

Me: Wait, so what happened to Wei Wuxian in the Burial Mounds?

MXTX: Oh, it was horrific. But I'll leave what actually happened up to you; I don't feel like writing it.

Me: MXTX? MXTX, what does that mean? *MXTX?!*
:)

Breaking News: WangXian Adopts A Dozen Radishes!

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Tintin once again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Wen Ning! Wen Ning! Look!" Wei Wuxian, the savior of Yunmeng and its temporary representative, shouted as he bounced through the halls. "Looks at this!"

When Wen Ning glanced over, he saw what his friend had been so excited about. Unlike the red and black he usually wore, Wei Wuxian's current outfit was Yunmeng's elegant silver and purple.

"...What's this, Wei-gongzi?" Wen Ning asked, desperately praying his friend hadn't stolen it from some unsuspecting Jiang elder. It was true that the elders were giving Wei Wuxian a lot of grief, but Wen Ning didn't think that warranted *this*.

Hearing the worry in Wen Ning's tone, Wei Wuxian paused in his improvised fashion show to give an exaggerated expression of hurt and exclaim, "I didn't steal it! I found it!"

Wen Ning's worry quadrupled.

"But-but…."

"I thought you'd be happy. Weren't the elders constantly complaining to you about how I didn't dress like I was from Yunmeng, and so didn't work as a good representative?"

"H-how did you find out about that?"

Wei Wuxian grinned, "They're really not as subtle as they think they are. But hey, now the problem will be solved! I can wear this while meeting with the other sects, and they won't be able to complain about it anymore!"

Wei Wuxian did a little twirl before spreading his arms wide in victory and grinning confidently. Three girls and one boy behind Wen Ning promptly fainted at that, but such an incident was common enough that Wen Ning no longer paid it any mind. They would get up soon enough by themselves.

"Young Master Wei, it's-it's good that you found a solution, but… *where* did you find this?"

"Uncle Jiang's closet."

There was a moment of silence as Wen Ning processed those words.

"*What?!*"

"Wow, I think that's the loudest I've ever heard you sp-"

"Young Master Wei, did you steal from your *Sect Leader?!*" Wen Ning asked, then flinched and looked around, praying that no one had heard his shouting. Lucky, it seemed as though everyone within hearing distance had fainted earlier during Wei Wuxian's earlier show, and wouldn't be able to tell anyone.

"Once again, not stole; *found.*"

"Young Master Wei-"

"It was actually my father's."

The protest that had been about to leave Wen Ning's mouth halted at that, and the bittersweet smile on Wei Wuxian's face removed it completely. He looked down at the uniform again, and noticed that the fabric did indeed look rather old in comparison to what he remembered of Sect Leader Jiang's clothing.

"One of the elders told me about it," Wei Wuxian revealed, staring at the silver embroidery on the sleeve with an achingly nostalgic expression before shrugging with a grin. "I think he was trying to make a point about how we should rely on Meishan Yu more because family is valuable and 'look how sentimental Sect Leader Jiang is, even going so far as to keep Wei Changze's robes in the treasury,' but I kinda stopped listening after that. So, what do you think?"

Given the way everyone else had fainted at the sight of Wei Wuxian showing off his new robes, Wen Ning thought the answer to that was clear enough. Then again, maybe that was the point. Wei Wuxian needed to ask someone who wasn't (physically) attracted to him to get a more honest answer.

"I…" Wen Ning paused, looking Wei Wuxian up and down one more time to make sure he knew what to say. "I think it looks good. It will identify you as a member of Yunmeng Jiang. Though, it's not the uniform of a sect leader-"

"I don't want it to be. Can you imagine how strange it would be for me to wear one of Uncle Jiang's robes?" Wei Wuxian asked, giving a fake shudder at the thought.

"Right! Right! Um… but it's also a little different than what today's Yunmeng disciples wear, which I-I think is a good thing. It should work? So long as the elders approve."

"Well, let's assume they do and not worry about asking them!"

Wen Ning really wished he could say he was surprised by Wei Wuxian's decision.

"Da-shixiong!" little A-Lu shouted from several rooms away. "We're back!"

"A-Lu, we're by the main hall!" Wei Wuxian responded, shouting just as loudly as the preteen had. "How was it?"

“He agreed!”

The identity of the mysterious ‘he’ was revealed to Wen Ning mere moments later, when not one but *two* children ran in. One was A-Lu, dressed in his usual uniform, and the other was a boy dressed in commoner’s clothes who took Wen Ning several seconds to identify.

“Wait,” Wen Ning straightened up, spinning to face Wei Wuxian. “Is-is that-”

“Welcome to Yunmeng Jiang, Mo Xuanyu,” Wei Wuxian greeted, smiling brightly and giving Wen Ning a look that was just a few traces too smug at Wen Ning’s surprise to be polite. If Wen Ning’s sister was here, he had no doubt she would be glaring disapprovingly at Wei Wuxian. As it was, however, Wen Ning was left to stare in open-mouthed shock at what he saw before him.

‘Don’t mention the future Mo Xuanyu to him if he joins us, okay?’ Wei Wuxian had said on the way back from Mo Manor. ‘I don’t want him to feel like I’m expecting something that impossible from him.’

But, somehow, Wen Ning still hadn’t completely expected Mo Xuanyu to agree. The future one withheld information like it was second nature and lied with a disarming smile. Now that the whole ‘time travel’ element had been revealed, Wen Ning more than understood why, it just made the open, honest, vulnerable expression on the child Mo Xuanyu’s face quite a shock.

Then again, people changed a lot as they got older, so it really shouldn’t have been a surprise.

“Was your journey over here good?” Wei Wuxian asked, kneeling down so that he was eye level with Mo Xuanyu. The boy nodded once, but it was A-Lu who answered aloud.

“It was awful, Da-shixiong!” the boy loudly complained. “Madam Mo is so… she’s so-”

“A-Lu!” Wen Ning nervously interjected, his eyes flashing to Mo Xuanyu. Luckily, it seemed the boy had no objections to whatever A-Lu had been about to say regarding his aunt, and merely continued looking at the floor, completely unresponsive. The awkward silence stretched out.

As Wei Wuxian watched the younger-self of the man he’d been working with fidget nervously, he couldn’t help but notice how round Mo Xuanyu’s cheeks were. He had heard his own had been similar at that age, but it was something else to see first-hand. If he pinched and pulled them, he could easily imagine them stretching to be at least a *meter* in length. And Mo Xuanyu wasn’t the only one with squishy cheeks. A-Lu and A-Yue had yet to lose their baby fat, and also had quite round, mochi-like faces. He wondered whose was the squishiest. Probably Wen Ning’s.

(It was entirely possible that Wei Wuxian had overworked his brain to the point of shorting it out, but these few minutes were the only break he’d have before his meetings started up again, so he was willing to give himself a pass on this.)

“Um… Da-shixiong?” A-Lu finally asked.

“Oh, right!” Wei Wuxian snapped out of it, abruptly remembering that he was currently the person in charge of the livelihoods of his disciples. “Mo Xuanyu, do you have any luggage with you?”

Cheeks flushing in embarrassment, Mo Xuanyu slowly shook his head ‘no.’

“No worries. A-Lu, please take him to your third shijie. She should be in the archives right now, and she can get you everything you need. The next meal is in an hour or two, but I won’t be able to join you for that. I don’t want everyone to overwhelm you while I’m not there, so why don’t you start trying to meet a few people ahead of time once you have your things? Sound good?”

There was a pause for a moment as it slowly dawned on Mo Xuanyu that Wei Wuxian was genuinely asking for his opinion. He flushed even deeper, then nodded twice in rapid succession.

“Great!” Wei Wuxian beamed, then stood up and gathered his things. “Well, I unfortunately need to head off to my next meeting and the Lans’ representatives hate when I’m late, so I should probably head off. Wen Ning, call me if there’s any trouble — I don’t mind being interrupted. A-Lu, A-Yu, have fun with the rest of The Squishables!”

He leapt out the door and darted off too quickly to hear Wen Ning’s confused, “‘The Squishables?’”

There was a buzzing anticipation floating through the air as the watchers waited to see what would be shown next. The relatively unknown “Yi City” wasn’t much of a source of excitement, but the story’s connections to Baoshan Sanren gathered the attention of even the most prideful watchers.

Which was why, when the world shifted into towering peaks in the distance of a mist filled valley, the watchers seemed to simultaneously suck in breaths of anticipation.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were travelling through the fog in the direction the left hand pointed, and soon came across a small, worn-down village. A few rails of fencing encircled thatched houses made of mud, and a brood of chicks scuttered in and out of yards, picking on the ground for rice. On one of the roofs, a large, bright-feathered rooster looked down loftily.

Unable to resist, Jiang Yanli knelt down next to one of the illusionary chicks, practically cooing as it frantically searched around for food (and promptly ran into one of the nearby walls). Not the most well-trained animal she had ever seen.

(Of course not; she was the young lady of Lotus Pier. The things her shidi had experienced — his time on the streets and starvation in the Burial Mounds — were things she had never even imagined. A strong, illogical feeling of guilt quickly spread across her body.)

As Wei Wuxian watched the birds scurry about, he smiled to himself and thought, ‘*It’s a good thing there aren’t any dogs here. Then again, the villagers can probably only get their*

hands on a few chunks of meat every year. There's no way they'd have enough of a surplus of bones to feed the dogs. Lucky me!'

As much as people wanted to smile at the words, their memories of the child Wei Wuxian rang just a little too strongly for them to manage that.

In front of the village, there was a forked road leading in three different directions. Two of the roads were tred bare (covered by a great deal of footprints), while the third was overrun by weeds. A square sign made of stone was pointed slantingly at this road, but it was split down the middle by a large crack, more weeds poking out.

'*Please don't go down that road, Wei-xiong, Wangji-xiong,*' Nie Huaisang fervently prayed. '*Please don't go down that road. Please don't go down that road. Please don't go down that road!*'

The left arm was pointing toward that road.

'*Stupid arm!*' Nie Huaisang cursed. '*Why are you there at all?! Who thought it was a good idea to let Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong find you?! If I ever meet the person responsible for this, I'm going to-*'

Before Nie Huaisang could finish his mental threat, Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji and said, "Lan Zhan, the crack goes right through the characters; I can't read the sign. Let's try to ask the villagers."

Lan Wangji nodded once.

With a large grin on his face, Wei Wuxian walked over to the women feeding the chickens. Some of them were quite young, and turned nervous and fearful at the sight of the unfamiliar man approaching them. However, after just a few words from Wei Wuxian, they quickly relaxed and hesitantly returned his smile.

Jin Guangshan wished the simulation had taken them along with Wei Wuxian so that he could hear what the boy had said. As it was, the watchers instead remained with the silent Lan Wangji, waiting for Wei Wuxian to return.

Although the women started to speak, they didn't dare to look at Lan Wangji (or the sign he stood next to) whatsoever. Wei Wuxian listened to their words, smiling widely and nodding along with them. Then, as though the topic of discussion had changed, the women began to relax, quite a few blushing rosely at whatever Wei Wuxian had said.

Next to the watchers, Hanguang-jun continued to wait. As the time bore on, it began to seem like Wei Wuxian had no intention of returning anymore, too caught up in the conversation to remember his original goal. Lan Wangji's face remained as blank and expressionless as ever, but he slowly turned to look at the gravel and stone path on the ground.

He kicked a small chunk of rock that was by his feet.

"..."

"Oh my-"

"That's-"

"*Adorable!*" Lan Xichen clasped a hand over his beaming mouth, having not realized he had spoken until it was already too late.

Overwhelmed by the cuteness, someone let out a high-pitched squeal. A moment later, it became a ringing symphony produced by the entirely of the WangXian fanclub, making it impossible to determine who had started it.

(It was Madam Jin, but, even if you told them, no one would ever believe that.)

"My, that's quite a bit of jealousy," Nie Huaisang cackled. "Isn't a bit of an overreaction? After all, you and Wei-xiong *did* sleep together last night!"

"Not like *that*," Lan Wangji fiercely defended, glaring in a way that Nie Huaisang used to find terrifying, but now (able to see the red on Lan Wangji's ears) just found adorable. "Wei Ying isn't… interested in me-"

"I hate to say it Lan-er-gongzi," Wen Qing interrupted. "But I think even *you* know that's a lie."

And, as always, Wen Qing was 100% correct, so there was nothing Lan Wangji could say in response.

Meanwhile, the simulated Lan Wangji had stepped on the innocent rock, rolling it back and forth over and over again as he waited.

Even Lan Qiren was having trouble remaining impassive in front of his nephew's cuteness.

As Lan Wangji looked up again, he saw Wei Wuxian take something from his sleeves and hand it to the woman who had spoken the most. Following that, the Yiling Patriarch spun on his heel and began travelling back to Hanguang-jun, waving a cheerful goodbye to the women as he went.

Lan Wangji stood still, an unchanging, blank look on his face.

Although Lan Xichen was still the only person capable of reading all of Lan Wangji's expressions, the watchers now understood how to gain insight into the second jade's emotions. Right now, with the additional context they had….

(Jiang Cheng had already decided that he was going to find a rock to hide under when the next cultivation conference rolled around so that he wouldn't have to face the other watchers. He wondered if he should extend an offer to Lan Wangji as well. The second jade would undoubtedly appreciate it.)

Finally, Wei Wuxian returned and fell into step beside Lan Wangji, commenting, "Hanguang-jun, you should've come. There were even rabbits in the yard!"

Remaining as (outwardly) indifferent as ever, Lan Wangji asked, "What were their answers?"

"This path leads to Yi City! The first character on the sign is 'yi.'"

"Of course it does," Nie Huaisang deflated dejectedly, knowing that it was now guaranteed that Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji would go that way. Seeing that, Nie Mingjue awkwardly tried to pat Nie Huaisang's head (but, due to the no-touch rule, went straight through instead).

"Yi as in 'chivalry?'" Lan Wangji asked.

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean?"

"The character is correct, but not the meaning. It's not yi as in chivalry, but yi as in 'coffin home.'"

"Oh, *of course it is!*"

"Are you alright, Huaisang?" Lan Xichen asked.

"I'm just saying! When Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong went to the cold springs in the Cloud Recesses, walking corpses got loose. A few days earlier there was a waterborne abyss. At the Wen Camp, they ran into the Xuanwu of Slaughter! What's going to happen now?!"

"Yi City is a small town," Jiang Fengmian pointed out, hoping to calm the Nie heir's nerves. "I have no doubt that something happened, but how bad could it possibly be?"

As he spoke, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji stepped over a bunch of weeds in the path and soon passed the sign, prompting Wei Wuxian to continue, "The girls said that, ever since a long time ago, most people in this city have died young. Whether by poor health or accidents, the sheer number of victims here meant there needed to be a lot of coffin homes for temporarily holding the corpses. Also, they specialize in making coffins, paper money, and other sorts of burial goods. Everyone was skilled at something related to that, whether it be creating coffins or paper mannequins, which is why the city became known by that name."

Wen Chao shuddered, vividly recalling the way Wei Wuxian had embodied the death the city was named after when he hunted down Wen Chao.

'*No wonder Wei Wuxian isn't worried about going into that city,*' Wen Chao thought. '*Nothing there could possibly be a bigger monster than him.*'

Hopping over the cracks and ditches that littered the road, Wei Wuxian added, "They said that people here don't go to Yi City, and that the people inside rarely leave either.

In the past few years, essentially no one's been seen leaving, so nobody's walked on this path for years. Sure explains why it's so grown-over."

"And?" Lan Wangji asked.

"And, what?"

"What did you give them?"

"Ah, keeping your priorities straight I see," Lan Xichen whispered, delighting in the glare Lan Wangji sent his way. It was usually almost impossible for Xichen to get a reaction out of his brother, but now...

(He truly owed Wei Wuxian more than words could describe.)

"Oh, you mean what I gave them at the end there?" Wei Wuxian realized after thinking it over for a bit. "It was the rouge. You have to show people your thanks when you're asking them things, right? I wanted to give them money, but they were too scared to take it. It seemed that they liked the scent of the rouge. They had probably never used such a thing before, so I gave it to them."

And, as always, Wei Wuxian's unrivalled understanding of the differences between various classes of wealth in their society had proved useful. Wen Ruohan had never thought such a skill could be valuable before, but perhaps he would need to reconsider that assessment.

The number of things Wei Wuxian had taught him continued to grow.

However, Lan Wangji had no reason to feel the same awe Wen Ruohan did. In fact, given his emotional involvement in the situation, what he felt was undoubtedly the exact opposite.

Perhaps realizing the same, Wei Wuxian asked, "Hanguang-jun, why are you looking at me like that? I know that the rouge's quality isn't great, but I'm not how I used to be, when I always had a ton of flowers and jewelry on me to give girls. I really don't have anything else to give them. At least it's better than nothing."

As if those words had sparked a displeasing memory, Lan Wangji's brow twitched, and he slowly turned his head away.

Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng nodded furiously in agreement, pleased that Wei Wuxian was remembering everything Yunmeng Jiang had offered him fondly.

The farther the pair went, the wider the road became, and the denser the fog appeared. Soon, it was difficult to see anything more than two meters away, making the road itself the only thing visible to human eyes.

The watchers looked around, startled by their new inability to see each other. Ever since they had been pulled into the simulation, they had become a single unit (the only exception being Wen Xu's early departure). It was strange to not be able to see the crowd they had long-since grown accustomed to.

At the end of the long path was a city gate, barely visible in the thick fog. The tower in front of the city had missing paint and a broken roof, one corner chipped off. The walls were covered in graffiti, the red doors were almost faded white, and each doornail was rusty and black.

Jin Guangshan stepped back in disgust.

The doors were unlatched and slightly ajar, as if someone had just stepped inside.

And the presence of resentful energy on the other side was impossible to ignore (especially for the watchers, who had gained a new sensitivity to it). Several people shivered as they approached.

The entire area was steeped in gray, the fog making it appear to be a world of monochrome darkness. Fences around the houses inside had long since been eaten through and toppled over, the ropes that had once been holding them together flapping uselessly in the wind. A breeze blew torn up banners into the sky.

Wei Wuxian approached casually, looking this way and that as if he could see through the fog, and commented, "Woah, this city is in ruins. I doubt we'll find anyone alive here; the feng shui is absolutely terrible."

Lan Wangji agreed: "Barren mountains and turbulent rivers."

Wen Qing nodded once, finding the health risks it posed to all travelers completely inexcusable. It was no surprise that deaths were so common there. She knew Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji could take care of themselves, but that didn't stop her from wishing she could be there to ensure that.

An especially large gust of wind blew past, and with it came a tar-like coat of resentment. Wei Wuxian frowned and rubbed at his temples, taking deep breaths to clear his mind.

"Is it the curse mark?" Lan Wangji asked.

"No, I was just affected by the resentful miasma here," Wei Wuxian explained, then, seeing Lan Wangji's unchanging worried look, added, "Don't believe me? Look. It's long gone."

He pulled open his robes to reveal his chest-

"*Wei Ying!*" Lan Wangji shouted, quickly turning away. "You… improper-"

"Shall I show it to you again?" he asked, and, glancing up through half-lidded eyes, reached down to show the skin on his legs.

If it weren't for present company, Jin Guangshan would have given an impressed whistle.

Lan Wangji's eyes went lower and lower in synch with Wei Wuxian's motion, the golden orbs unable to pull away. Hands teasingly grabbed the edge of Wei Wuxian's pants,

and, as the simulation focused on Lan Wangji's expression, an idea-like *ding* resounded loudly.

"What?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"Oh," Nie Huaisang mumbled, then "*Oh!*"

"Oh my," Madam Jin agreed, grinning brightly enough to make Jin Zixuan send the second jade a look of absolute pity.

Meanwhile, Lan Wangji stood frozen. He turned to his uncle, but Lan Qiren was very studiously avoiding eye contact with him. It was one thing to tell Wangji that desiring a romantic relationship with Wei Wuxian was acceptable; *this* was something else entirely. Sexual attraction was perfectly healthy (especially for a relationship as mutually respectful as Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's), but it was *not* something Lan Qiren was going to speak to his nephew about while *here*.

Luckily for Lan Wangji's (and everyone else's) sanity, Wei Wuxian decided to stop his exhibition there and stand up again. The second jade's face was completely blank again, leaving Wei Wuxian with no clues as to what he was feeling. All he could see was the shocking lack of an angry outburst.

Taking in a big breath, Wei Wuxian grinned and bounced closer to Hanguang-jun, teasing, "Something is really off about you. In the past, every time I did something like that, you would already be telling me to mind my manners and tact!"

The real Lan Wangji, who had done just that, flushed heavily.

He elbowed the second jade, and lit up further when he saw that Lan Wangji was accepting the physical contact. After Wei Wuxian's numerous failures at getting a reaction out of him, his one success through waking up together had reinvigorated his teasing streak.

Nodding to himself, Wei Wuxian continued, "You would be going on about proper etiquette, courtesy, and whatnot. Lan Zhan, you've changed~"

The two of them made eye contact for a while, and Wei Wuxian soon found himself getting lost in those calm, golden orbs. His childish enthusiasm faded into a more mystified awe.

Ding!

Nie Huaisang fearlessly burst into laughter, loving expressions on both the real Lan Wangji and the simulated Wei Wuxian. He was joined by nearly the entirety of the watchers, drowning out the sounds of Jiang Cheng's embarrassed outrage and Wen Chao's annoyance.

Realizing that he had been frozen for far too long, Wei Wuxian coughed a few times and looked away, rushing to explain, "D-don't mind what I said earlier. The resentful

miasma around here is so thick even though it's still daytime. I think this city has more problems than just terrible feng shui."

As Wei Wuxian continued to talk and talk without saying much of anything (more to fill the silence than to convey any information), Wen Ruohan found himself giving a strange huffed laugh. It was quite amusing how Lan Wangji was the only one ever able to make the brilliant Yiling Patriarch lose his composure. He found himself hoping that the real versions would be able to regain this relationship once they left.

"The easiest way to handle a place like this would just be to leave," Wei Wuxian continued, having just discussed the lack of assistance the area was likely to get from any sect. "Then again, if someone's family has been living here for generations, it'll be almost impossible for them to chose to leave where they've grown up. Even if six or seven out of ten live short lives, maybe they'd be the remaining three or four. Might not seem too unbearable."

Nie Huaisang fell silent and levied his brother a very telling look.

A gust of wind caused the fog to surge forward, leaving the area even whiter than before. The streets were empty, and, despite the daylight, no sound could be heard from any of the houses either.

"...What do you suppose caused this?" Jiang Yanli asked, glancing around nervously. She turned to Jin Zixuan, but he could only shake his head, equally befuddled.

By now, the fog had gotten so thick that they couldn't see more than five feet away. Amid the eerie silence of the town, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's barely-perceivable footsteps echoed softly. They moved closer and closer together, disliking the extent to which their senses had been cut off.

Curious, Madam Yu held out her hand and realized that even she wasn't able to see her fingers anymore. She frowned, disliking the atmosphere of the town more and more as time went on.

'*Well, this is the place the arm pointed us to. It'd be stranger if it wasn't peculiar,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Right now… if someone took advantage of this fog to sneak over and join us, I'm not sure we'd be able to notice.*'

The watchers glanced between Wei Wuxian and each other, feeling awkward at how well *they* fit that description of unwelcome accompanists (even if unwillingly).

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian stepped on something irregular. He froze at once — tension flooding his body — and grabbed Lan Wangji's hand firmly to ensure the other didn't wander off.

The smiles which subsequently covered Madam Jin, Nie Huaisang, Lan Xichen, Jiang Yanli, and Jiang Fengmian's faces ranged from joy to gleeful smugness, but were all ignored indiscriminately by Lan Wangji.

Wei Wuxian knelt down to see what he had stepped on, and the watchers followed suit.

It was a head.

“Gah!” Wen Chao jumped back as Nie Huaisang squeaked. Wen Ruohan and Nie Mingjue both sighed at the reactions (one considerably more fond than the other).

The head had the face of a man with thick brows, large eyes, and two smudges of rouge that stood out starkly. The way it had tumbled when Wei Wuxian stepped on it proved its insignificant weight, making it impossible for any to mistake it as a human head. Wei Wuxian picked it up and squeezed it, making part of the head sink in.

Madam Yu sighed at the blatant fascination on Wei Wuxian’s face, wishing that he would be a little more careful during the investigation. It was like he didn’t understand his own mortality-

(No, that couldn’t be true. He had already died once, after all.)

“It’s made of paper,” Wei Wuxian observed, gazing in befuddlement. “Not bad; someone put a lot of work into this. I bet it’s a Nether Brawler.”

“A what?”Jiang Cheng asked, turning to his father. The question was whispered (so as to not attract attention), but there was no hesitance in Jiang Cheng’s expression. He trusted his father to answer without judgement (something the Jiang Cheng of before would have never been able to do).

“A Nether Brawler is meant to protect the deceased from the bullying of other ghosts or tricky judges,” Jiang Fengmian explained, smiling warmly. “It ensures that the paper money burned for that person won’t be stolen away. Cultivators don’t usually bother with that.”

Then, as if his own words had reminded him, he turned to Wen Qing and bowed once, thanking her for rescuing his and Madam Yu’s other-selves’ bodies.

“Someone pulled the head off and threw it into the streets,” Wei Wuxian assumed, lacing his fingers through the head’s jet black hair. “It really was skillfully crafted. Did they take real, human hair and glue it on?”

Nie Huaisang shuddered, those words making him remember the corpses floating in water as a result of the waterborne abyss. He was sure he was going to have nightmares when they left the simulation.

(But, if his assumption on the core transfer was correct, he could hope that they would be able spare Wei Wuxian a few of his own.)

Suddenly, a thin shadow swept by him, brushing Wei Wuxian's shoulder, and disappeared into the fog.

Jin Zixuan flinched as the shadow ran through him, shuddering at the cold chill he felt as it passed (and relaxing into the warmth Bichen exuded as it chased after the shadow). He turned to stare in the direction it had disappeared into, wondering at the source of that feeling.

‘*Was that a resentful object?*’

‘*A human couldn’t have gone that fast,*’ Wei Wuxian agreed.

“Pay attention,” Lan Wangji advised. “Be careful.”

Thonk.

“Did you hear that?” Wei Wuxian asked.

A nod: “Footsteps and a bamboo pole.”

‘*Not a resentful object then,*’ Jin Zixuan amended, unsure of whether or not to be relieved by the truth.

Then, from within the fog, someone cried out as they fell. Wei Wuxian looked up to the source of the sound, and watched as a flash of yellow toppled through the air-

“*A-Ling?!*” Jiang Yanli cried out.

Lan Wangji shot a hand forward, sending out just enough energy to stall Jin Ling’s fall and keep him from unceremoniously slamming against the ground.

“Oh, *of course* that brat’s involved in something dangerous again!” Madam Yu cursed as Jiang Cheng allowed his head to collapse into his hand, facepalming as though that was the only thing keeping him upright.

“Jin Ling!” Wei Wuxian greeted, his whole demeanor lighting up at the boy’s presence. However, hearing the shouted name, some figures in the distance immediately rushed over.

They stepped through the fog, allowing everyone to see who it was.

“Sizhui and Jingyi too?”

The three Lans tensed up at that, torn between happiness at a chance to see their future juniors again, and worry over what was to come.

“Why is it *you* again?” Jin Ling asked, scowling heavily.

“I wanted to know the same,” Wei Wuxian responded, staring at the kids in disbelief.

‘*Them again? That* can’t *be a coincidence, right?*’ Nie Huaisang thought.

Although he tried to contain himself, as Lan Sizhui stepped forward to speak, his voice was noticeably delighted: “Young Master Mo, if you’re here, then is Hanguang-jun here as well?”

“He definitely is!” Hanguang-jun’s number one fanboy, Lan Jingyi, proclaimed. “That power that saved Jin Ling earlier was from him, right?”

Hearing that, Jin Ling, who had been about to protest to the 'saved' description, instantly snapped his mouth shut. He was probably scared Hanguang-jun would punish him again.

Smiling at the boy's reaction, Wei Wuxian nodded once and said, "Yup. He's right here beside me. You should come over."

They did, soon revealing that they were a group of eight or nine juniors wearing clothes from different sects.

"Oh! That one!" Nie Mingjue gestured at one of the boys. "He's the final member, right?"

"Ouyang Zizhen," Lan Xichen recalled.

"Ah!" Nie Huaisang beamed. "We've collected the whole set!"

"Why are you all here?" Wei Wuxian asked, handing back Suihua. "You just went flying through the sky. It's a good thing it was us. What if you'd crashed into ordinary people?"

"There aren't any ordinary people here! There aren't any people at all!" Jin Ling shouted.

Lan Sizhui nodded: "It's daylight, but there's fog everywhere. And there isn't a single shop open."

Hearing that, Lan Qiren frowned deeply, wary of the danger the city could pose.

"And what about you?" Jin Ling added on. "Why are you always hanging around Hanguang-jun?"

"I like being around him!" Wei Wuxian laughed, grabbing onto Lan Wangji and pulling him close. "What about it?"

"I — that-"

"Just give up, A-Cheng," Madam Yu sighed, noticing the way her daughter and husband's cooing had joined most of the watchers in making the real Lan Wangji's ears turn as red as apples. "No one's capable of stopping that brat."

Jiang Cheng just scowled deeper.

(On the other hand, Jiang Yanli felt herself warm. The disgust Jin Ling had directed toward his "uncle's" relationship with Lan Wangji had been something impossible to ignore. However, right now, his tone of voice had lacked its previous revulsion, and instead mostly contained just childish annoyance.)

(Jin Ling — her wonderful, darling A-Ling — was changing. Jiang Yanli couldn't be happier.)

However, unable to resist teasing back after the judgement Jin Ling had just tried to direct his way, Wei Wuxian continued, "I noticed you seemed happy to see me just now."

"Huh? Don't think so highly of yourself!" Jin Ling shouted back, sticking his tongue out childishly.

The laugher that escaped Madam Jin at that made Jin Zixuan feel far more judged than mere words would be able to invoke. He knew he had been somewhat prideful growing up ~~(and, after the soup incident, could admit he might be even worse now)~~, but there was really no reason for his mother to laugh so heartily at that, was there?

He instantly regretted each and every time he had betrayed Lan Wangji by laughing at Hanguang-jun's actions, and resolved to not do so again.

"Ah, whatever. It doesn't matter now. How did you guys run into each other? Don't tell me you arranged a nighthunt together."

The juniors paused, glancing at each other nervously.

'*There's no way, right?*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Jin Ling thinks of everyone as an eyesore and wants to fight with everyone. He's already had unpleasant experiences with the Lan disciples; there's no way they'd want to hunt together.*'

Jiang Cheng flinched at the comment, turning to his sister with a mouthed, '*I'm sorry.*'

She smiled back, unjudging and simply pleased that Jin Ling had gotten some experience with her side of the family even after her death. And besides, Jin Ling was still young. As the changes he was already experiencing showed, there was plenty of room for him to grow.

Finally, Lan Sizhui cleared his throat and said, "That would be a long story. We were originally-"

Before he could finish, there was a sharp scratching sound of a bamboo pole against the ground, accompanied by a set of fast paced taps that grated on the ears. The junior's faces changed at once.

"It's here again!" they shouted.

This time, Lan Qiren was the one to experience a chill of coldness as the unknown figure ran through him. He shivered at the feeling, wondering as to the source of the layer of frantic desperation he felt in the resentment.

The noise bounced around, sounding both near and far at the same time. Not only was that effect annoying, but it made it impossible to determine where the source of the noise was.

"All of you, come over," Wei Wuxian ordered. "Huddle close. Don't move and don't attack."

Jiang Cheng had unconsciously moved to follow those orders as well, only to blush and quickly back up upon remembering that he was just a watcher, rather than a person actually there.

A few moments later, the sound stopped. For several seconds, Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and the juniors simply waited, tension remaining in their bodies in case it started up again. However, time continued to pass, and yet it didn't.

Relaxing at last, one disciple frowned and grumbled, "That thing again… just how long is it going to follow us for?"

"It's been following you?"

"Since we entered the city," Lan Sizhui explained. "The fog was too thick for us to see through, so it would be easy for one of us to wander off. Because of that, we decided to stick together while we walked. Then, we suddenly heard the noise. At first it was relatively slow — one knock at a time. We managed to make out a short shadow through the fog, right in front of us, but when we chased after it, it disappeared. The noise has been following us ever since."

'*Good summary,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*Clear, concise… the Lans have done well with their next generation.*'

"How short was the shadow?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Sizhui gestured at his chest and elaborated, "Quite short. Small."

"And how long have you been here for?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?" Wei Wuxian repeated, swerving to face Lan Wangji. "Hanguang-jun, how long have we been in here for?"

"About thirty minutes."

And there was no way for *Hanguang-jun* to be wrong.

"But that doesn't… make any sense."

"See?" Wei Wuxian asked. "We've been here for longer than you have. How is it possible for you to have ended up in front of us, only running into us when you turned around?"

"We never turned around!" Jin Ling immediately disagreed. "We've always been walking forward, following this path."

Wei Wuxian stared blankly.

"Okay, this *really* doesn't make any sense."

‘*Did someone jinx the path to make it into a cryptic maze array?*’ Wei Wuxian wondered.

Just like the one outside the Nie Sect’s saber hall. Nie Mingjue sighed; with this and the corpse being placed in the burial grounds, it certainly seemed like the perpetrator was familiar with the Nie Sect. He hoped the corpse wasn’t anyone he knew.

“And was Jin Ling checking the situation out from the air?”

“Yeah. I flew a long way up-”

“Actually, it wasn’t that high,” Lan Jingyi corrected.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?! It felt like a long way up to me!”

Long-since familiar with the sorts of arguments that tended to break out amongst the juniors, the watchers merely sighed.

“What Jingyi means is that the way it felt was probably deceiving,” Lan Sizhui jumped in. “So, what did you see?”

Although he looked for all the world like he was considering being silent just to spite Jingyi, Jin Ling soon recalled that the intimidating Hanguang-jun was waiting for his answer as well, and forced himself to answer:

“Well… there were a few fuzzy shadows darting here and there. I couldn’t make out what they were through the fog and the heavy miasma made it hard to move, so I decided to come down-”

“You mean when you *fell* down?”

“*Jingyi!*” Sizhui scolded.

Failing to completely hold in her laughter, Jiang Yanli commented, “At least we can rest assured that A-Ling and the others eventually develop a close friendship.”

Despite her best efforts, the few snickers that escaped her meant her words did nothing to counteract her mother, brother, and fiance’s embarrassment.

(If Lan Wangji wasn’t the fairest and most righteous person alive, he would be feeling rather smug that the people who had laughed at him earlier were finally the ones getting embarrassed instead.)

“Anyways,” Sizhui interrupted once again, hoping to move past the incident before another argument truly broke out. “I believe it stands to reason that this is a ghostly mist, rather than a natural fog.”

Wei Wuxian nodded once in acknowledgement, ever the teacher.

“The fog isn’t poisonous, is it?” Lan Jingyi asked, glancing around nervously.

“Probably not,” Wei Wuxian answered. “We’ve been here for quite some time already, and we’re still fine.”

Wen Qing clicked her tongue again, beyond annoyed at Wei Wuxian’s ‘proof.’

“I should have brought Fairy with me,” Jin Ling declared, glaring at Wei Wuxian (whose arms had erupted in goosebumps at the dog’s name). “It’s all because of your damn donkey.”

Jingyi was furious: “We haven’t even blamed your dog yet! It opened its mouth to bite first, and then it ended up with Little Apple’s hoove. Whose fault was that? Anyhow, neither of them can move right now.”

“What?!” Wei Wuxian shouted. “My Lil’ Apple was bitten by a dog?”

Groaning heavily, Jiang Cheng buried his face in his hands at his shixiong’s ridiculous acts.

“You — how can that donkey be more important than my spiritual dog?! Fairy was given to me by my Shushu. If something happened to it, not even ten thousand donkeys would be able to pay for it!”

“A dog from the Chief Cultivator himself,” Jin Zixuan repeated, disbelievingly. Well, if nothing else, it was nice that Jin Zixuan could rest assured his brother took good care of his son.

Then, unsurprisingly, Wei Wuxian retorted in all absurdity, “Don’t use LianFeng-zun’s name to scare people off! Well, my Lil’ Apple is a gift from Hanguang-jun. How could you take Lil’ Apple out to night-hunt? And let it be injured on top of that!”

“Liar!” the juniors from the Lan Sect declared.

Jiang Cheng, Jin Zixuan, and Nie Huaisang had all shouted the same, though with varying degrees of amusement toward the situation.

All the while, Hanguang-jun himself made no comment.

And neither did the real Lan Wangji. Both were content simply watching Wei Wuxian interact with the juniors, no matter how ridiculous the Yiling Patriarch chose to be.

Finally, Lan Sizhui clarified, “Um… sorry, Young Master Mo. Your Lil’ Apple… your donkey has been making noise every day in the Cloud Recesses, and the seniors have been complaining for some time.”

“The Cloud Recesses will lose its tranquility when Wei Wuxian arrives, won’t it?” Lan Qiren asked, sounded uncomfortably resigned to the possibility as Lan Xichen began to laugh.

(Jiang Cheng, on the other hand, frowned deeper, annoyed at how everyone was assuming that the real Wei Wuxian would just go along with the Lan Sect’s second young master, despite having never met him.)

“Anyways, they ordered us to get rid of the donkey during this night hunt, so we…” he trailed off, unwilling to finish.

Not believing that the donkey was truly a gift from Hanguang-jun, Jin Ling scoffed, “I can’t stand looking at that donkey! And it’s even called something as absurd as ‘Lil’ Apple!’ It’s so damn stupid.”

“What’s wrong with ‘Lil’ Apple?’” Lan Jingyi asked, worried that the donkey might indeed be from Hanguang-jun. “The donkey likes to eat apples, so it’s called Lil’ Apple. How down to earth. This is ten times better than calling your fat dog ‘Fairy!’”

“Hanguang-jun worshiper he may be, but you have to admit that the kid has a point about the names,” Nie Mingjue said, casting a far too-entertained look Jiang ‘Princess, Little Love, and Jasmine’ Cheng’s way.

Jin Ling disagreed.

“How is Fairy fat?! Just try to find me a more fit dog than Fairy!”

“You’re not disagreeing to the name comment-”

“Not disagreeing? Fairy is a fine name that-”

The voices abruptly cut off.

“A-Ling?!” Jiang Yanli asked at once, standing up.

“What happened?” Lan Qiren demanded, not noticing the amusement on Lan Xichen’s face.

“Is anyone still here?” Wei Wuxian asked, unable to see anyone in the fog.

There were several muffled grunts and “oomphs” and “mmns,” indicating that everyone was still present. A moment later, from directly behind Wei Wuxian, came an explanation:

“Noisy,” Lan Wangji calmly said.

“Wangji-xiong, how is your cold disapproval more scary than your uncle’s anger?” Nie Huaisang whined. “That doesn’t make any sense. It’s not how it’s supposed to work!”

“Perhaps being around Da-ge has made you immune to my uncle’s anger,” Lan Xichen suggested, delighting in the way Nie Mingjue jumped at the new title he had been given.

‘*He silenced everyone at once?*’ Wei Wuxian thought, disbelief clear in his expression (to those close enough to see him in the fog). ‘*I guess I’m quite lucky then.*’

He unconsciously brought his hand up to touch his lips.

‘*I won’t silence you,*’ Lan Wangji thought, thinking back on his other self’s frequent use of the silencing charm with disapproval. ‘*Not again. Not now that I’ve seen a world in which*

you were forced to be silent for thirteen years.'

He would take every bit of Wei Wuxian he could get.

Then, from the left, came a tremendous gust of wind, accompanied by a mangled groan. There was a symphony of clunks as heavy footsteps approached. In the distance, hunched over shadows got closer and closer with every step.

The Sect Leaders stood up, instantly on alert. One or two fierce corpses would be easy for any one of them to deal with (meaning worrying about the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun would be idiotic), but right now, before them, wasn't just a handful of corpses.

There were *hundreds.*

And the resentful energy that accompanied them was not something that could be ignored.

Ravenous hisses escaped the corpses, making the gathered juniors eep in fear. The fog made it impossible to accurately determine where their attacker were, making the situation even more dangerous than before.

The sounds got closer.

"I think I hear breathing sounds," one boy pointed out, only to flush, realizing what a ridiculous statement that was.

Another boy laughed, "You really are something else, huh? Breathing sounds. How could there be something like that from corpses?"

But the undercoat of nervousness in his voice was undeniable.

The footsteps were five meters away from the outskirts of the group. Then four. Then three. Then two-

"Ha. They're finally coming," Jin Ling humphed, bravado taking over.

"A-Ling," Jin Zixuan whispered. "Don't-"

But Jin Ling had already unsheathed Suihua and shot forward, moving into the dense cloud of fog and out of Wei Wuxian's sight.

"Jin Ling!" Wei Wuxian shouted, then sighed as some of the other juniors lept forward to follow Jin Ling's example.

There were a few golden flashes as Jin Ling fought, and the simulation moved towards it to give the watchers a better view. Within the cloud, the Jin heir was doing everything he could to destroy the corpses. The others fought by his side, wielding their blades with admirable bravery. However, when one of the juniors cut one open, there was a strange sploshing sound. Something dark sprayed everywhere.

Jin Ling dodged and covered his mouth, narrowly avoiding ingesting it. The others weren't so lucky.

“Well, if it’s any consolation,” Lan Xichen smiled. “We can at least be grateful that Wangji and Wei-gongzi are there. I’m sure things would have been much worse otherwise.”

In response to those words, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan simply paled further, horrified by the possibilities.

“Huh?” Jin Ling gasped, glancing back and realizing far too late that a corpse had snuck up on him.

“*A-Ling!*”

“Ah!” the boy shouted as he was blasted through the air. Wei Wuxian immediately abandoned the boys he’d been helping, spinning on his heel and lunging forward to catch Jin Ling before he fell. The force of the corpse’s attack sent the pair skidding across the ground. Wei Wuxian dug in his heels, refusing to lose his balance in such a dangerous situation.

“Thank you, Wei Wuxian,” Jin Zixuan sighed, feeling like he’d said that line over two dozen times.

“What a strong force,” Wei Wuxian muttered.

There was another set of splashing sounds, and some of the disciples screamed in fright.

“What happened?” Wei Wuxian asked, clutching the unconscious Jin Ling tighter in his arms.

“Something spurted out of the corpse's body!” Lan Jingyi responded, gagging a little. “I think it was some sort of powder. It was bitter and sweet and rotten!”

Wen Qing sighed heavily, burying her face in her hand as her stress level skyrocketed.

“Um… Wen-guniang,” Jiang Yanli cleared her throat. “Will they be alright?”

After hesitating for a moment, Wen Qing responded, “We know the four who contacted us survive. However, if this is what I think it is, I can’t make any promises for the others.”

Jiang Fengmian sucked in a breath, biting his lip in worry.

“Everyone! Get away from the corpses!” Wei Wuxian ordered. “Come here, now!”

The juniors began blindly stumbling in the direction of his voice, trying to get close. Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian turned his eyes on the approaching corpses.

There was no humor in them now.

He glanced at Jin Ling once, then looked up again, his irises a burning scarlet.

♫

The watchers *flinched* at the power that filled the air.

And the corpses stalled, confused for a moment by the commands behind the song Wei Wuxian's makeshift flute played. However, a moment later, they trembled and jerked and *moved*.

'*I can't control it?*' Wei Wuxian realized.

"Oh, *fu*-"

Before that curse could be finished, it was exchanged for a scream. The corpse had pounced forward, and Wei Wuxian had escaped its grasp by a mere centimeter. Lan Wangji came up behind Wei Wuxian, already unsheathing Bichen, only for the Yiling Patriarch to rest a hand on Wangji's own.

"No need," he said, curling his fingers around Lan Wangji's and pressing down to re-sheath Bichen. "We can't risk any more dust getting into the kids' bodies. Let me handle this."

If the situation wasn't so serious, Lan Xichen would have cooed at the sheer intimacy of the interaction.

Twisting so that the boy in his arms was near Wangji, Wei Wuxian requested, "Take care of Jin Ling for me?"

"Okay," Hanguang-jun calmly answered, accepting the boy without complaint. No worry could be found in his expression.

As the real Lan Wangji watched the exchange, he couldn't help but find himself amazed once more. Although he was well aware of Wei Wuxian's power, the complete and utter *trust* his other self had in Wei Wuxian's ability — and vise versa — left him momentarily breathless.

No matter how many misunderstandings had occurred between them, their faith in each other's strength and righteousness had never faltered.

Wei Wuxian ran forward to where the corpses were most heavily concentrated, trusting Lan Wangji to take care of the kids while he did. They attacked him on all sides, but Wei Wuxian's agility (even in Mo Xuanyu's body) was more than enough to easily avoid them. They lunged for him and slashed with their claws, but only ever hit air.

Wei Wuxian gathered resentment in his body, then attacked. He slammed his power into the remaining corpses — trying to knock down, rather than control. Unlike the cuts that would result from Hanguang-jun's attacks, Wei Wuxian's did not break open the corpses' skin; the powder remained inside.

The last corpse slammed against the ground, and Wei Wuxian's flute was at its neck an instant later. One foot on the monster's chest, Wei Wuxian loomed over his fallen adversaries with a smug satisfaction that sent tingles up the real Lan Wangji's body.

“The person controlling you is indeed skilled,” he acknowledged. “But when it comes to demonic cultivation… I’m the founder.”

Wen Ruohan gave a low, impressed whistle, filling in the silence created by the other watchers’ speechlessness.

Seeing that the corpses had all been immobilized, Lan Wangji acted next. A light blue glow filled the space, and dark miasma was forced out of the bodies into the air.

Jiang Cheng stepped back, not wanting to find out how the strange resentful energy would interact with his incorporeal form.

Once most of the energy had been forced out, Lan Wangji’s free hand (which had been up in a hand signal), pressed down, causing the little tension still in the corpses to vanish.

The now-soulless bodies became limp on the ground.

Wei Wuxian had been too far to see where the other was, but Hanguang-jun’s purification gave him a general idea of where to find the man. He headed in that direction, relaxing when he spotted the figure of an adult through the fog.

“Alright, everyone get close!” he commanded. “Come here quickly. I want to see you.”

“Okay, but I can’t see *you*,” Lan Jingyi pointed out. “Where are you?”

Briefly recalling the only thing that had been visible in the thick fog, Wei Wuxian called out, “Hanguang-jun, draw your sword for a moment so that he can walk over.”

However, the shadow Wei Wuxian had identified as Lan Wangji’s figure neither twitched nor moved. Then, a blue glow appeared some ways away from the figure Wei Wuxian had been looking at.

Which meant the adult figure next to him-

The man darted forward and snatched the Qiankun pouch from Wei Wuxian’s side. His face was covered in a shadowy mist — it was the grave robber from before. However, a moment after he grabbed the pouch, it suddenly swelled. The string that had kept it tied snapped in half, and three enraged spirits shot forward.

The watchers jumped back as a panicking Wen Chao screeched.

“What-”

Wei Wuxian’s laughter cut the question off: “Sorry, did you want the Qiankun Pouch with the corpse? Your eyesight must be pretty bad then. Why did you take my spirit trapping pouch instead?”

‘*Crafty brat,*’ Jin Guangshan thought, noticing the way Wen Ruohan’s eyes had quirked in approval when the Chief Cultivator realized what Wei Wuxian had done.

‘*It’s a good thing I swapped the pouches placements,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, watching the unknown man take care of the spirits with ease. ‘*So he really is someone with a high level of cultivation.*’

That was undeniably true, but after having spent so long watching Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Patriarch perform miracles, Lan Qiren and Jiang Fengmian couldn’t help but feel a bit underwhelmed by the supposed ‘high cultivation.’

“Hanguang-jun, the gravedigger’s here!” Wei Wuxian shouted. Less than a moment later, Bichen’s piercing blue glow shot past him and engaged the unknown man in combat. Unfortunately, while Bichen’s glow couldn’t be concealed, the shadows the intruder had applied to himself masked his own cultivation. Given the gravedigger’s familiarity with the Gusu Lan fighting style, it was far from an easy battle.

Someone made a grunt of pain.

“Lan Zhan?! Are you hurt?” Wei Wuxian shouted.

“Of course not.”

There was bitter laugh, then another gasp, quite clearly not Lan Wangji’s voice.

Wei Wuxian grinned: “So it seems!”

Warmth wrapped around Lan Wangji’s heart at the interaction, and, despite the still-impassive face, Lan Xichen could tell that his brother had just fallen a little deeper than before.

(Which made it all the more unfortunate that the real Wei Wuxian wasn’t here to watch with them.)

As Lan Wangji immediately resumed his battle with the mysterious perpetrator, Wei Wuxian turned to face the juniors (confident that Lan Wangji could handle whoever the man was). There was now a large pack of new fierce corpses surrounding them on all sides, making it difficult to escape.

“How are the ones who inhaled the powder?” Wei Wuxian asked, prioritizing the health of the children, as per usual.

Wen Qing straightened up even further, praying that someone there had an antidote to corpse poisoning.

Having taken a moment to observe those who had inhaled the powder most deeply, Sizhui reported, “They are starting to have trouble standing up.”

Wei Wuxian nodded: “Alright. Come to the middle and number yourselves off.”

Despite his words, he then turned his attention to the gathering corpses just outside their little group. These were the stragglers who had been too far to be a threat earlier, but were becoming more and more of one every second.

With a cocky smile and a twirl of his flute, Wei Wuxian brought the instrument to his lips and played a single, resounding note.

♪

Instantly, a stream of resentful energy exploded into the air. Ten or so yards off the ground, an enormous magic array made out of resentment formed.

"What the — that's as big as a house!" Wen Chao gaped, stepping back in shock.

And the effects were felt soon enough. Now that Wei Wuxian had gathered all the kids in one place, there was no need for him to hold back when it came to attacking the rest of the corpses. Resentful energy exploded into a tidal wave that launched the corpses — and many of the watchers — straight off the ground. They flew through the air as if rocketed back, only stopping when they either crashed into the nearby houses (the corpses) or got low enough to make contact with the floor, skidding across it until they stopped.

"Ow," Nie Huaisang said, miserably.

The notes Wei Wuxian was playing on his flute then switched, and an entire song broke out, just as unnervingly gorgeous as all the others had been. Within seconds, every corpse had been purified.

Wei Wuxian lowered the flute with a smirk.

If Lan Wangji were a lesser man, he knew he would be staring in slack jawed awe at Wei Wuxian (possibly releasing a bit of drool in the process). Luckily for the little dignity the second jade had left, he was far too composed to do something like that.

(That didn't stop his brain from imagining all sorts of detestable things regardless.)

The juniors, who had just finished numbering themselves off, were now staring at the sky, slack-jawed with disbelief at what they had just seen. Without explaining what he had done, Wei Wuxian approached them and cupped Lan Jingyi's face with one of his hands, using the other to feel the boy's forehead.

'*A bit warm,*' Wei Wuxian thought, frowning.

As Wei Wuxian moved to check the other juniors' foreheads (finding the same result each time), Wen Qing sighed. It was becoming increasingly likely that her theory was correct. She would know for sure if she could just get a good look at their-

"Show me your tongue," Wei Wuxian ordered, lifting Lan Jingyi's eyelids. "Ahh."

"Ahh."

"That settles it, then," Wen Qing sighed.

"Yup. Congratulations. You're under corpse poisoning."

“What?!” Lan Qiren stood.

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng shouted, annoyed at his shixiong’s persistent, obnoxious positivity (especially considering what Wen Qing had said about the severity of her theory).

Similarly, Jin Ling soon added on, “How is that something to congratulate someone for?!”

“It’s a life experience,” Wei Wuxian shamelessly answered. “It’ll be a conversation starter when you get older.”

“For crying out loud-” Nie Mingjue cut himself off, groaning heavily.

Feeling much the same, Lan Xichen gave a shaky smile and commented, “I feel like one of us should tell him that there is such thing as *too much* positivity.”

Then again, after the things Wei Wuxian had experienced and moved past, perhaps it shouldn’t be a surprise that he considered corpse poisoning a ‘good life experience.’

“Young Master Mo, will anything happen to them?” Sizhui asked, worriedly. “Corpse poisoning happens so rarely… we don’t have any elixirs to cure them.”

Wen Qing tsked.

And the affected boys all paled considerably upon hearing that.

“Nothing will happen for the moment. When the poison travels through the bloodstream to enter the heart, however, nothing will be able to help anymore.”

“W-what will happen?”

“Whatever happens to the corpse will happen to you,” Wei Wuxian blithely answered. “If you’re lucky you’ll just rot away. If you’re not, you’ll become a long-haired zombie that’ll only be able to hop around for the rest of your life.”

If it weren’t for the constant reassurance that her grandson would be fine, Madam Yu would be cursing Wei Wuxian’s near-callous lightheartedness until the end of time.

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down, not noticing the thoughtful expression her husband sent her way.

“So, do you want to cure it?”

The disciples all nodded frantically, none of them sharing Wei Wuxian’s obvious amusement with the situation.

“Alright. If you want to cure yourselves, then listen up. From now on, all of you have to listen to whatever I say and follow my orders. Every one of you.”

Many of the boys had never met ‘Mo Xuanyu’ before, but the familiar way in which Wei Wuxian referred to Hanguang-jun (and the desperate situation) commanded their obedience. Wen Ruohan smiled minutely, suddenly recalling the way every sect heir had unquestioningly followed Wei Wuxian’s plan in the Xuanwu Cave.

It was truly unfortunate that the boy seemed to have no desire to be a sect leader; he’d make quite a good one.

Wei Wuxian clapped: “Stand up. Those who aren’t poisoned, carry those who are, preferably over the shoulder. If you can only lift them over your fronts, remember to position their heads and hearts higher than the rest of their bodies.”

“But I can walk!” Lan Jingyi protested. “Why do I need to be carried?”

“If you jump around, your blood is going to circulate quickly, and it will enter your heart sooner. It’s best if you don’t move at all.”

The complaints stopped after that.

Nie Huaisang, who had stood in the center of the powder released by Lan Jingyi’s attack (only for it to phase straight through him), was very, very glad they were still intangible.

“Young Master Mo, everyone is in position. Where do we go now?” Lan Sizhui asked, carrying Lan Jingyi over his back.

‘*Ah, this Sizhui boy really is the nicest, most obedient, and least worrisome one.*’

Remembering the close relationship his other self had with the boy, Lan Wangji felt a bit of pride soar in his chest at the comment.

In the distance, Lan Wangji continued his battle with the unknown man. Glancing that way for a moment — still not even remotely worried — Wei Wuxian smirked.

“Right now, we won’t be able to leave the city. So, let’s go around and knock on a few doors.”

“Doors?” Jiang Cheng repeated.

Equally confused, Jin Ling asked, “Knock on the doors of what?”

Pausing for a moment in thought, Wei Wuxian asked, “Is there anything we can knock on the doors of but houses?”

The faux-confusion in his tone made Madam Yu sigh, but she refrained from commenting. No matter how infuriating the boy’s arrogant mocking was, she had to admit it wasn’t entirely unearned; he was always the one with an answer, after all.

Seeing that, Jiang Fengmian bit his lip as his thought. Recently, despite still getting annoyed at Wei Wuxian in general, Madam Yu had not said anything against him. Before the simulation, that would never have been the case. In fact, at the beginning of the simulation,

she had still not hesitated to make all sorts of comments before the gathered sects. Even after watching Wei Wuxian being thrown into the Burial Mounds, certain judgements remained.

Now, however — whether it was because he had saved Jin Ling, proven his sanity, or even just had given her the time to process everything — Madam Yu was not speaking out against Wei Wuxian.

A transition Jiang Fengmian had long since accepted as impossible had happened in a handful of days.

Meanwhile, undisturbed by Jiang Fengmian's racing thoughts, the simulation had continued:

"You want us to enter these houses?!" Jin Ling demanded. "It's already dangerous enough outside. Who knows what sorts of things are hiding in the buildings, waiting and watching us."

Wen Chao paled, instantly flashing back to the Yiling Patriarch's revenge.

(The infant Wang Lingjiao thought she had seen certainly matched Jin Ling's description.)

And then, contrary to most of the watchers' expectations, Wei Wuxian just shrugged and said, "True."

"*What?!*"

"It's hard to say whether it's more dangerous inside or outside of the houses, but, since it's already like this on the outside, we might as well try out the inside," he said, gesturing around to the new series of corpses approaching in the distance.

"Let's go; there's no time to lose. We still need to cure the poisoning."

Unable to deny that, the juniors complied. Holding onto the sword sheaths of the person in front of them, they walked single-file after Wei Wuxian through the fog. They went from house to house, knocking on doors. There was no response from the first. Nor the second. Nor the third.

Impatient, Jin Ling suggested, "There doesn't seem to be anyone inside. Let's just go in."

"Who told you to enter if there wasn't anyone inside?" Wei Wuxian demanded. "Continue knocking. We need to get to a house that does have someone in it."

"Are you serious?" Jiang Cheng asked, groaning at Wei Wuxian's usual ridiculousness.

"You want to find one with someone inside?" Jin Ling asked.

"Yes. Knock nicely — yours were too fierce. It's quite rude."

Those words infuriated Jin Ling to the point where he looked like he wanted to kick the door down. Luckily, he controlled himself at the last second and merely stomped his foot on the ground.

"Oh, A-Ling," Jiang Yanli sighed out, a warm smile on her face. To her left, her fiance was torn between amusement and second hand embarrassment, causing him to look away. After a moment, he peaked back at her out of the corner of his eye. The pair made eye contact for a moment.

Immediately after, they both burst into laughter.

From there, they went from house to house, knocking on each door. Although each failure was clearly making Jin Ling more and more annoyed, the amount of force he was exerting had clearly lessened.

'*Good job, A-Ling,*' Jin Zixuan thought, feeling a new kind of pride well up within him.

On the other hand, no matter how many times they failed, Sizhui remained calm.

"Excuse me, is anyone inside?" he asked for the dozenth time.

Suddenly, the door shifted, and a thin, black slit cracked open.

"Oh? There was actually someone inside?" Madam Jin asked, having half believed that Wei Wuxian was just messing with the juniors by this point.

Time went on, but the person behind the door didn't speak. It was impossible to see them as well, due to how dark the inside of the house was. Nervous, the boys unconsciously took steps back.

Lan Sizhui quickly regained his composure, "Excuse me, are you the manager of this shop?"

Both Wen Ruohan and Lan Qiren nodded in approval, especially pleased by this junior.

Another moment passed, before an old, bizarre voice leaked from the slit a simple "Yes."

Wei Wuxian walked over with an easy grin, patting Lan Sizhui's shoulder and motioning for him to step back as he said, "Manager, it's our first time coming to this city. The fog was so thick that we got lost. We've been walking for a long time already, and we're rather tired. Would it be possible for you to lend us your shop so that we can rest?"

"...My shop is not for travelers to rest in," the gravelly voice replied.

Looking unhurried and unconcerned despite the strangeness of the situation, Wei Wuxian continued, "But this is the only shop around here that has anyone inside. Manager, are you really unwilling to do us this favor? We will gladly pay."

He flashed a charming smile, and Jin Guangshan was once again reminded of the fact that Wei Wuxian had been forth on the list of young masters. Mo Xuanyu was attractive in his own right, but something about Wei Wuxian's presence in the body elevated that to a whole new level.

Behind Wei Wuxian, Jin Ling quickly blurted out, "How are you going to pay? *I'm* certainly not going to lend you any money."

"No need," Wei Wuxian responded, gleefully pulling out a pouch of money and waggling it before their eyes. It was MianMian's pouch, from all those years ago.

Lan Sizhui flinched back in shock, gasping out "You — how dare you? That is *Hanguang-jun's.*"

Upon hearing that, Lan Xichen frowned slightly in confusion. Were the juniors truly so familiar with their 'Hanguang-jun' that they could recognize his money pouch on sight?

As the argument continued, the door then slid open just a bit more. It was still impossible to see inside, but they could now make out the person they had been speaking to. A gray-haired, expressionless woman stood behind the door.

Jin Guangshan internally mourned that it wasn't a young maiden. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were certainly quite beautiful, but, if you asked him, the overall story was somewhat lacking in the female cast.

Although the woman had a hunched back (making her appear quite elderly), she didn't actually have many wrinkles or age spots. It might even be possible to describe her as middle aged. She proceeded to open the door and move out of the way, wordlessly welcoming them inside.

Gaping in astonishment, Jin Ling whispered, "She's really willing to let us in?"

"Of course," Wei Wuxian whispered back. "One of my feet was in the slit, so she couldn't have closed the door even if she wanted to. If she didn't let me in, I would have just kicked the door down."

"*A-Xian!*" Jiang Yanli instantly scolded, mouth falling open in shock as laughter erupted around her. "You can't just-"

"In all fairness, Jiang-guniang," Wen Qing interrupted. "If he doesn't find a cure soon, the juniors will die."

"...I suppose," Jiang Yanli acknowledged, still finding herself shocked by her shidi's rudeness. Then again, perhaps this was simply an extension of their different backgrounds, as Jiang Yanli had seen throughout the simulation.

Wei Wuxian knew what it was like to be desperate. When he needed something, he knew how to make it happen.

The old woman stood waiting on the side, frowning as the disciples hesitantly brought their too-scared-to-move poisoned friends inside. As soon as everyone had entered, she shut the door.

Darkness instantly filled the room.

“Manager, why do you not turn on the lights?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“The light is on the table. Ignite it yourselves.”

“Hm?” Wen Ruohan wondered, feeling suspicion rise within him and stepping closer to get a better look at the unknown woman.

Following her instructions, Lan Sizhui felt around the table for the light, swiftly moving to turn it on. He found the candles, then lit the flame.

“*Ah!*”

The virtual and real juniors shrieked in unison, all stumbling to the middle of the room as the unblinking faces of countless people stared back at them.

Jiang Fengmian had flinched heavily, and Lan Qiren had turned several shades paler. Even Nie Mingjue was startled, having not heard any breathing beforehand.

The reason why became apparent a moment later.

When he had flinched, Lan Sizhui had nearly dropped the oil lamp, but Wei Wuxian’s quick hand caught it before it made contact with the floor. Calmly brushing the burning fire talisman, he lit it up further and set it down on the table.

“Did you make these yourself, Manager? They’re quite well made.”

“...Oh. Puppets.”

And indeed, the silent ‘people’ in the room were in actuality paper mannequins in the forms of delicate women, adorable children, and even Nether Brawlers. Their eyes were entirely white, lacking pupils despite their noticeably rosy cheeks.

Their strange likeness to humanity made them all the more unsettling.

However, curiosity soon overcame the juniors’ fear, and they began to venture closer to the mannequins. As time went on, it became more and more obvious that they were truly just puppets. Their fears soon eased.

Seeing that, Wei Wuxian turned to the old woman and asked, “Would it be possible for us to borrow your kitchen?”

“Kitchen?” Jiang Yanli asked, tilting her head in confusion.

Glowering at the lamp, the old woman answered, "The kitchen is in the back. Use it as you please."

Before she had even finished that sentence, she had already turned around and fled the room, rushing off as though she was trying to escape the plague. The door slammed in her wake.

Shocked by the blatant disrespect, Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen made eye contact with each other, somewhat surprised by Wei Wuxian's tolerance for it. Then again, Wei Wuxian *had* barged into her home, so it was understandable.

Jin Ling disagreed.

"There's definitely something wrong with that woman! What is she thinking? You-"

"Okay, hush. I need someone to help me," Wei Wuxian interrupted. "Any volunteers?"

Lan Sizhui immediately raised his hand, offering "I can come."

All three Lans looked on in potent approval, unspeakably proud of their to-be disciple.

"Wait, then what should I do?" Lan Jingyi asked, still standing straight as a stick.

"Remain standing," Wei Wuxian answered. "Don't move until I tell you to."

At those words, Lan Jingyi impossibly stood up even straighter, the tension in his body reaching near-critical levels.

Although Lan Jingyi hadn't been quite as perfect a disciple as the Twin Jades or Lan Sizhui, his cultivation skill could not be discounted, showing years of hard work. With his defensiveness of the Lan Sect on top of that, the three present Lans knew any damage he sustained would be a heavy loss.

'*After the way he died, I might not have a right to ask this of him, but I sincerely hope Wei Wuxian will be able to help,*' Lan Xichen thought, taking several calming breaths.

Lan Sizhui (and the watchers), then followed Wei Wuxian into the back room. As soon as they entered, Lan Sizhui flinched back and covered his nose as if overwhelmed by a foul stench. His head spun until he needed to support himself on one of the nearby cabinets, breathing gasps out through his mouth to try to limit the air intake of his nose.

The other person who had followed, Jin Ling, immediately spun around and fled the room as soon as he entered, shouting, "What in the world is this?! What are you doing here instead of thinking up cures?!"

"I'm so glad the simulation doesn't include smell," Nie Huaisang said with a relieved sigh. The other heirs present all nodded in agreement, and the only one who opposed the notion was Wen Qing (whose curiosity had long since overcome her sense of disgust).

But, instead of answering Jin Ling's question, Wei Wuxian just called out, "Young Mistress Jin, are you coming over? If you are, then come and help; if you're not, then go back and tell someone else to come over."

"Who are you calling 'Young Mistress Jin?!' Watch what you say!"

Leaning close to Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue muttered, "I have to admit, that name suits him rather well."

Lan Xichen quickly coughed to hide his laughter, and Wen Qing made amused eye contact with a bashful Jiang Yanli.

There was a deafening *bang* as Wei Wuxian opened a chest on the ground. Instantly, all the young masters reeled back in disgust, the smell increasing to intolerable levels.

"So, so glad," Nie Huaisang muttered.

Within the chest was ham and chicken, dotted in blotches of revolting green, which in itself was dotted in the white of coiling maggots. Seemingly unphased by this, Wei Wuxian picked up the chest and handed it to Jin Ling.

"Throw it away," he ordered. "Anywhere works, so long as we don't smell it."

"How is he not reacting?!" Wen Chao demanded, having moved as far away as he could possibly go. "He can even smell it! Wasn't he supposed to be a young master?! What, does he not have a tongue? He really is a freak-"

"Chao-er," Wen Ruohan spoke, the one disapproving word enough to make Wen Chao's mouth snapped closed.

After hesitating for a moment, Wen Qing couldn't help but scathingly point out, "I'm sure, after the Burial Mounds *you* threw him into, this is nothing."

Even if Wen Chao was willing to argue with her, he wouldn't be able to. Not only was his father annoyed with him, but, just a little further, the second jade sat, a dark cloud of hatred forming around him.

Wen Chao wasn't *intimidated* by the second jade, but he thought now would be an unwise time to say anything further.

Meanwhile, Jin Ling (quite reluctantly) did as he was told. After throwing the chest away, he wiped his hands with a handkerchief a few times, and threw that away as well. He shuddered at the memory of what had been inside the chest.

Once again, Jiang Yanli was overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness. It was one thing when her shidi was fighting dangerous battles, but he and her son were doing something in a kitchen, now. She was Lotus Pier's uncontested expert on that. And yet there was still no assistance she could offer them.

(Because her other-self was *dead*.)

(Which made her want to find out how that had happened all the more.)

When Jin Ling returned to the kitchen, he noticed that Wei Wuxian and Lan Sizhui had fetched two buckets of water from an outside well. Rather than using it for a ritual of some sort, the pair was instead using it to clean up.

"...Is Wei Wuxian just messing with them?" Jiang Cheng couldn't help but ask. His father laughed at the question, while his mother just gave an elegant shrug.

Once again not jumping to blame Wei Wuxian, Jiang Fengmian noticed.

"Hey. What are you doing?" Jin Ling demanded.

Wiping diligently, Lan Sizhui explained, "As you can see, we're cleaning the kitchen hearth."

"What's the use of cleaning the hearth. We're not making food or anything."

"Says who?" Wei Wuxian asked. "We *are* making food. You can sweep the dust. Get rid of all the cobwebs up there. Go on, now."

The words were said so naturally that, without even thinking about it, Jin Ling soon found himself doing just that.

"I can't believe he got young masters to do something like this," Madam Jin commented, staring in disbelief at her numbly compliant grandson. Hearing that, Lan Xichen suddenly remembered a part from the second segment, in which, after Wei Wuxian had asked how the sluggard could have gotten money, the spirits added in a note above the Lan juniors' heads. 'Young masters who have never had to think about money' it had said.

Wei Wuxian was quite a good influence on them, it seemed. Despite the dangerous situation, Lan Xichen couldn't help but be grateful his future disciples would get to experience it.

Then, the door cracked open, and Lan Wangji stepped inside.

"Ah, Lan Zhan! Perfect timing!" Wei Wuxian beamed, not bothering to ask about the grave robber. "Help us clean up."

Nodding once, Lan Wangji did so without complaint. After a short while, the kitchen looked completely different. It almost made the house appear lively, rather than worn down and abandoned as it had before. They piled some pre-chopped firewood into the hearth and set it alight with a flame talisman, quickly warming the room in a yellow glow.

A moment later, the door to the storage room swung closed as Lan Wangji stepped out, a basket in his arm.

"I found it," he reported. "There was some glutinous rice left inside."

"...Wen-guniang, um-"

“You don’t need to worry, the kids will be fine now,” Wen Qing quickly assured her, nodding once in what she hoped was a comforting manner (because if there was one thing Wen Qing could understand, it was protective worry). “Glutinous rice is one of the cures to corpse poisoning.”

“It is?” Jin Zixuan asked disbelievingly. Wen Qing saw no need to answer him.

While they were speaking to each other, Wei Wuxian had gotten to work. Taking a clean pot, he filled it with water and put it over the hearth. Once the water had started boiling, he poured the rice Lan Wangji had washed inside. With a peaceful smile on his face, he used a wooden spoon to stir it.

“You’re making *congee?*” Jin Ling asked.

“Uh huh.”

Annoyed, Jin Ling hurled his cleaning rag to the ground.

Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan both flushed in embarrassment, seeing their families giving them fairly knowing looks in regards to who Jin Ling got that behavior from.

“Hey now, no need for that,” Wei Wuxian scolded. “How can you get so mad after working for just a short while? Look at Sizhui. He’s worked the hardest, but he hasn’t said anything.”

Lan Qiren tried very hard to not preen with pride over his to-be disciple.

“Besides, what’s wrong with congee?”

“What’s *not* wrong with congee?!” Jin Ling responded. “It’s so watery and tasteless and… Wait, I’m not mad because there’s something wrong with congee!”

“Good. It’s not for you anyways.”

Those words just made Jin Ling even more angry: “What do you mean it’s not for me? I’ve worked for so long, and I don’t even get any?!”

“Wasn’t he literally just complaining about how tasteless it was?” Nie Mingjue asked, to which Jiang Yanli shook her head while hiding a laugh, silently communicating that looking for logic would be a futile endeavor.

“Hanguang-jun, Young Master Mo, is it that congee can cure corpse poisoning?” Lan Sizhui inquisitelly asked.

“Yup. But it’s not the congee that can cure corpse poisoning — it’s the rice. This is folk medicine. Normally, you’d apply the glutinous rice to a scratch or bite wound. If this ever happens to you again, try this. It’s hurts a lot, but it works pretty efficiently. However, you all swallowed corpse poisoning powder instead of being scratched or bitten, so we need to make this into rice congee.”

“Oooh.”

“That makes sense, I suppose.”

Although Lan Qiren had already seen as much during Wei Wuxian’s student days in the Cloud Recesses, it still surprised him how much the boy knew. For all that Madam Yu complained about his laziness, he was clearly quite well read.

(Then again, after what they’d seen, she probably wouldn’t ever complain about that again.)

“Oh, so that’s why you wanted a house with someone inside,” Lan Sizhui realized. “Only a house with an occupant would have a stocked kitchen. And only a kitchen could have glutinous rice.”

But Jin Ling’s objections continued: “Who knows how long that rice has been here for! Can you still eat it? This kitchen hasn’t been used for at least a year! There’s dust everywhere and the meat’s rotten. Don’t tell me that hag hasn’t eaten for an entire year. What, has she practiced inedia? That’s impossible! How did she survive?”

‘*Fair question,*’ Wen Ruohan thought, frowning deeply as Wei Wuxian continued to be undisturbed by the strangeness of the woman who allowed them in.

“There are two possibilities,” Wei Wuxian began. “Either she hasn’t been living here and isn’t the real shopkeeper, or she simply doesn’t need to eat.”

“...Huh?” Jiang Cheng asked, wishing Wei Wuxian could just explain normally for once.

Lowering his voice to a near-whisper, Lan Sizhui said, “If she doesn’t need to eat, then she would be dead. That woman clearly breathes.”

Still waiting for the pot to heat up enough, Wei Wuxian simply switched topic, asking, “Right, you haven’t finished explaining. Why did you come to Yi City together? It wasn’t just by chance that you ran into each other, was it?”

Everyone’s expressions quickly turned serious as Jin Ling replied, “The Lan Sect’s people, those from other sects, and I were all chasing after something. I came from around Qinghe.”

“We came from Langya,” Lan Sizhui added.

Curious, Wei Wuxian casually asked, “What were you chasing?”

“We don’t know,” Lan Sizhui shook his head. “It never showed its face. We don’t even know if it is a what or a who or… or an organization.”

“And they just chased after it?” Madam Yu huffed in annoyed. “Honestly, you’d think A-Ling at least would have someone looking after him. What an utter mess.”

“At least Wei Ying is here, now,” Lan Wangji pointed out. Madam Yu pursed her lips, but didn’t object. Internally, she had to admit there were few she trusted with Jin Ling more than

Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Patriarch (regardless of the mysterious circumstances that led to her daughter and son-in-law's deaths).

A moment later, they were given an explanation. However, despite it being Lan Jingyi's voice speaking, there was no motion from the boy himself. This was a message from the version even farther in the future, who had assembled the simulation. And, accompanying it, were memories showcasing the events. Jin Ling crept out of a tavern.

"Ever since a few days ago, when Jin Ling lied to his uncle — wait, really? You did?"

The memory jerked to a halt, freezing as the narration paused.

"Just keep going!" Jin Ling complained.

"Alright, alright. So, the delicate Young Mistress had become worried that Sect Leader Jiang would really break his legs, so he-"

"Wait, what did you call me?"

As Lan Sizhui tried (mostly in vain) to stop the argument, the Jiangs shifted awkwardly. Much had happened since then, but it was hard to forget Wei Wuxian's last meeting with Jiang Cheng. And now, Jin Ling was scared that Jiang Cheng was actually going to hurt him.

For the crime of saving Wei Wuxian.

It was probably not a necessary concern — Jiang Cheng probably wouldn't actually hurt Jin Ling over this —and it would probably be fine, but there shouldn't *have to be* a 'probably' there. Words could not describe how much was wrong with that situation, and yet, based on the accuracy of the simulation so far, it appeared to be the truth.

"I'll continue from here," Lan Sizhui decided, presumably snatching the script from Lan Jingyi's hands. "He was worried Sect Leader Jiang would really break his legs, so he decided to sneak away and disappear for a couple of days, not wanting to meet up with his uncle again until the man's anger had subsided."

Both Madam Yu and Jiang Cheng flinched at the description, finding a churning whirlpool of anger forming within them, but having no one to direct those emotions at but themselves.

"As soon as he had passed Zidian to one of Sect Leader Jiang's trusted subordinates, he ran away. Having arrived at a city on the border of the Qinghe area, his journey paused. While searching for a location for his next night hunt, he took a short rest at a local inn. That night, while he was memorizing spells in his room, Fairy started barking at the door. It was late at night, so Jin Ling told the dog to stop, but, a moment later, he heard someone knock on the door."

"I don't like this story. It's creepy," Ouyang Zizhen complained in a low whisper, causing the memory to freeze once again.

"We've already *lived it*. What else is there to be scared of?" Jin Ling scoffed, then paused when he heard Lan Sizhui clear his throat with just a trace of annoyance.

‘*It’s like herding cats,*’ Lan Qiren thought, sighing lightly. As capable as those juniors were, their attention spans seemed to be shorter than Jin Guangshan’s periods of sexual abstinence. He thanked the heavens that Sizhui was present.

“Although Fairy stopped barking, it was still restless. Its claws dug at the ground and it growled deeply. Already on alert, Jin Ling asked who the person beyond the door was. There came no reply, so Jin Ling returned to his own business. However, half an hour later, the knocks started again.”

The memory zoomed out to show an agitated Jin Ling leap out through his back window, circling around to cut off whoever was bothering him. However-

“Jin Ling searched, but there was nobody there.”

Frowning heavily, the memory of Jin Ling set Fairy out to guard the door, presumably informing it to attack if it saw anything suspicious.

Jin Zixuan paused, torn once again between his great respect for ‘Little Fairy,’ and the overwhelming realization that the real Wei Wuxian would be heavily inconvenienced if Jin Zixuan gave his son a dog.

“The next morning-”

There was a scream.

Nie Huaisang jumped at the sudden sound.

Jin Ling kicked the door open at once, only to step in a pool of blood. A moment later, a black mass fell from the top of the door — one which Jin Ling just barely managed to dodge.

It was the corpse of a black cat.

“What kind of *deranged psychopath* would do something like that?!” Nie Huaisang shrieked, quickly backing away.

“Someone had nailed a cat on top of his door. He tried a few different inns, but the same thing kept happening. Eventually, he got so fed up that he told himself he would hunt down any mention of a cat nailed to someone’s door, just to find out who was messing with him.”

The memory and narration both faded away, returning them to Wei Wuxian’s cooking.

“The same thing happened to you guys?” Wei Wuxian asked the Lans, receiving several nods in response.

“We chased after it, eventually arriving at Yueyang and Young Master Jin,” Lan Sizhui explained. “We found out we were searching for the same thing, so we decided to work together, arriving in this area today. We asked a hunter in the village, and were shown the path to Yi City.”

‘*A hunter in the village?*’ Wei Wuxian mentally repeated. ‘*Lan Zhan and I were there only a little while before them, but we didn’t see a hunter there. Just women and children.*’

A tense pause spread out.

“At least the didn’t get hurt,” Lan Xichen pointed out. “The perpetrator may not be entirely malicious.”

“Perhaps,” Wen Ruohan acknowledged. “Or maybe the juniors aren’t the targets of this scheme.”

Although he wouldn’t say so out loud, Nie Huaisang had to agree.

‘*Is it really a coincidence that the juniors involved include all three of the kids Wei-xiong met after coming back to life?*’ he wondered.

Feeling much the same, Wei Wuxian thought, ‘*It almost seems like they were led to us. To bring a bunch of juniors into a dangerous place so they could face the limbs of a fierce corpse — isn’t this what happened at Mo Village?*’

“Da-ge,” Nie Huaisang whined pitifully, as if saying ‘are you really planning on leaving me alone in such a scary world?’ In response to that, Nie Mingjue could only look away, unable to reject the accusation.

The future certainly seemed to be full of dangerous people. And yet, what other choice did Nie Mingjue have?

‘*Worst of all, there were corpses here I couldn’t control,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*In that case… it’s entirely possible the Stygian Tiger Seal might be in Yi City at this very moment. After all, something must have happened to the seal Xue Yang restored.*’

However, at that moment, there was a sudden bubbling below.

“Oh, perfect,” Wei Wuxian grinned, showing none of his earlier seriousness. He grabbed the wooden spatula again and mixed the rice, making sure to not move too quickly.

“What do you need to put in next?” Lan Wangji asked calmly.

“That,” Wei Wuxian gestured with a jerk of his head. Lan Wangji reached over and picked up the specified wooden containers.

“Oh,” Jiang Cheng’s eyes widened in horror. “Oh, no.”

“What’s wrong?” Jin Guangshan asked.

Jiang Fengmain laughed somewhat awkwardly, sending the juniors a pitying look as he said, “Remember what we mentioned about his love of spice?”

“Come now, I’m sure it can’t be that bad,” Madam Jin suggested. She received no answer from the Jiangs.

“Thank you, Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian grinned, watching Lan Wangji add ingredients in according to Wei Wuxian’s directions. “Oh, and this!”

And so Hanguang-jun did so.

Wei Wuxian laughed as he gave instructions, not at all phased by the fact that it was *Hanguang-jun* helping him. And the second jade appeared equally unphased, perfectly content with helping ~~his beloved~~.

Watching from the sidelines, one of the juniors couldn’t help but comment, “Hanguang-jun… is different… from what I expected.”

“Put all of it in the pot!” Wei Wuxian told him, laughing even more as Lan Wangji complied.

“It’s because of that Mo Xuanyu,” Lan Jingyi huffed.

“It’s because of love!” Nie Huaisang whisper-screamed, making Lan Wangji’s cheeks glow red with blush.

Then, from below where he had been fanning the flame, Lan Sizhui commented, “Senior Mo, I think the congee is ready?”

Stepping close to lean over and get a good look at the pot’s contents, Jiang Cheng was unsurprised but nonetheless disappointed to realize Wei Wuxian’s cooking hadn’t improved at all.

The flakes of red in the food were quite obvious, after all.

However, unaffected by the seasonings, Wei Wuxian tried a bit of it and smiled: “It’s ready. Take it out and feed one bowl to each person who has been poisoned.”

“Well, he liked it, at least,” Jin Zixuan mentioned. “It can’t be that bad.”

“A-Xuan, A-Xian’s cooking ability is more than fine; he makes exactly what he wants to make,” Jiang Yanli explained. “It’s just that his tastes are….”

Lan Jingyi had one spoonful, then immediately spit it out.

“What is this? Poison?!” he asked.

“How is that poison? It’s the cure! Glutinous rice congee.”

“First of all, I don’t know why would glutinous rice be the cure, but I’ve never eaten such a spicy bowl of congee before!”

Feeling skeptical that it could possibly be that bad, Nie Mingjue commented, “Well, what’s spicy for Lans might be different than what’s spicy for the disciples from other sects-”

The other boys immediately reacted the same as Lan Jingyi had, tears forming in their eyes as they nodded along with his observation.

The real Lan Wangji looked down over the bowl of apparently burningly-spicy congee, and reminded himself that the possible gains of trying Wei Wuxian’s food were more than worth such trivial mortal pains.

As Wei Wuxian finished passing the bowls out, Lan Jingyi began creeping very carefully toward the sealed door. He stepped on his tip toes, and barely breathed out of fear of being discovered. Five steps left to the door. Then four. Then three-

“Why are you running away?” Wei Wuxian asked, tapping the side of one of the bowls with his serving spoon. “Here. There’s a bowl for everyone.”

“I’ve never faced such torment before,” one of the boys complained. His friend patted him on the back, but flinched when Wei Wuxian spoke to him:

“Stop worrying about your friend. If you don’t want to join the corpse army outside, you better finish your porridge!”

Lan Wangji straightened up as well, and, as evenly as ever, ordered, “Finish them.”

In the face of a command from Hanguang-jun, the juniors had no choice but to obey.

As whines of protest and tears began appearing on each and every junior, it quickly dawned on the watchers just how awful Wei Wuxian’s food truly was.

“So even Wei-xiong has a flaw,” Nie Huaisang laughed.

“Is anyone else a bit… morbidly curious?” Jin Zixuan asked, watching the reactions with amusement. Despite himself, Lan Wangji had to nod in agreement. The taste and smell of the congee were not things the simulation could convey; if he wanted to learn about it, he would need to be brave enough to try-

“Don’t be,” Jiang Cheng disagreed. “Trust me, it’ll be your funeral.”

Loud gasps of desperate air were released as Lan Jingyi slowly lowered the now-empty bowl. His face was a brilliant red, tears filled his eyes, and air couldn’t enter his lungs fast enough.

“I’ve never had such spicy rice porridge before! Water! Water!” he ran off toward the well.

Curious, Lan Sizhui had tried a bite as well, and was now desperately fanning his tongue as his bright red face gasped out.

“It’s so spicy,” he breathed out. “It almost gives me a sense of deja vu.”

At those words, Lan Wangji glanced back. His blank face gave nothing away, but the action itself remaining notable.

Lan Xichen frowned, unable to determine the cause of Wangji's action.

Grinning, Wei Wuxian reached forward and squeezed Lan Jingyi's cheeks, turning him to the left and right to get a good look at his whole face.

He grinned, "Great. You'll be cured in half and hour or so."

"Thank the heavens," Lan Qiren muttered, finally relaxing.

One disciple was furious: "You — you gave us that-"

His mouth was immediately sealed shut, the silencing charm activating at once.

"Less talk, more rest," Hanguang-jun ordered as Wei Wuxian laughed.

"Is it really that bad?" Wei Wuxian asked. "You're all from Gusu, but Hanguang-jun is much better at handling spice than you guys."

"Oh? Really?" Jiang Fengmian asked, turning to Lan Qiren with an eyebrow raised in surprise.

However-

"Not at all, senior," Lan Sizhui corrected. "Hanguang-jun never has spicy food."

Right as those words were said, Lan Wangji raised his hand so that his sleeve covered his mouth, allowing him to breath in and out without smelling the spice.

Seeing everyone else's questioning looks, Lan Wangji nodded once, confirming Sizhui's words to a now increasingly-confused crowd.

"Never has spicy food?" Wei Wuxian repeated. "Is that so?"

A memory formed, overlapping over the scene as Wei Wuxian thought.

'*But, back then, I met with Lan Zhan in Yiling once,*' he recalled, the memory too blurry for the watchers to make out more than the notable black and white robes of the pair sitting down. '*At that time, all the dishes Lan Zhan ordered were packed with Sichuan peppers. I always thought our tastes were pretty similar.*'

Another round of questioning looks were sent Lan Wangji's way, so he shook his head once.

But the fact remained that he had ordered that food. Which meant-

'*...Looking back on it, I don't think Lan Zhan ever actually picked up his chopsticks. And then I said it was my treat, but Lan Zhan ended up paying for it anyways! No wonder I forgot.*'

"*He* paid for it?!" Jiang Cheng gaped. "Wei Wuxian!"

“Oh, I see now. No wonder you ordered that.”

“Xiongzhang, please,” Lan Wangji begged.

As he thought that, he suddenly really wanted to see Lan Wangji’s face. He glanced back, and found Hanguang-jun already watching him, allowing them to make eye contact. They stared at each other for several long seconds, neither speaking a word.

“Senior Mo! Senior Mo!” Lan Sizhui stood up. “The old woman’s door… has opened.”

A gust of wind swept by, making the door swing open and closed. An unworried expression on his face, Wei Wuxian signaled for the juniors to stay where they were and walked to the door with Lan Wangji.

The dim light of the oil lamp and candles leaked inside, illuminating the old woman. She sat with her head hung low, and didn’t react to the sound of intruders in her space. A cloth lay on her knees, stretched tightly around an embroidery frame. Above that, her hands jerked stiffly, trying and failing to thread a needle. She turned her head to glance up briefly, then looked back down again.

‘*I see. That practically confirms it then,*’ Wen Ruohan thought, staring calmly at the woman before him. He didn’t know how it was possible, and he didn’t know who was responsible, but the state of that woman’s life was now clear.

Lan Wangji stepped back slightly, allowing Wei Wuxian to take control of the interaction. Understanding instantly, Wei Wuxian sat down by the table, joining the woman as peacefully as possible.

“Manager, why not light the lamp if you’re threading a needle?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Here, let me help.”

He took the needle and thread, easily slipping the thread through the hole, and handed the completed product back to the woman. Then, as if nothing had happened, he stood up and walked with Lan Wangji back out the door.

“...I don’t get it,” Nie Huaisang admitted, lacking any and all knowledge on spirits. However, to his surprise, no explanation came. Even those who were familiar with the undead had nothing to say.

“When you were inside, did you get to see if that hag’s actually alive or not?” Jin Ling asked.

“Don’t call her a hag. That’s quite rude,” Wei Wuxian scolded. “The old lady is a living corpse.”

Those words made the three youngest straighten up at once, not because they knew the term, but because they didn’t. Every time Wei Wuxian was with the future’s juniors, he taught them

obscure pieces of trivia and necessary strategies that even some of the adults present didn't know.

Part of Nie Huaisang wished he had a scroll to take notes down on; the rest was grateful that his brother and Lan Qiren wouldn't be able to force him to treat the simulation like a class.

Finally, quickly realizing that only 'Senior Mo' and Lan Wangji knew that term, Lan Sizhui asked, "What is a living corpse?"

"From head to toe, everything seems to indicate that they are a corpse, but the person themselves is actually alive."

"You're saying that she's still alive?!" Jin Ling asked.

If Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan weren't equally shocked by those words, they would have frowned at their son's rude tone. As it was, however-

"Have you looked inside?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Yes?"

"We were there *with you* and I *still* didn't see anything."

"What did you see? What was she doing?"

After thinking it over for a moment, expecting some sort of trap in the question's phrasing, Jin Ling reluctantly answered, "Threading a needle."

"Did it go in?"

"...No."

Wei Wuxian nodded, "Correct. She isn't capable of threading the needle. Dead people's muscles are too rigid to perform delicate tasks like that. The marks on her face aren't age spots, but livor mortis. And she doesn't need to eat, either. The only thing that makes her alive is the fact that she can breathe."

The breathing was a notable difference, but Wen Qing still couldn't help connecting the description of the living corpse to the fate her brother had wound up in. Yes, Wei Wuxian had saved his mind, but he was still dead. He wouldn't be able to eat or sleep or breathe, no matter how much he wanted to. Even the archery he so loved would be impossible as he currently was.

She promised herself to not allow that to happen in this world.

"B-but she's already quite elderly," Lan Sizhui pointed out. "Most older women have poor eyesight and cannot thread needles by themselves."

"So I helped her," Wei Wuxian agreed. "But did you notice? From the time at which she opened the door until now, she hasn't blinked even once."

Lan Wangji nodded once in agreement.

Slowly, as if trying to avoid notice, Jin Zixuan glanced over at the second jade and whispered, “The two of you are almost scarily observant.”

Lan Xichen sighed, “How is *this* the same person who thought Wangji was talking about Bichen when he said ‘mine?’”

“Please don’t bring that up,” Lan Wangji requested, not enjoying the reminder of all the ways he had pushed Wei Wuxian away in their childhoods, leading to that confusion.

“Living people blink to prevent their eyes from becoming sore and dried out. Dead people, on the other hand, have no need to do that. When I grabbed the needle and thread from her, did anyone notice how she looked at me?”

“Her eyeballs didn’t move… but her head did!” Jin Ling exclaimed.

“Precisely!”

Although Lan Qiren had heard of nearly every resentful beast there was, he had never heard of these before. It had been quite some time since the grandmaster of the Lan Clan had been a student himself, but, watching Wei Wuxian’s lesson, he found himself pulled back to that time of his youth.

Back when Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze had still been alive.

“When people look at something, it’s usually their eyes that move, no matter how slight that movement is. However, since dead people can’t do such subtle actions, they need to turn their heads and necks instead.”

Lan Jingyi was baffled: “Should we be taking notes?”

The juniors of the present time understood that feeling all too well. Wei Wuxian in teacher mode was a force to be reckoned with.

“Notes are a good habit, but you won’t have time to flip through them when you’re out night-hunting. Keep the information in your minds.”

Gritting his teeth together, Jin Ling complained, “Walking corpses are already weird enough. Why do things like living corpses exist?”

Nie Huaisang nodded fiercely.

Wei Wuxian shrugged, “There are quite a few disadvantages the dead have to deal with. Rigid muscles, slow movement, and no taste, to name a few. However, there are several advantages as well: the lack of fear towards pain, inability to think, and how easy they are to control.”

“I suppose the Yiling Patriarch would know best,” Wen Qing commented.

“Someone thought they could counter the disadvantages of corpses and create perfect corpse puppets. The end result was these living corpses.”

Although the boys didn’t say anything out loud, it was clear what they were all thinking.

‘*Who could that person be but Wei Wuxian?*’

“Fair enough,” Madam Yu acknowledged.

‘*But it wasn’t me!*’ Wei Wuxian mentally protested.

“Really?” Jiang Fengmian asked. He didn’t know who else could have come up with them, in that case. Xue Yang came after Wei Wuxian’s death, so, if it was him, Wei Wuxian wouldn’t have known. Did the Yiling Patriarch really have hoards of disciples in Yiling doing research with him?

‘*Doubtful,*’ Jiang Fengmian decided. ‘*Even as the Yiling Patriarch, he was still A-Xian. He wouldn’t allow his disciples to act however they pleased.*’

Finally, Wei Wuxian decided to clarify the situation.

He cleared his throat: “Alright, Wei Wuxian started it. He successfully made Wen Ning, or the Ghost General — though, I’ve wanted to ask, who exactly came up with that title? It’s sounds dumb.”

“Huh? No it doesn’t! It sounds cool!” Nie Huaisang protested.

“I honestly thought Wei Wuxian was the one who came up with that,” Wen Qing commented, having felt it matched the boy’s sense of humor. Though, on second thought, it was Jiang Fengmian who had named Suibian, not Wei Wuxian. If he had given her brother a name, it probably would have been more along the lines of Chenqing.

“Anyways,” Wei Wuxian continued. “Some people wanted to imitate what he did with Wen Ning but weren’t skilled enough, so they used improper means. They targeted living people instead, and developed living corpses. A type of failed imitations.”

‘*It definitely wasn’t with his blessing, then,*’ Jiang Fengmian thought, relieved despite having already assumed that.

“Wei Ying himself used improper means,” Jin Ling snapped.

The Jiangs flinched. They had already known Wei Wuxian, and the other watchers had gotten to see what kind of a person he was. That made it hard to remember, sometimes, that everyone in the future hated him.

(Not that they could completely blame them. Before they knew why Wei Wuxian had used resentment, they had felt much the same. With the Yiling Patriarch’s kill count on top of that….)

But Wei Wuxian was unphased, continuing, "Yup. The ones who created living corpses used the most improper of improper means."

"Then, Senior Mo, what should we do?" Lan Sizhui asked.

"Some living corpses may not know they're already dead. I think that old lady is one such corpse; let's not disturb her for now."

'*Daozhang,' a girl's voice said, and Wei Wuxian turned to see a wispy, silver figure chasing after a tall, white one.*

It vanished a moment later.

"What the-"

"What is it?" Hanguang-jun asked.

Wen Ruohan frowned, "Did he not see it?"

"It must be like the voices within the saber tomb," Nie Mingjue pointed out. "Only Wei Wuxian can detect them."

Wei Wuxian frowned, "Just now, that was-"

Then, out of the blue, there were the taps of a bamboo pole against the ground.

"The ghost?" Jin Guangshan asked, looking around for the source of the sound.

It came from a nearby window which had been sealed shut by strips of black, wooden boards. The disciples all turned pale.

"It's that bamboo pole again," Lan Jingyi realized. "That thing's been following us since we entered the city. Nothing good happens when it sounds."

"W-what sort of demon is that?" Ouyang Zizhen asked. Although he hadn't been formally introduced within the simulation, the watcher's memories of the four who caused this mess were as strong as ever, so he was easy to point out.

"We will know after we take a look," Lan Wangji pointed out. Smirking, Wei Wuxian gestured for the juniors to be quiet, then walked to the window to peak through.

The watchers were brought close as well. Curious, some approached the gaps in the boards to take a look.

A pair of hideous, white, pupil-less eyes glared back.

Someone *screamed*.

Everything faded away.

“What was it?” Jiang Yanli asked, having not seen what Wei Wuxian was looking at.

“I’m… not entirely sure,” Lan Xichen admitted, frowning minutely. “It resembled a face with eyes, but even ghosts don’t look quite so… blank. Especially given the obvious intelligence it has shown.”

Jiang Fengmian nodded, “It disappeared too quickly for us to get a better view than that. The next segment will most likely have the answers we want.”

Giving a sigh that contained a strange trace of fondness, Madam Yu agreed, “Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun are there. They’ll figure it out quickly.”

“Those two aren’t the only ones there~” Nie Huaisang sang, leaning close to Lan Wangji. “Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong went out and adopted a whole pack of ducklings!”

“We didn’t,” Lan Wangji snapped back, annoyed that Huaisang’s fear of him had decreased to the point where the boy had no hesitation when it came to teasing. He missed the days where his mere presence would make the Nie heir flinch back in fear.

“To be honest, if A-Ling has to be adopted by someone in a world where A-Li and I are gone, you two would probably be my first choice,” Jin Zixuan commented.

“He’s the heir to the Jin Sect,” Lan Wangji calmly pointed out. “We *can’t* adopt him.”

“Even though A-Xian’s in Mo Xuanyu’s body?” Jiang Yanli asked.

“That isn’t — I-” he cut off, not sure of how to answer in the face of attacks from all sides, and Lan Xichen grinned. Recently, Wangji’s new acceptance of his own feelings in regards to Wei Wuxian took away many of the avenues Lan Xichen could use to tease him. However, it appeared the acquisition of children with Wei Wuxian had remained a delectable weak point in Wangji’s mask.

Right as Lan Xichen was about to fulfill his role as a responsible older brother (teasing him until his ears were glowing red), Wen Ruohan spoke up:

“Due to the nature of the time travel, we were assured that the four who sent the information over would be born into their appropriate bodies, yes?” the Chief Cultivator asked. “Then does that mean the other miscellaneous juniors who were present are likely to be erased from our world?”

All the humor in the room abruptly died with those words. Although most of the juniors shown hadn’t had more than one speaking line, they had still been there. Now they had a sect, appearance, and voice to match to the unknown masses who might not be born as a result of the time travel that occurred.

An uncomfortable feeling wormed its way into the chests of the watchers, but, long since accustomed to the tragedies of the world, they managed to avoid dwelling on it for too long. If it was impossible for them to change, worry would do them no good. Still, it reassured them greatly that those juniors would still exist in the future Wei Wuxian’s world.

(The one least bothered by the situation, Wen Chao, began picking at the floor, disliking the pointlessly awkward atmosphere.)

"...Yi City was pretty neat though, wasn't it?" Jin Zixuan commented, hoping to change the subject. "Maybe, when this is all over, we should head over there and try to purify some of it."

"The feng shui of the terrain there would make it difficult," Lan Wangji pointed out. "Though I would not be opposed to trying."

"Great! Sounds like a plan then."

Jiang Cheng was about to joining the conversation, only to pause when he saw his father step closer to his mother. They were a little too far away for him to hear the conversation, but he tensed up nervously nonetheless.

'*Please don't fight,*' he thought, clenching his hands. '*We've spent hours together without a big fight. Please stick to that. Please don't fight.*'

But, unwilling to say that aloud, he had no way to ensure that.

"San-niang," Jiang Fengmian greeted as he approached, having left Lan Qiren behind with his nephews. "Can we speak?"

"What do you want?" she snapped back, suspicion growing, but not to the point where she would refuse to talk (especially not while they were in the simulation and physically unable to get away from each other).

"I…" he hesitated, glancing back at his children momentarily. "I have a concern that I… thought I would share. I don't intend to force you to do anything you don't want to, and I can assure you that my focus on it doesn't mean I love our children any less-"

"Where are you going with this?" she demanded, rage growing.

"I simply wonder if we should do more for A-Xian. We could offer guidance — tell him about his future — *help* him more."

Madam Yu sighed as though unsurprised but nonetheless disappointed by Jiang Fengmian's concerns and asked, "What makes telling him now any different from telling him after we leave? Except, of course, that we'll be able to keep the boy from doing something idiotic in the later case. Not to mention that Wen Ruohan might act if we do something now."

"Wen Xu is in the real world, isn't he? How do we know he won't tell A-Xian something that leads him to be reckless?" Jiang Fengmian asked. "How long can we justify leaving A-Xian to fend off against Wen Xu? While trying to help us on top of everything else. You're right about the risk of provoking Wen Ruohan, but surely we can at least give him a bit more information."

The question made Madam Yu scowl even deeper, but it was a different sort of anger than Jiang Fengmian was used to. Rather than accusations and rage, Yu Ziyuan's mind appeared

occupied by a mix of frustration, fear, and uncertainty. She didn't have a solution.

"Perhaps we can tell him more. Or maybe it will just cause a bigger mess," Madam Yu decided, sighing. "Speak to me about this later. And, if you do decide to tell Wei Wuxian more, figure that out before you start speaking. You'll just be a fumbling mess, otherwise."

Jiang Fengmian nodded once, then fell silent, allowing his thoughts to take over once again.

Chapter End Notes

Wei Wuxian: We'll be fine, kids. The corpse poisoning is no match against us! We have something no one else has! *points at his chest*

Lan Sizhui: Heart?

Wei Wuxian: What? No. Me. We have me. I'm pointing at myself.
:)

A Memorable Last Meal for Xue Yang

Chapter Notes

> Tintin was a life saver this chapter, especially in regards to spelling! I hate the English language.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Sect Leader!" a terrified Nie disciple shouted as she burst through the door. "Sir, sir-"

"What is it?" Huaisang squeaked out, immediately putting down the fan he had been in the process of painting. In the distance, he heard a *crack*, followed shortly after by a scream of terror.

"We're being attacked. By-by the *Yiling Patriarch!*" the disciple revealed.

Huaisang simply blinked.

"By Wei-xiong?"

Less than ten seconds later, the door was swung open and Nie Huaisang's terrified disciple valiantly moved to defend him from Wei Wuxian (who entered the room looking as casual as ever).

"Hey!" he greeted, waving cheerily.

"Welcome, Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang responded, more than a little confused. "Would you… like some tea?"

"Tea sounds great!" Wei Wuxian replied, completely ignoring the Nie disciple and sitting down across from Nie Huaisang, giving the fan he was painting an appreciative look.

With a wave of his hand, Nie Huaisang sent his disciple off to grab the specified tea, pretending not to notice the shocked and befuddled look said disciple sent his way.

"Sorry about the mess on the way in. I know I don't have an appointment with you, but I figured you were going to avoid me until you could make sure the meeting was on your terms," Wei Wuxian shamelessly confessed. "I tried asking politely — I even waited for you to be done with your meeting with those merchants — but the people outside still said you were busy!"

"I… heard something break," Nie Huaisang nervously admitted. "Was that…."

“No need to worry, it wasn’t someone’s bones,” Wei Wuxian laughed. “Just one of the staircases next to where a particularly stubborn disciple was. I’ll pay you back for it, promise!”

Nie Huaisang had actually been worried about it having been a wall; the snap being a *bone* hadn’t even crossed his mind. Now that the possibility had been raised, he found himself more nervous than ever before.

He and Wei Wuxian stared at each other for a moment, both waiting for the other to speak. The disciple came back swiftly, setting the tea down before them and scampering out just as fast.

(This was what Huaisang got for putting a disciple almost as cowardly as him as one of his guards. He should have known that, regardless of how good Nie Lifen’s taste in books was, he would abandon him when Huaisang needed him most!)

“I was talking to Zewu-jun a bit more,” Wei Wuxian began, swirling the tea in his cup around until it made a miniature whirlpool. “Do you know what he told me?”

After pretending to think it over for a moment, Nie Huaisang hopefully suggested, “Was it about the wedding? I know you and Hanguang-jun are happy having eloped, but I still think a proper wedding’s as good an excuse as any for a celebration! Though, from what I heard, you two haven’t exactly been *saving yourselves* for marriage.”

“Oh, I wanted to, Sect Leader Nie, I really did,” Wei Wuxian faked a sniffle. “But my darling Lan Zhan was just too tempting — I couldn’t hold out! Surely you understand.”

“Of course, of course,” Nie Huaisang nodded seriously, only minutely frustrated that Wei Wuxian remained perfectly composed despite his words. Then again, he should have expected this; although Nie Huaisang had been the one to pass around spring books during their time in the Cloud Recesses, not even he had ever been able to beat Wei Wuxian in shamelessness. He should have known the other man would just roll with the punches. Tapping his fan lightly, Nie Huaisang took a deep breath and held in a sigh.

This would be so much easier if his mask of uselessness was still effective against Wei Wuxian!

“Sect Leader Nie, do you remember the time we spent together during the disciple exchange at the Cloud Recesses? On one of the first days, Lan Qiren told me to ‘spend my night copying down
Righteousness to see if some of the lessons could get through my thick skull!’”

“Of course I remember; I’m the one who copied it for you.”

“And do you remember what you said when you offered to copy it for me?” Wei Wuxian asked. “You told me that if you copied, I would need to be the one to go down and grab some alcohol from Caiyi town. ‘Compromises must be made,’ you said. ‘Society as a whole works best when people specialize! People must give up a little for society to run smoothly.’”

“Did I say that?” Nie Huaisang tilted his head, fluttering his fan nervously. “I must admit, I don’t really remember….”

He trailed off, seeing the amused but unfaltering expression on Wei Wuxian’s face, and deflated in defeat. Really, there was no reason for Wei Wuxian to be so mean. Huaisang couldn’t understand why his former friend refused to allow him to save even the slightest face.

“I was talking to Zewu-jun,” Wei Wuxian repeated. “He’s terrified that if he doesn’t help Meng Yao, no one will. The other people in our world don’t care about him, and the ones in our past won’t have built up an emotional connection to him before the betrayal is revealed. He’s getting desperate-”

“I know,” Huaisang responded evenly. Not a trace of sympathy could be found in his gaze.

Although he didn’t allow his smile to falter, Wei Wuxian tensed slightly at Huaisang’s words, not due to their meaning, but because of the terrifyingly blank way Nie Huaisang said them. He knew full well — possibly better than Wei Wuxian did — why Lan Xichen was so desperate. He just didn’t care.

That made this slightly harder.

“I told Zewu-jun that we can’t just offer Meng Yao protection,” Wei Wuxian continued. “Not only would it be nearly impossible to get the people in that world to agree to such a thing, but it would be more than a little unfair to people like your brother. I told him that he would need to compromise.”

“Did you?” Nie Huaisang poured himself some more tea. “Like what? We let Meng Yao live, but hand him over to the Wens? With the full knowledge that he killed their leader in our world? I can agree to that.”

“Xichen-ge would probably disagree with that even more than killing him,” Wei Wuxian laughed, but Nie Huaisang heard the words for what they were. ‘Xichen-ge’ instead of ‘Zewu-jun.’ Whatever Lan Xichen had said, it had convinced Wei Wuxian Meng Yao didn’t deserve torture.

Unfortunate.

“Then, what are you suggesting?”

“I told Xichen-ge that I would keep Meng Yao alive and relatively unharmed. In exchange, he would be forbidden from ever cultivating, and I would let *you* be the one to tell my younger self who Meng Yao grew up to be.”

“And he *agreed* to that?”

“Yup!” Wei Wuxian beamed. “My charm was overwhelming. He simply couldn’t refuse!”

“If only your charm could have been so effective at the end of your first life,” Nie Huaisang ruthlessly commented, giving an internal impressed whistle when Wei Wuxian didn’t so

much as flinch.

However, the lack of reaction meant something else as well. Wei Wuxian was set on this result, and was willing to take a few hits to get Nie Huaisang's cooperation. Which meant the lengths it would take to stop him were probably farther than Nie Huaisang was willing to go.

Wei Wuxian would rather not have an enemy of him, and Nie Huaisang knew for a fact that only an absolute idiot would try to be an enemy of the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-jun (for the two were an eternally connected set now, even more so than they had already been).

Honestly, it was completely unfair that Nie Huaisang had to go against them. Why couldn't Sect Leader Yao have been the one in charge of the past Meng Yao? Nie Huaisang was sure he'd have been able to come up with a solution then!

Unfortunately, it wasn't Sect Leader Yao in control of the Píngxíng Gateway, it was Wei Wuxian.

"...In that case," Nie Huaisang tentatively began. "I have a few additional conditions of my own."

"I would expect nothing less," Wei Wuxian agreed instantly.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian gasped, leaning in even closer.

The virtual juniors (and Nie Huaisang) jumped at the sound, apprehension filling their bodies.

"What happened?" one boy asked, his hair practically standing on-end.

"Shh," Wei Wuxian whispered lowly. "Don't talk. I'm looking at it."

"Why are you so fascinated? Who could possibly find something like that pretty?" Jiang Cheng asked, rolling his eyes. His sister, on the other hand, just watched Wei Wuxian with a warm, soft expression. His fascination with the world around him had always been one of the things she admired most about him.

(That said, her intuition as Wei Wuxian's shijie told her that there was probably a little more to his reaction than just awe.)

Jin Ling kneeled close, lowering his voice so that it was even quieter than Wei Wuxian's as he asked, "Then what do you see? What's outside the door?"

Rather than answering the question, Wei Wuxian just hummed, "Yes, this is amazing… truly amazing."

Jin Ling tilted his head, confusion growing.

A strong flicker of suspicion rose up within Lan Wangji, and he was abruptly reminded of the many, many times the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian had tricked Wangji's younger self. He

glanced back at Hanguang-jun, but saw only a warm indulgence in his older-self's expression.

It didn't reassure him whatsoever.

Several juniors tried to get close to see what was behind the door, but Wei Wuxian's body blocked the only available holes. They got more and more impatient, Wei Wuxian's continued gasps and sighs sucking their interest in.

Finally, Lan Sizhui asked, "Senior Mo… *what's* truly amazing?"

"Shh! Wow, it's so pretty! Be quiet you guys, don't scare it away. I'm not done looking at it."

Jin Ling leaned close, commanding, "Move! I want to see!"

"Me too!"

"Are you sure?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Ah," Wen Ruohan shook his head disbelievingly. "I see now."

It took Lan Qiren an additional second to understand.

"Wait, is Wei Wuxian-"

Wei Wuxian slowly moved aside, as though he was unwilling to leave. Impatient, Jin Ling abruptly shoved him out of the way, then leaned close to the door. He closed one eye, long, feminine eyelashes covering his cheek as he moved the open eye closer and closer to the slit in the wall.

This time, the simulation moved forward and allowed them all to see what was behind the wall. At first, it appeared to be just a mass of white fog — less than before, having dissipated slightly as night approached, but still too much to see more than three meters away.

"It's all white…. There's nothing at all," Jin Ling observed, sounding somewhat disappointed. He looked even closer, observing every detail of the small space revealed by the crack.

An eye encompassed all.

"The *fu*-"

"Wah!" Jin Ling immediately stumbled back, tripping over his own feet and only avoiding a collision with the ground due to Wei Wuxian's fast reaction.

Unfortunately, Jiang Yanli, Jiang Cheng, Jin Zixuan, Nie Huaisang, and a decent portion of the adults weren't so lucky. Even those who managed to avoid falling to the ground had

jumped out of their seats and tensed (largely saved by the fact that they had gotten a glimpse of what laid beyond earlier).

That said, it was still absolutely-

“How was it? Exciting?” Wei Wuxian suggested with a wink. “Didn’t it look pretty?”

Abruptly realizing what Wei Wuxian was doing, Lan Wangji gave a fond sigh, torn between an urge to shout at Wei Wuxian’s ridiculousness and laugh at Wei Wuxian’s truly unpredictable mind.

Realizing as well, Jin Ling abruptly switched to an exaggerated act of calmness, agreeing “Y-yes. Though, only so-so at best. Barely worth a look!”

The next curious juniors approached the crack in the window.

“Is this how *all* of Wei Wuxian’s night hunts go?” Lan Qiren asked, unsure of which answer he would prefer.

Being the only Jiang to regularly go on night hunts with Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng was forced to sigh and answer, “Every. Single. One. It’s not always this, specifically, but he really likes startling our new recruits.”

“It keeps them from reacting poorly when startled in a less controlled situation,” Jiang Fengmian added proudly, then, noticing a minute twitch in his son’s expression, made sure to add, “It works especially well with A-Cheng’s leadership, as he always manages to find good adversaries for them to go up against.”

Lan Qiren nodded in understanding, and Jiang Cheng was forced to look away, blush quickly spreading across his cheeks.

Lan Sizhui, Ouyang Zizhen, and Lan Jingyi got there first, moving to different cracks so that they could look at the same time. They moved closer and closer to the holes, peering through in search of the ‘beautiful thing’ Wei Wuxian had-

Ouyang Zizhen shrieked, while Lan Jingyi yelped and jumped back, spinning on his heel to run away from the door.

Seeing that, Nie Huaisang felt a deep kinship form between himself and these juniors from the future.

On the other hand, Lan Sizhui had simply tensed, bringing one hand to rest on his sword so that he could draw at a moment’s notice. In the distance, the tapping of a bamboo pole could be heard against the ground.

“Senior Mo…” he trailed off. “There is… a-”

“There’s a *that*, right?” Wei Wuxian interrupted knowingly. “No need to say it outloud. If you do, it’ll no longer be a pleasant surprise for everyone else. Come on back now. Let everyone go see it for himself.”

“I can’t believe Hanguang-jun is just *letting* this happen,” Nie Mingjue muttered, watching the next set of juniors approach the door and repeat the process. “You’d think this would be too ridiculous for him.”

“It… does seem like an okay teaching strategy, though?” Jin Zixuan commented, his words sounding more like a question than anything else. “Maybe he’ll accept that.”

“Or perhaps he’ll gladly experience anything Wei Wuxian does,” Jin Zixuan’s mother added, sounding far too cheery, in Jin Zixuan’s opinion.

However, by now, the Lan boys and Jin Ling’s reactions had allowed the juniors to realize that whatever was beyond the door was far from a ‘pleasant surprise.’ They shook their heads.

“No thanks. No thanks,” they agreed.

Jin Ling sighed, “The situation’s already like this and you’re still playing tricks. Just what in the world were you thinking?”

“You joined me, didn’t you? Don’t imitate your uncle’s tone with me,” Wei Wuxian playfully scolded.

Jiang Cheng gave a heavy roll of his eyes at that, unsure if it was at his ridiculous shixiong or his equally insane nephew.

“So Sizhui, was it scary?” he continued.

“Yes,” the Lan boy answered, obediently nodding.

“Not bad,” Wei Wuxian praised as he sat down. “Even then, you didn’t panic. You’ve got guts.”

The more Lan Xichen saw from this particular disciple, the more proud he was. He couldn’t wait to meet him in the real world.

“Why do ghosts scare people? It’s because when one becomes frightened, their spirit and concentration becomes disturbed,” the Yiling Patriarch added, patting his hand with his flute as he spoke.

“They’re most vulnerable to attacks when that happens, as it makes it easy for ghosts to suck out their Yang energy.”

“Who are you bluffing?” Jin Ling snapped.

Somewhat-begrudgingly, Lan Qiren was forced to acknowledge that Wei Wuxian was right as always. His teaching style was certainly unconventional, but….

Lan Qiren couldn’t quite fault it, either.

“I’m serious. Ask Hanguang-jun if you don’t believe me,” he glanced back at the man with a wink.

“Mn.”

‘*Teaching together!*’ Lan Xichen realized, watching the older version of his brother gaze happily down at Wei Wuxian. ‘*Not for a long time, perhaps, but when we leave the simulation…*’

It might be a possibility some day.

“Anyways, this is why ghosts are most afraid of those who are fearless,” Wei Wuxian elaborated. “They have no opportunities to seize, so there’s nothing the ghosts can do. Thus, as cultivation disciples, your number one goal is to become braver!”

As someone who worked with Lan Wangji to kill the Xuanwu of Slaughter at seventeen, Wei Wuxian was definitely speaking from experience. For a moment, Wen Qing had been about to gratefully sigh that — regardless of how many dangerous situations Wei Wuxian was put in — at least Wen Ning wouldn’t be so reckless.

Then, she remembered how little choice Wei Wuxian had in getting involved and recalled that Wen Ning had done something all too similar when he betrayed the Wen Sect by helping Wei Wuxian.

(She truly had the most infuriatingly kind kids in the world, didn’t she?)

However, the children disagreed.

“Braveness is determined at birth,” Lan Jingyi objected. “What could one possibly do if they were born a coward?”

“Were you born knowing how to fly on swords? People only gain skills after practicing and practicing.”

‘Cultivation and riding on swords also used to be just wild dreams,’ Wei Wuxian had said in response to Jiang Cheng’s disbelief in his theory on the Compass of Evil.

And then he’d actually gone on to make one. Wei Wuxian’s willingness to branch out into the impossible and new had always been an aspect of his personality, regardless of everything that had happened since.

‘*How are you still so unchanged after everything?*’ Lan Wangji wondered, both grateful and stunned that that could be true.

However, unaware of the past-watchers hanging on to his every word, the Yiling Patriarch continued his lesson for the kids:

“Just like learning to fly, people can get used to being scared. Does the outhouse reek? Is it disgusting? Trust me, if you live in the outhouse for a month, you’ll even be able to eat meals there!”

‘*And if you stay in the Burial Mounds for three months, you’ll be able to eat rot?* Wen Ruohan suggested, frowning slightly at the thought.

The virtual juniors professed their disbelief at Wei Wuxian’s words.

“You can’t do that!” one shouted.

“No way. No way!”

“It’s only an example,” Wei Wuxian said, waving their complaints off casually. “Okay, I admit I haven’t lived in an outhouse before. I don’t know if you can actually eat in there — I’ve got no evidence either way. However, you must all try the one outside the door. You must not only look at it, but look carefully. Watch for details, and, from the details, find any hidden weaknesses in the shortest time possible. You must take in the situation calmly and look for chances to counter-attack. So, how about it? It’s a rare chance to receive my guidance. You ought to appreciate it.”

Agreeing completely, Lan Wangji calmly stood up and made his way to the wall, taking a good look at the spirit who lurked beyond. At first, Jin Zixuan had gaped at the second jade’s easy compliance. Did he really have no objection to Wei Wuxian’s audacity in expecting them to be *grateful* for his lesson?

Then, he quickly realized that a) *he* had no right to criticize Wei Wuxian’s arrogance, and b) Wei Wuxian’s words were more than justified by the simple fact that the juniors were getting a lesson from *the Yiling Patriarch.*

After hesitating for another second, he joined Lan Wangji as well.

“Come on, now. Single file, please,” Wei Wuxian ordered. “One look at a time.”

“...Do we have to?”

“Of course. I’m always serious. I never try to fool people either.”

“That might be the biggest lie he’s said to date,” Nie Mingjue observed.

“Let’s start with Jingyi, again. Both Jin Ling and Sizhui have gotten good looks already.”

Hesitantly, the juniors lined up (including Ouyang Zizhen, who could reluctantly admit he hadn’t gotten a good look the first time around).

After hesitating for a moment longer, Jiang Cheng joined Lan Wangji, Jin Zixuan, Nie Mingjue, and Lan Xichen in observing the spirit outside. Wen Qing, who had never felt any hesitance to begin with, had already long-since observed the spirit to completion, and had since stepped back.

Nie Huaisang was perfectly happy staying behind, thank you very much.

Desperate, Lan Jingyi made one last attempt:

“I don’t see why I have to look again!” he protested. “When I was startled back, I moved a lot. People under corpse poisoning can’t move, you said. You said so yourself!”

Without faltering, Wei Wuxian simply leaned close and ordered, “Let me see your tongue. Ah.”

“Ah.”

Wen Qing moved close, giving the boy a thorough analysis along with Wei Wuxian.

“Congratulations! You’ve been cured! Bravely step forward and try looking again!”

“I’ve been cured already? You’re kidding, right?!”

“He actually managed to make the kids disappointed that they’d been cured,” Jin Guangshan muttered, shaking his head disbelievingly. And yet, no matter their reluctance, the juniors did what Wei Wuxian said anyways.

The boy’s ability to take leadership was as impressive as always; Jin Guangshan would need to remember that for when he left.

Terrified beyond measure, Lan Jingyi very slowly approached the wall. He peeked through the hole, then hurriedly looked away. After taking a deep breath he peeked again, only to turn back right after.

Huffing fondly, Wei Wuxian knocked on the board twice and asked, “What are you so scared of? I’m standing here, and Hanguang-jun’s right over there. It won’t break through the board, much less eat your eyeballs or anything.”

Jingyi had decided he was done and walked off, allowing the next junior to look, but Jiang Yanli’s mind was on something else. Just like Wei Wuxian had said, he was a safety net for the juniors. If something went wrong, he would be able to deal with it.

When Wei Wuxian had been Jin Ling’s age, he had been the one tasked to save Su She from the waterborne abyss. When he had been Lan Jingyi’s, he was fighting the Xuanwu of Slaughter with only Lan Wangji to help him. Just a little after, he was fighting for his life in the Burial Mounds. In the real world — their present — he was leading the Jiang Sect alone.

All the comfort he was providing to the juniors was a level of safety no adult in his life had ever offered him. And the last time he had seen her parents-

‘You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!’

‘A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him.’

The juniors went one by one, observing the being behind the door and gasping in fright at what they saw.

“A-Die?” Jiang Yanli whispered.

He glanced back, giving her his full attention as he waited for her to speak.

"I…" she trailed off. "I heard what you and A-Niang were talking about. Earlier. When you suggested giving A-Xian more information about what was happening. I agree. I… would appreciate it if we could help him a bit more."

With each word, Jiang Fengmian's eyes had widened slightly. He glanced back, but, despite having heard their conversation, Madam Yu had no objections to offer. When Jiang Fengmian glanced up at his obviously-eavesdropping son, he saw no disagreement in the boy's expression.

"Thank you, A-Li," he breathed out, smiling warmly. "I will."

Several minutes later, all the juniors had tried, and Wei Wuxian activated teacher-mode again.

"Finished looking?" he asked. "Then, everyone, tell the group what you saw. Let's summarize."

As per usual, Jin Ling fought to speak first: "White eyes. Female. Short and skinny. Fine looks. Holding a bamboo pole."

After thinking for a moment, Lan Sizhui added, "The girl's height reaches about to my chest. She is only wearing rags, and doesn't look very clean — like a beggar roaming the streets."

Jin Guangshan shuddered at the description, wondering why, now that another girl had finally been introduced, she had to look like *that.* He leaned back in his chair, sighing at his own boredom.

"The bamboo pole appears to be a white cane," Lan Sizhui added. "It seems possible that her white eyes are not blindness formed after death, but instead due to being blind even before passing away."

"Good. Jin Ling had higher quantity, Lan Sizhui had higher quality," Wei Wuxian commented. Jin Ling's lips twitched in dissatisfaction.

Biting his lip, Nie Huaisang did his utmost to not laugh at the truly Jin Zixuan-like expression on the boy's face.

Finally, Ouyang Zizhen spoke up: "The girl is only around fifteen or sixteen. She has an oval face with a lively air about her delicate features. She fastened her long hair with a wooden hair clip, which has a small fox carved into the end."

As he spoke, an image appeared behind him: an imagined version of how she might appear once she was cleaned up. It was clear that the boy's imagination was getting away from him slightly.

(An imagination Jin Guangshan greatly appreciated. She did indeed look quite fine.)

Zizhen continued, "She's not just small — her figure is slender as well. Although she's not especially tidy, she's not grimy either. It's not at all repulsive. After some grooming, she's bound to be a lovely girl."

Lighting up at the description, Wei Wuxian praised, "Not bad, not bad — you could tell she was a beauty from just one glance. The observations are both detailed and unique. Child, you'll definitely be the romantic type after you grow up."

The boy blushed and turned to hide his face in a wall, surrounded on all sides by his peers' laughter.

As Lan Xichen glanced to the side, he couldn't help but notice that the expressions on the real and virtual Lan Wangji's faces were, at that moment, completely identical. And both were aimed at that laughing Patriarch before them.

'*Oh, Wangji,*' Lan Xichen smiled. '*You've fallen this deep already?*'

The loving expression on his brother's face more than answered that.

Finally, another boy spoke, "It looks like those sounds we've been hearing are from the bamboo pole she uses to walk. If she was blind before she passed away, she won't be able to see even now that she's become a ghost, so she has to rely on the white cane."

"But how could that be possible?" another one of the boys objected. "You've all seen blind people, haven't you? Because they can't move their eyes, they move and walk very slowly to avoid bumping into anything. However, the ghost outside the door moves quite swiftly. I've never seen such a nimble blind person before."

"Good point," Wen Qing agreed, frowning in confusion. It seemed relatively apparent that the girl was blind now, but her movement brought doubt to that assumption.

Clearly, there was something they were missing.

But Wei Wuxian seemed undisturbed by the mystery, twirling his flute once and praising, "Good job. That is exactly how you should analyze something. Don't dismiss any information."

He then stood up and stepped toward the door.

"Alright, you've all observed the situation," he grinned. "Let's move on to the real thing!"

"Huh?" the juniors collectively asked.

And the real versions joined them, tilting their heads in abject confusion.

But then, without answering them, Wei Wuxian simply tore off one of the wall's boards.

"Ah!"

“You-"

“What?!”

The juniors — real and virtual — as well as the ghost herself all jumped at the action, the latter raising her bamboo pole warily as she did.

Well, Wen Chao supposed that if there was anything both ghosts and humans should be scared of, it was Wei Wuxian.

Saluting respectfully, Wei Wuxian greeted the ghost and calmly asked, “Maiden, do you have any business here, having followed us all this way?”

The girl widened her eyes in a manner that would be adorable if it weren’t for the twin rivers of blood flowing out of them.

‘*So he does have it in him to be polite,*’ Madam Yu thought, then scowled, overcome by a sudden churning feeling within her — one she could now recognize as guilt. She clicked her tongue, annoyed at her own sensitivity to the words which would have been first nature to her just a week ago.

Someone in the back whimpered in fear, terrified by the sight of the mangled ghost before them, no matter how beautiful she must have once been. Seeing that, Wei Wuxian turned and gave a warm smile.

“What are you scared of? You’re gonna need to get used to seeing people bleeding from the seven qiao in the future. It’s only two of the seven that are bleeding on her, and you already can’t handle it? This is why I said you need to experience more things and toughen up.”

“*Your* time as a teenager should not be viewed as normal, Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang shouted, terrified that the simulation would warp Lan Qiren and Nie Mingjue’s expectations regarding him. Then again, perhaps there was no reason to worry; his future self had already shown he wasn’t capable of leaving any sort of meaningful impact on the world.

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian’s attention was drawn outside once again as the girl stomped her feet on the ground, glaring fiercely. With several large, sweeping gestures she (quite impatiently) tried to express a message to them. She bounced around and pointed, trying to express something.

Quite a number of people just stared blankly at her performance.

“Strange,” Jin Ling wondered. “Can’t she talk?”

Hearing this, the ghost paused, then opened her mouth.

“What the *#@k!%!!*”

At any other time, Madam Yu would have scolded her son for his language in the presence of the other sect leaders. Right now, however, she had to admit she was inclined to agree.

Blood gushed out of the open mouth in a waterfall of red. Her tongue had been pulled out from its root.

"Who would *do* such a horrible thing?" Jiang Yanli gasped, turning unhealthily pale at the sight.

'*So that's why she couldn't speak,*' the disciples realized. '*Both blind and mute; how unfortunate.*'

Uncaring, the ghost returned to making her initial gestures as Wei Wuxian asked, "Is she using sign language? Does anyone understand?"

Nie Huaisang didn't understand sign language, but the 'get out' in the ghost's actions seemed pretty obvious to him.

The girl got so anxious she stomped her feet. Then, truly desperate, she used her pole to write on the ground. Unfortunately, due to her now-obvious lack of scholarly education, she was illiterate and couldn't be understood. With only a mess of stick figures, no one could understand what she was trying to say.

Even Lan Qiren (resident expert at making sense of the ridiculous visual reports only teenagers could come up with) had no idea what it was meant to be.

Suddenly, from the far end of the street, there was a series of footsteps and human pants. The girl flinched, then disappeared.

Wei Wuxian frowned.

"What do you think?" he asked, glancing back at Hanguang-jun.

Without hesitating for even a moment, Lan Wangji answered, "She will most likely return."

"I think so too," Wei Wuxian agreed. "But I'm worried. If someone here has something resembling the seal…"

The kids tilted their heads in confusion, but Lan Wangji understood at once. If someone here had Wei Wuxian's Stygian Tiger Seal, they were a demonic cultivator. A demonic cultivator would be more than capable of destroying the girl's spirit.

If this was the Madam Yu of before, she knew she would have rolled her eyes and snapped "Then maybe you should have thought twice before you invented demonic cultivation!" As it was, however, she knew that any sense of victory she might have felt from those words would be cheaper than air.

She pursed her lips, remaining silent as the simulation went on.

"I'll try to find her," Lan Wangji offered, not waiting for a response before he'd unsheathed Bichen and taken to the sky. It was the logical option, especially given the

fact that the abundant corpse poisoning in the area made Wei Wuxian's fighting style better for protecting the juniors than Lan Wangji's was.

Nevertheless, watching his other-self separate from Wei Wuxian made a shock of nervousness spread across the real Lan Wangji's body. Last time they had split up like this, Jiang Wanyin's future self had found Wei Wuxian and tortured him.

He prayed that wouldn't happen a second time.

Nevertheless, Hanguang-jun was gone, leaving Wei Wuxian and ~~their~~ the juniors alone. Wei Wuxian quickly put the board he had removed back in the wall, peeking out through the slit to see what had made the noise that frightened the ghost away. The disciples also wanted to see the situation outside, squeezing themselves together by the door and becoming a row of heads stacked on top of each other, peaking through the slit.

As Jiang Yanli watched the juniors squish their faces together, she felt it was becoming very clear that Wei Wuxian's weakness to children had undoubtedly remained consistent even after his death. She couldn't wait to show her A-Ling to the real version of her shidi waiting outside.

(Though perhaps she was still a little too young for that.)

Although the fog outside had been thinning for a while, the second the watchers laid eyes on a shadowed figure in the mist, it started circulating again. Realizing how much harder it was getting to see, the figure broke through the fog and rushed over.

They were dressed in black and staggered as they ran, limping forward as if injured. A sword covered by a black cloth hung by his waist, jostling with each tumbling step the man took.

He nearly tripped as his leg temporarily gave out.

Cursing, Wen Qing stormed forward, uncaring of the fact that she couldn't do anything when there was an obviously-injured patient before her. She tried walking to him, but the barrier surrounding the simulation cut her off before she could get close enough to truly see him through the fog.

Huffing in annoyance, she cursed again and prayed that — no matter what happened next — Wei Wuxian would be safe.

Noticing all the black the man was wearing, Lan Jingyi turned to Sizhui and asked, "Is he the mist-faced man?"

Jiang Cheng tensed at the possibility.

"Probably not," Lan Sizhui whispered back. "The mist faced man had an entirely different kind of movement than this person does."

And he was right. Due to the man's limping movement, a group of corpses soon caught up to him. However, right before they were able to tear into him, the figure unsheathed his sword and cut the closest corpse clean in two.

'*Not bad,*' Wen Ruohan admitted, somewhat impressed.

And Wei Wuxian clearly agreed. Unfortunately, right after that attack, there was a splattering sound yet again, and the man was soon hacking out the powder.

"Oh, no," Jiang Yanli gasped. "That poor man — he's already injured too."

Lan Sizhui straightened up, tension filling his body: "Senior Mo, this man… we-"

He cut off as the man attacked again, spraying more powder into the air.

Wen Qing sighed. Despite knowing nothing about the figure, Sizhui was the first to suggest saving him. There wasn't any real connection between the events, but, seeing the boy's wide-eyed earnestness, Wen Qing couldn't help but recall how Wen Ning had looked when he asked her to help hide Wei Wuxian from the roaming soldiers.

Had it really only been a few days ago that she learned about that?

Another group of walking corpses soon surrounded the mysterious figure. The circle became smaller and smaller, closing in on the man and making it so that each time he cut down a corpse, some of the powder sprayed into his eyes. He breathed in more of the substance, and soon began swaying back and forth in the air.

"We need to help him," Wei Wuxian finished for Sizhui.

"And how do you expect to do that, Wei Wuxian?" Jiang Cheng shouted, the stress of the situation beginning to get to him. "If you go out, you'll get poisoned yourself. In such a weak body — helping him *can't* be your priority right now. You're supposed to be protecting the kids!"

As he was shouting, Jin Ling raised many of the same concerns: "How do you intend on helping him? We can't go over there right now! The corpse powder is everywhere; you're gonna get poisoned if you go near."

Perhaps, but Lan Wangji wasn't concerned. Based on Wei Wuxian's performance against the Wens in the Xuanwu Cave, the second jade knew Wei Wuxian wouldn't act without a plan, and wouldn't be Wei Wuxian if he didn't act.

The barest hint of a smile crossed Lan Wangji's face as he watched Wei Wuxian get to work.

Having thought about it for a moment, Wei Wuxian frowned and stepped away from the window.

Outside, more and more corpses were piling up. They were coming from every direction, all attracted to the blood being let out by the unknown figure's injuries. There had been ten, and then twenty.

Then another dozen staggered over from the left; then another thirty from the right. More and more were arriving by the second — not at the man yet, but approaching quickly. It was almost as if someone had summoned them.

They were running out of time.

One junior, tense with terror, had stepped away from the wall and unsheathed his sword. Wei Wuxian walked straight to him.

"A-Xian?" Jiang Fengmian asked. "What are you-"

Wei Wuxian grabbed onto the exposed blade and slid his hand across, sending a splash of his own blood splattering onto the floor.

"*A-Xian!"*

"What-"

He lifted his hand until it was as high as his eyes, and let the blood drip into a green light rapidly spreading out below. With it came resentment, which grew and grew in potency until it encompassed the house — the block — the whole village-

The unknown figure seemed to turn towards Wei Wuxian, as though able to feel the spreading resentment. The ground underneath him was shining a sickly green.

"Those corpses… must be destroyed."

The Patriarch commanded them.

The watching spirits felt they had to comply.

And yet the command was not meant for them, as became apparent a moment later. A large drop of Wei Wuxian's blood finally made contact with the ground, and, with it, came an explosion of resentful energy. Tendrils of darkness burst out of the green, dancing through the air as they followed the resentment farther and farther out. The watchers were zoomed out into the sky, and saw that the entire town was now covered in the sickly green-ish hue. Somehow, even though Wei Wuxian's hands were empty, they could still hear the ringing of a note.

♫

"The flute," Wen Chao tensed up, paling at once. "That *flute!*"

A song played on a flute that commanded the surrounding resentment to move. No flute was actually there — no air vibrated with noise — but to beings who had been controlled by resentment before, Wei Wuxian's powerful commands were far too associated with the sound for them to separate it. The resentful energy moved. As it went, it surged through the houses and streets of *Yi City*, — a town that specialized in burial goods.

It should be no surprise, then, that it came into contact with *hundreds* of life-sized puppets as it went.

Wei Wuxian breathed out once, bringing two fingers up in one position, then both hands up in a set of complex seals. By now, the resentment was so thick that it made the very air appear green.

Allowing his hands to fall down, he approached two paper mannequins of young girls which lay on the ground. Using the blood dripping from his still-injured hand, he painted irises on them.

A new wave of resentment burst out.

“Eyes behind thy long lashes,” Wei Wuxian whispered.

The mannequins across the whole town *jolted.*

“Lips parted, smiling in tease.”

There was a gust of air sending the town’s banners flying wildly. It took the watchers a second to realize what the source of that wind had been. Above them, hundreds of female mannequins were flying through the sky at nearly supersonic speeds, sending air flying out widely with their unmatchable velocity.

“Mind not the good or evil-”

The army circled in the sky, nearly generating a tornado above the city as they swarmed.

“With smeared eyes, I summon thee.”

A hundred crashed onto the ground around the mysterious figure, leaving craters in their wake. The smiling painted faces seemed to grin, their unseeing eyes impossibly focusing on the corpses before them.

“...What?” Jin Guangshan breathed out, unable to do anything but gape at the simulation.

“Bring the living person here,” Wei Wuxian ordered. “Other than that… kill them.”

And they did.

The world darkened instantly as the little sun in the sky was blocked out by the near-endless flock of puppets which filled the air. They dived down, crashing into the fierce corpses and slamming them against the floor, only to leap up again and use their bare hands to rip apart the ones that remained. It seemed impossible that they were made of paper — their strength easily eclipsed the corpses a hundred-fold. There had been dozens upon dozens of corpses in the street, but the population of puppets dwarfed them easily.

It couldn’t even be considered a fight.

"...I suppose we should have expected this outcome," Wen Qing eventually sighed, breathing out sharply through her nose. "With the amount of resentful energy in Yi City-"

"He can control *puppets?!*" Wen Chao cut her off, so pale he was nearly translucent. "I thought — isn't it only corpses? No one said anything about puppets!"

After thinking for a moment, Lan Qiren suggested "They might be a less efficient tool than the corpses, and much harder to come by during war. However, given that Wei Wuxian couldn't control those, this was the best option he had."

When he had been brought back to life, he had cut open a stalk of bamboo to make a new flute. When he couldn't control the corpses, he instead used puppets. Practitioners of normal cultivation were far weaker without their swords — that had been the whole reason the Wen Sect took them at the indoctrination camp — and yet they'd still had the gall to look down on Wei Wuxian's supposedly inferior method time and time again.

A now-familiar sense of shame filled Lan Qiren, and he couldn't help but remember the vicious scolding Cangse Sanren had given him when his adherence to the rules had nearly cost Jiang Fengmian his life.

'*It seems I truly hadn't learned anything, Cangse,*' Lan Qiren thought, sighing at his own arrogance. '*I needed to meet your son to understand what you had tried to teach me.*'

The only mannequins which hadn't been used were the adult men — whose structures were most likely different enough that Wei Wuxian's blood on the child mannequins couldn't affect them. At first, some of the watchers had been concerned that just the women and children wouldn't be enough to destroy the corpses; they soon realized those fears were unnecessary. By now, the corpses had been reduced to motionless chunks of flesh on the ground, and the giggling of women and children filled the air like a maniacal symphony.

Wen Ruohan was impressed.

'*Although the environment the battles take place in matters more for demonic cultivation than spiritual, Wei Wuxian's ability to use it regardless of the body he inhabits has proven to be invaluable. Does that mean physical injuries are irrelevant? Could cripples use it? Off the top of my head, I can think of at least three cultivators whose futures were ended due to the loss of a limb. Perhaps this could be a way for them to return to the field.*'

Something to consider, for later.

Obeying Wei Wuxian's earlier command, the puppets of two young girls swiftly carried the injured man inside, only to exit once again after they set him down. They joined the rest of the puppets, spreading around the building like the lion statues that guard noble estates.

The disciples inside were shocked speechless.

Seeing their expressions, Lan Xichen couldn't help but laugh: "We might be getting accustomed to Wei Wuxian's particular brand of impossibilities, but this is the first time most of the juniors are seeing it."

"Seeing it actually makes me feel better about how I reacted at the beginning," Jiang Yanli admitted. "Learning what led to it made everything seem like such a natural outcome… I had almost wondered if my initial disbelief was silly."

Huffing a laugh at that, Nie Mingjue rolled his eyes and said, "Even thirteen years in the future, Wei Wuxian is just…."

Before he could find a word to accurately describe the boy, the juniors' thoughts took over.

'*In all the lessons we'd had on demonic cultivation, I could never understand why anyone would want to learn.*'

'It had seemed weird that we relied on so many of the Yiling Patriarch's inventions — he was a demonic cultivator, after all.'

'But if* this *is demonic cultivation…..'

Suddenly, everything made much more sense.

Jin Guangshan had to agree. With this sort of power, no wonder his other-self had put so much effort into saving Xue Yang. It was one thing for it to be a powerful weapon in open war, but, after watching this, the potential applications of demonic cultivation truly seemed endless.

'*That was The Summoning of Painted Eyes, wasn't it?*' one boy thought, fascination clear in his tone. '*That's supposed to be a simple part of demonic cultivation. If this is the power of a spell like that, what could powerful demonic cultivation do?*'

Lan Qiren instantly bristled, then flinched back. He pursed his lips together, sealing his mouth shut and fighting his instinctive reaction to scold the boy for showing such interest in demonic cultivation.

(Intellectually knowing he had to be more accepting and *actually* being more accepting were two very different things. He resolved to stay vigilant.)

However, to the side, there was one boy who didn't share the others' enthusiasm.

Simultaneously, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan rushed to Jin Ling's side, kneeling beside the boy as he stared at the destruction the dolls had left with a terrifyingly blank expression. Although the two to-be parents knew it was impossible for the boy to feel their presences, they retained a hope that being there — with him, watching over him with a single-minded dedication their own parents had never managed when it came to them — would somehow be able to help.

Finally, shaking himself out of his thoughts, Lan Sizhui stood up and moved to help Wei Wuxian with the stranger.

“Nobody move,” Wei Wuxian ordered. “Be careful to not touch the corpse-poisoning powder. Even just physical contact might be enough to poison you.”

Yelping, Nie Huaisang quickly backed away from the man, phasing straight through several cabinets as he did.

There were two coughs from below, and the unknown man shifted as if starting to wake up. He had covered his mouth with his hand to prevent other people from being affected by any corpse poison, and was breathing shakily as he spoke:

“Who… are you?” he asked.

The sheer exhaustion in the man’s tone made Jiang Yanli unconsciously step closer, sympathy and concern overtaking her mind.

Wei Wuxian observed the white bandage over the man's eyes, quickly realizing that he was most likely blind. Despite that, he appeared quite young and even handsome, somewhere between a boy and a man. It was quite likely that the blindness had been caused by an injury.

‘*Why have I been coming into contact with so many blind people these last few days?’* he wondered. ‘*Both heard and seen; both alive and dead.*’

“I’m honestly starting to lose track of all of them,” Jin Zixuan admitted. “Especially when you add in the story about that Baoshan Sanren disciple Lan-er-gongzi’s future self told us about.”

There were nods of agreement from all around.

Suddenly, Jin Ling called out, “Hey! We don’t know who he is, or whether he’s on our side at all. Why should we save him without taking that into consideration? If he’s a bad guy, then won’t we be letting a snake in?”

Jiang Yanli blushed, glancing down at the clearly-listening man and hoping he wasn’t too offended.

Strangely, however, rather than getting angry, the man simply nodded, “Young Master, you’re very right. My apologies, it would be best if I left.”

Jin Ling did a double take at that, clearly not having expected it at all.

And Wen Qing straightened up, fully prepared to knock out her (virtual) patient if he truly tried to leave.

“But it’s also possible that he’s not a bad person,” Lan Sizhui pointed out, rushing to intervene before things got drastic. “No matter what, not helping a dying person is against our sect’s rules.”

The three Lans and Wen Qing all nodded in approval, their fondness for Lan Sizhui growing even further.

"*Fine.*" Jin Ling stubbornly huffed. "You're the good guys. But if somebody dies, it's not my fault."

"You-" Lan Jingyi began, before forcing himself to stop.

'*It serves you right to be bored to death!' Jiang Cheng had told his shixiong. 'You shouldn't have played hero, and you shouldn't have cared for such a hell of a thing. If in the beginning you didn't-'*

'Jiang Cheng,' Jiang Fengmian had interrupted, sternly.

Jin Ling wasn't necessarily wrong, in this case — they didn't know who the man was, after all — but direct contrasts between him and Sizhui were easy to draw. First at Dafan Mountain, when Jin Ling's mocking of those trapped in the nets was contrasted against the help the Lans offered them, and now, when the differences between the boys themselves became apparent.

(Differences which, it seemed, had a lot to do with who raised them.)

While the Jiangs' thoughts were preoccupied by that, the rest of the watchers focused on something else entirely. When Lan Jingyi had cut off earlier, it wasn't because Lan Wangji had miraculously returned to activate the silencing spell. His attention had been attracted by the man's sword, which lay propped up on the table. A thick black cloth had been wrapped around it, previously obscuring the sword from view. However, right now, some of it had fallen off the very edge, allowing the body of the sword to be seen.

The sword had been forged with unequalled skill. The sheath was a steady bronze, an intricate pattern of frost carved along its body. Behind the pattern, the body of the sword shone as though it was made of silver stars, glistening with snowflake-shaped flecks of luminescence. It emanated a pure yet brilliant beauty.

Seeing it, Jiang Fengmian couldn't help but be reminded of the majesty of Cangse Sanren's sword when she came down the mountain all those years ago.

Having overcome his speechlessness (but not his shock), Lan Jingyi opened his mouth to begin, "That-"

He cut off abruptly as Wei Wuxian pressed a hand to his mouth, silencing whatever he had been about to say. Jingyi glanced back angrily, but Wei Wuxian simply raised a finger to his mouth in a shushing motion.

'*He covered his sword with a cloth,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Clearly, he doesn't want it to be seen.*'

Flinching at the silent reprimand, the crowd of juniors covered their mouths with their hands, as though trying to physically trap in the noise that had been about to escape. Taking a deep breath, Jin Ling remained silent while stepping forward to write something on the dust-covered table. After a few seconds of work, he stepped back and allowed Wei Wuxian to see.

The characters for 'Shuanghua' lay drawn-out in the dust.

"Wait, isn't that-"

'*Xiaoxingchen's sword?*' Wei Wuxian realized. He turned to Jin Ling and mouthed the question, receiving nods from all the juniors in response. Apparently, the sword was quite well known.

Wei Wuxian's eyes turned to the unknown man again.

'*If the sword is Shuanghua… and this person is blind…*'

"He's A-Xian's martial uncle," Jiang Fengmian realized, relaxing into a soft smile. "If A-Xian is actually meeting him-"

"He might learn more about his mother?" Madam Yu snapped, only to look away right after. She knew she had no reason to stop this (especially when *she* was the reason Wei Wuxian didn't know more about his mom), but her husband's mention of Cangse Sanren still stung regardless.

The right thing to do would be to let it happen without complaint. She couldn't do anything to stop it, and causing a scene would only embarrass herself.

(Besides, Wei Wuxian deserved to know.)

But, no matter how well she knew that, the stinging, stretching pain of ~~jealousy~~ hate just didn't go away.

None of the virtual people shared her discomfort. Curious beyond measure, several of the juniors reached forward to the bandaged man, hoping to get a better look, only to freeze when the man flinched back.

"Sorry, sorry… it wasn't on purpose," one boy lied, swiftly taking his hand away.

The man shook his head, responding with an unconvincing, "...It's fine."

Although he was far too dignified to talk to illusions outloud, internally Lan Qiren was knee-deep in a lecture at the future boy about 'proper conduct and behavior while on missions.'

(Lan Xichen, who could read his uncle's expression quite well, had to bite his lip to reign in his laughter as his uncle's silent scolding reached new heights.)

"Well, thank you for the help," Xiao Xingchen nodded once, reaching out to take his sword. "I'll take my leave-"

Before he had even finished, Wei Wuxian's hand darted out lightning-fast to cover Shuanghua with the black cloth, hiding the fact that they'd seen it. A moment later, the man reached over and picked the sword up, rising from his seat and bowing once.

"Stay here for now," Wei Wuxian objected. "You're under corpse poisoning."

“Is it severe?”

Without hesitation, Wei Wuxian bluntly admitted, “Quite so.”

“If it’s severe, then what’s the point in staying? I’m long past hope anyways. Why not kill a few more corpses before I become one as well?”

The juniors flinched back.

“What the — how can he be so callous about his *own life*?” Jiang Cheng asked, gaping openly. Wen Chao was in complete agreement with the question. Did the man somehow not understand how scary death was?

Well, Wen Chao supposed he could think of one other person who was more than willing to risk death.

‘It’s exactly because I’m close to death that I’m happy!’ Wei Wuxian had exclaimed, madness seeping into his eyes. ‘Go on, torture me if you dare! The crueler the better! After I die, I’ll return as a fierce ghost. I’ll haunt you until you’re forced to join me.’

The Wen heir shuddered at the memory, glaring at the illusion of Wei Wuxian before him.

The juniors had similarly been shocked by the man’s statement — though for completely different reasons — and protested his suggestion.

“You *can’t-*”

“No, wait-”

“Just stay. It’ll be fine-”

“Who said that you’re long past hope?” Lan Jingyi demanded, raising his voice. “Stay here. He’ll cure you!”

“Me?” Wei Wuxian asked, pointing at himself.

“Yes, *you*,” Madam Yu huffed in a manner that quite clearly conveyed the implied ‘obviously.’ However, across from her, Wen Qing instead frowned, transitioning into a grim acceptance.

Seeing her sect leader’s questioning look, she elaborated, “It’s too late. He’s had too much corpse poisoning for congee to cure it. He would need an elixir.”

“Eh?” Jiang Yanli asked.

And it seemed Xiao Xingchen knew that as well.

“I have already killed a number of corpses in this city,” he explained. “They continued chasing after me, new ones arriving as soon as the old ones died. If I stay, you’ll be drowned in an ocean of corpses sooner or later.”

And, having seen that very event happen to him right before Wei Wuxian performed the Summoning of Painted Eyes, the watchers couldn't offer up much of an objection.

"Do you know how Yi City became this way?"

"No," Xiao Xingchen shook his head, turning to vaguely face Wei Wuxian. "I'm only a roaming cul… roaming around the area. I heard about the strange events here and decided to night hunt in the city. You haven't seen how dangerous the corpses can get here in terms of both quantity and power. Some move too quickly to take precautions against. Others, when killed, release corpse poisoning powder that infects people upon touch. However, if you don't kill them, they charge after you and attack. Both result in poisoning, which is truly difficult to deal with."

Paling even further, it occurred to Wen Chao once again that Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun were probably some of the only people who would be capable of dealing with the situation. His father as well, of course, and maybe (annoyingly) Nie Mingjue or Lan Xichen, but not many others — and especially not without casualties.

No wonder his father wanted to ally with the two of them-

But his experience in the simulation had shown Wen Chao that the pair was comprised of two terrifying, unfaltering *freaks*-

But they wouldn't be dangerous if he had them under control-

Could he be sure of that?

He sat back in his seat, lost in thoughts and plans for the third time that day.

(Even those who noticed weren't especially worried; thinking wasn't exactly Wen Chao's strong suit.)

"Judging from your voices, there are quite a few young masters in this group, right?" Xiao Xingchen asked. "It's best if you leave this area as soon as possi-"

He cut off, tensing instantly as the laughter of the puppets outside grew in volume.

A shudder ran up Nie Huaisang's spine and he quickly backed up to his brother again.

Lan Jingyi glanced out through the door slit, then immediately spun around and covered the hole with his body, eeping, "Th-there are so many!"

"Walking corpses?" Wei Wuxian checked. "How many?"

"I don't know, they fill the entire street! Possibly hundreds! And more are coming!"

"And Wei Ying can't control them," Lan Wangji grimly pointed out. Although the strength of the puppets under his command was notable, they were still made of paper. The corpses' numbers could replenish in an instant; there was no telling how long Wei Wuxian would be able to hold out for.

As corpses continued to appear, Wen Ruohan began to frown, wishing Wei Wuxian had come to Yi City with a few more tools than just a shoddy flute and his own blood.

"I don't know how much longer the mannequins can hold out!" Lan Jingyi exclaimed, making the rest of the juniors immediately turn to face the outside. If the mannequins fell, the corpses on the street would rush into the shop. In such an enclosed space, if even one of the corpses were to be killed, everyone inside would surely end up poisoned. Fighting off the other corpses would make the poison circulate quickly, and, if they didn't fight back, they would soon be ripped to pieces.

Xiao Xingchen stood up as if planning on leaving and drawing the corpses to him, only to stumble and fall to his knees.

Nie Huaisang jumped.

"You can just sit back and relax," Wei Wuxian told him. "It's all going to be over soon."

"...What?" Nie Mingjue asked, staring blankly. He turned to Lan Xichen, but the first jade appeared just as lost as him. That confusion gave way to horror as soon as he saw what Wei Wuxian did next.

With a simple flick of his arm, Wei Wuxian cut his finger on Lan Jingyi's sword again. Droplets of blood dripped down, painting the wood underneath a scarlet red.

(Again.)

The sight of it nearly made Lan Wangji nauseous.

'*Mo Xuanyu barely has a golden core. There's only so much damage your body can take, Wei Ying,*' he thought, clenching his fists in anger at his other-self's continued absence. '*How much blood can you use before you get in serious trouble?*'

He was *not* interested in finding out.

Perhaps worried about the same, Lan Wangji's own #1 fanboy spoke up:

"Are you using The Summoning again?" Lan Jingyi asked, stepping forward and pulling back his sleeve to reveal his arm. "How much are you going to lose if you do it again? Do you need me to give you some?"

The other boys also rolled up their sleeves.

"I can also spare some!"

"Me too!"

As the juniors offered themselves up one after the other, Jiang Fengmian leaned close to Lan Qiren and asked, "Aren't you worried about the poor juniors being seduced into demonic cultivation?"

"*Fengmian*-" he cut himself off, knowing his initial reaction to Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation more than warranted the teasing. "I'll… make an exception. This time."

He very pointedly pretended not to hear Lan Xichen's poorly-disguised laughter from behind him.

"Senior, please take some blood from me."

Wei Wuxian looked like he couldn't decide whether to laugh or sigh, shaking his head and telling them, "It's okay. Does anyone have blank talismans?"

'*At their age, you were doing far more reckless things than offering a bit of your blood. Or did you forget about volunteering yourself to distract the Xuanwu?*' Lan Wangji thought, frowning at the reminder.

Lan Xichen, instantly realizing his brother's feelings, could only think, '*Wangji, given what we've seen, you have no room to talk either.*'

As though he could feel his brother's judgement on him, Lan Wangji very carefully turned away.

The disciples had all pulled out their talismans. However, their cultivation was not yet at a level that would allow them to write runes on the spot, and therefore all the ones they had were already full.

"No blank ones," Sizhui slowly reported. There was a growl outside and further laughter from the mannequins, making the juniors back away warily from the wall.

"That's fine," Wei Wuxian decided. "Already-written ones will work as well."

Hesitantly nodding once, Lan Sizhui took out a stack of yellow talismans from his Qiankun Pouch, holding them out in offering. After looking for a moment, Wei Wuxian grabbed a single one of them and gave it a thorough inspection.

"He only wants one?" Jin Zixuan frowned, turning to Jiang Cheng for answers.

"Don't look at me," the other boy responded. "I never know what he's doing."

Pleased with the one he had chosen, Wei Wuxian then scratched from top to bottom, writing on top of the pre-existing cinnabar runes. The crimson blood and vermilion cinnabar formed new characters with a new purpose. With a flick of Wei Wuxian's wrist, the talisman was sent hovering in the air for a moment before it ignited in flames.

Jiang Yanli jumped back, startled by the sudden light.

And yet Wei Wuxian simply reached a hand out to catch the sprinkling ashes. He brought them to his mouth, then blew them out the door to the mannequins fighting desperately against the dead.

"What is he-"

“With prairie fires it fails to die; when spring winds blow it regains life.”

This time, the puppets of adult men (who had remained on the ground until now) sprung to life. They twitched, then forced themselves up, then looked forward.

Their faces were painted for war.

With thick, powerful hands, they reached onto their backs and unsheathed the blades that laid there.

Many of the watchers’ mouths were making gaping “oh” shapes.

They were Nether Brawlers — designed to fight through the afterlife to protect their charges. And now they were all it took to turn the tide.

The female puppets were more than capable of destroying corpses, but their lack of defensive abilities meant they could be slowly worn down over time. The addition of the Nether Brawlers provided tanks to absorb the majority of the damage the corpses were capable of dealing out, making the army perfectly balanced. The puppets had already been winning, only possibly in danger due to the ever-growing number of their foes. Now, they could conceivably go on forever.

When Wen Ruohan had first learned of Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation, he had thought the prospect of an undying, unending army needing neither food nor shelter was worth millions. It soon became clear that Wei Wuxian’s inventions were worth even more than that, but it didn’t erase the initial uses he had observed.

The cultivation world had two great enemies in the past few decades. One was the Wen *sect* built up over hundreds of years; the other was Wei Wuxian alone.

With every segment of the simulation, it was becoming more and more obvious why.

After ensuring that the situation outside was more than dealt with, Wei Wuxian turned to the juniors and asked, “Nobody breathed it in, right?”

“No.”

“I’m good.”

“Me too.”

Nodding once, Wei Wuxian reached out to Xiao Xingchen, hoping to find a place for him to lie down. Unfortunately, the only option left was the cold, dust-covered ground — made even more uncomfortable by how tightly Xiao Xingchen was gripping Shuanghua. It seemed that transition was enough to pull Xiao Xingchen back, however, as a moment later he shifted and coughed a few times.

“Was that… the Summoning of the Painted Eyes?” he asked, speaking weakly.

Wei Wuxian just shrugged: “I know a thing or two.”

Here, Nie Mingjue leaned forward, watching Xiao Xingchen's reaction carefully. With how many people were seeing the simulation, it seemed unlikely that the Nie Sect's cultivation techniques would remain a secret for much longer. Getting a good idea of how the future's adults reacted to demonic cultivation would be immensely helpful in informing his later decisions.

Having thought for a while, Xiao Xingchen gave a weak smile and said, "Yes… to eliminate those walking corpses, that was indeed the best method. However, this path can easily lead to the backfiring of one's ghosts or spirits. Even the founder of the path, the Yiling Patriarch, couldn't avoid such an end. I suggest you refrain from using demonic cultivation except in dire situations. You can always cultivate using other paths…."

Sighing quietly, Wei Wuxian nodded once and said, "Thank you for your advice."

At the words 'even the Yiling Patriarch couldn't avoid such an end,' Lan Wangji had flinched and zeroed his attention in on Wei Wuxian, watching him carefully and searching for any negative reaction. That meant the slight twitch in Wei Wuxian's expression at 'you can always cultivate using other paths' was quite obvious to him.

And quite confusing. Was it simply that Mo Xuanyu didn't yet have a golden core, and so it wasn't an option? Or was it that the risks of demonic cultivation were often exaggerated by others — as supported by the lack of protest from Hanguang-jun at the resurrected Wei Wuxian's cultivation. The latter option seemed most likely, and yet Lan Wangji still couldn't help but feel like there was something he was missing.

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian felt nothing but awe for the usual acceptance 'Xiao Xingchen' showed.

'*Most famous cultivators would take a decisive stance on the matter, drawing distinct lines that indicated their absolute hatred toward a certain someone. And yet my Shishu tried to persuade me instead, despite being only half-alive himself right now, warning me about the potential backlash. He truly is a kind-hearted person,*' Wei Wuxian decided, his eyes falling to the bandages wrapped around Xiao Xingchen's once again. '*Really, I can't help but sympathize.*'

At that last line, Jiang Yanli frowned, hoping that he was sympathizing with the damage Xiao Xingchen had due to the events they had already seen, and not additional horrors which hadn't been revealed yet.

However, unlike the adults (and Jin Ling), most of the juniors couldn't help but feel an immense curiosity towards the tools Wei Wuxian had used.

"Oh my… that mannequin woman's nails are so scary!" one boy, crammed with the others in front of the crack, exclaimed. "One scratch from her and the corpse's head has been sliced into five lines!"

"Why's that little girl's tongue so long and hard? Is she a hanged ghost?"

“The man is so strong! How can he lift up so many corpses at once? He’s gonna throw them on the ground — look, look! He threw them! They broke!”

Nie Huaisang had very intentionally avoided stepping outside to look at the mannequins (who, despite being under Wei Wuxian’s control, were honestly more terrifying than the army of corpses from earlier). The laughter they let out was more than enough to give Nie Huaisang nightmares. Now, however, he was getting a full play-by-play from the future’s juniors regardless of what he wanted!

The future was the worst! Who on earth thought it would be a good idea to let those kids into Yi City in the first place?

As the children continued to gawk and whisper at each other, Wei Wuxian moved to pick up the last bowl of congee, turning to Xiao Xingchen to say “The poison has already worked its way through your body. The glutinous rice here might be able to slow it down, but it also might not work at all — not to mention it tastes really bad.”

“Oh, so you *do* realize that!” Jiang Cheng scoffed, having been forced to taste one too many of Wei Wuxian’s concoctions throughout his life.

(Technically he had only tasted one before learning his lesson and never accepting another, but that was still far too much in his book.)

“So, do you want to try? If you want to live, then ignore what I just said.”

“That was the least convincing sales pitch I’ve ever heard,” Jin Zixuan commented, unable to resist smiling at the absurdity.

Without hesitation, Xiao Xingchen took the bowl from Wei Wuxian, responding, “Of course I want to live. If I can, there’s no reason to not try.”

Yet, after only one mouthful, the corners of his lips twitched and he was forced to purse his lips together to avoid spitting it all out. Red covered his cheeks as his brain tried and failed to process the indescribable levels of spice he had just been given.

A moment later, he respectfully replied, “Thank you.”

“His mental discipline must be quite strong,” Lan Xichen whispered, to which Nie Mingjue immediately snorted. It was becoming increasingly apparent that the legend of Wei Wuxian’s spice tolerance actually *undersold* the severity of the situation, rather than exaggerating it.

However, as if willingly blind to that, Wei Wuxian bluntly spun on his heel towards the juniors and said, “Did you see that? Did you see? Did you hear what he said? You guys are the only ones with such high standards! Honestly, so full of complaints after having just a little of my congee….”

Unable to simply accept that, Xiao Xingchen was forced to admit, “But… now that I think about it, if I had to eat this every single day to survive… I think I’d rather die.”

Wei Wuxian spun to him, a look of complete and utter betrayal written clearly across his face, as Jin Ling dissolved into uproarious laughter.

"...Don't worry so much, Wangji," Lan Xichen told his brother, raising his voice slightly so as to be heard over the room's deafening howling. "In the Cloud Recesses, your food will be prepared for you. We can just add spice to Wei-gongzi's."

Frowning, Lan Wangji countered, "But what if he wants to cook me a meal on a special occasion?"

"I… well-"

"Xiongzhang, will you help me?" he requested. "I will need to increase my spice tolerance. Do we have any books in the library's restricted section on changing tastes?"

Seeing the utter desperation in his younger brother, Lan Xichen simply didn't have the heart to tell him that it was most likely beyond hope. He could only give a slow, hesitant nod.

"We can… look when we get home?"

"It's finished!" Lan Jingyi suddenly declared (resulting in a very thankful real Lan Xichen, who had no idea how to continue the conversation). "All of the corpses have been killed. We won!"

Hearing that, Madam Yu turned to her husband and — slack jawed — asked, "How long has it been? It can't have been more than ten minutes since Hanguang-jun left!"

Her equally shocked husband could only disbelievingly reply "It's been eight minutes," clearly remembering how many corpses there had been just a short while ago.

"Don't open the door just yet," Xiao Xingchen advised, putting down the bowl of congee. "Be careful. More might still come-"

"Don't put down the bowl. Pick it up and drink everything," Wei Wuxian ordered.

Although it was hard to read the man's expression without being able to see his eyes, the horror on Xiao Xingchen's face was clear as day. A sigh escaped Madam Yu's throat as she bemoaned the ridiculousness Wei Wuxian brought with him everywhere he went.

Seeing that Xiao Xingchen had (reluctantly) returned to drinking, Wei Wuxian then began moving toward the slit in the door, peeking through it to get a good look at the situation outside. Due to the inhuman battle that had just occurred, purplish-red powder pervaded the entire street, clearly visible even through the fog. Luckily, the corpse poisoning powder was beginning to dissipate, and the mannequins were working hard to clear the corpses off the street. If any of the body pieces littering the ground so much as twitched, they would be stomped on mercilessly.

Soon, pools of muddied flesh were all that was left.

It really was a shame that the other sect leaders were there as well, Jin Guangshan thought. If it had been just him, he would have free rein to manipulate Wei Wuxian into using demonic cultivation against the other clans without anyone being able to trace the destruction back to him. A pity.

However, if he could just get Wen Ruohan to agree, then maybe it wouldn't matter if the acts were traced back to them — Wei Wuxian's power would be theirs all the same.

Some time passed without any new corpses appearing, and the juniors slowly began to relax. Silence stretched out and Wei Wuxian was about to join the others, when a series of imperceptible noises came from above.

Wen Ruohan glanced up.

The sound was extremely difficult to pick up, but it appeared to be someone walking rapidly across the roof. The footsteps were abnormally light, making it nearly unnoticeable. Only those with especially keen senses would be able to tell.

However, noticing Wen Ruohan and Wei Wuxian's reactions, more and more of the watchers soon became aware that something was off. They joined the pair in looking up.

(Lan Wangji clenched his hands, praying that his other self would be back soon.)

Although the juniors were too inexperienced to notice, Xiao Xingchen (whose eyes were covered) relied quite heavily on hearing. A moment passed, and he turned his head toward the ceiling as well.

Frowning, he cautioned, "From above, there's-"

"*Disperse!*" Wei Wuxian suddenly shouted, pushing the juniors out of the way right as a large hole was smashed through the ceiling of the central chamber. Dust, grass, and broken roof tiles rained down from above-

Many phasing straight through the screaming watchers-

And crashing onto the ground below. Fortunately, as most of the disciples had already scattered, the resulting injuries weren't too severe. A moment later, a black figure dropped down from the opening in the roof.

His clothes were obsidian cultivation robes, and were decorated by the horsetail whisk strapped over his shoulder. He had a tall stance and a straight back, as well as a long sword he held in his hand. His handsome face was upturned, showing the man's personality as haughty and aloof.

And yet there were no pupils in his eyes, only a blank field of white.

'*Just like A-Ning,*' Wen Qing realized at once (and hating the truth of the statement). '*I see. He's a fierce corpse.-*'

The virtual cultivators realized the same, but had no time to react before the corpse had launched an attack. Jin Ling was the first one he reached-

"*A-Ling!*" Jin Zixuan cried out, running over, but unable to interfere.

Although Jin Ling managed to defend against the attack, its power was so great that the Jin heir's arms were numbed on impact. If it wasn't for Suihua's immense spiritual power, his sword would almost certainly have broken, leading to his death. The corpse attacked again immediately after, but, this time, his sword was stopped long before it came into contact with Jin Ling's.

Even with the poison filling his veins, Xiao Xingchen had managed to protect the junior.

"Oh, thank the heavens," Jin Zixuan gasped out, tension leaving his body until he swayed on his feet. If his other self wasn't dead, he would be able to *be there*, helping Jin Ling. He had no idea what events led to his death, but his determination to discover that strengthened anew.

(The fact that it had been *his* sword that defended Jin Ling — an indirect form of protection from him — was a small but nonetheless appreciated consolation.)

Xiao Xingchen and the corpse dueled while Wei Wuxian worked to ensure all the juniors were out of the strike zone. However, largely due to the corpse poison still filling his body, Xiao Xingchen faltered a moment later and fell to his knees.

"*Xiao Xingchen!*" Jiang Yanli stood up, horror filling her body. "A-Xian, you have to help-"

A sharp note filled the air, its piercing, high-pitched nature forcing the listeners to cover their ears and wince in pain. Hearing the sound, the corpse reeled back, his hands trembling. And yet, a moment later, he turned to face the Yiling Patriarch and *attacked.*

'*I can't control it,*' Wei Wuxian realized, eyes widening. '*This corpse has a master!*'

A master whos was also most likely the one using Wei Wuxian's Stygian Tiger Seal. Recalling the highly questionable report on Xue Yang, quite a few people turned their eyes on Jin Guangshan, watching disapprovingly.

His sword struck as fast as thunder, and yet Wei Wuxian dodged time and time again. Watching the fight between Wei Wuxian and the corpse continue, Lan Jingyi quickly began to panic.

"That — just what is he, dead or alive?! I've never seen such a…."

He couldn't finish, but his meaning was obvious. Who had ever seen a corpse with such high-quality swordsmanship and agility? It was a moment later, however, that he realized the answer to that question.

Knowing as well, the spirits switched the simulation to a memory. It was Wen Ning, the Ghost General.

‘*A-Ning,*’ Wen Qing thought, her heart squeezing at the sight of a corpse standing there, rather than a boy.

Jumping back, Wei Wuxian gained enough distance to buy himself a handful of seconds. Without wasting a moment, he pulled out his flute again and calmly played another tune, this one invigorating and persuasive.

‘*Attack!*

🎵

As sweet and playful as the tune was, it made Wen Chao freeze like a cornered rabbit. He knew what the orders were — he knew it had nothing to do with him — but he would never again be able to listen to flute music without recalling the face of the demon who caused his other-self’s demise.

Luckily, with no regard for the real Wen Chao’s feelings, the simulation continued as usual.

Through the walls of the house, the juniors could hear the laughter of the mannequins increase in volume. Wei Wuxian dodged another attack from Song Lan, and, a split second later, the puppets patrolling outside hopped onto the roof and down through the hole the corpse had made. Sensing that something was wrong, the corpse sliced twice, vertically stabbing two of the mannequins into four halves.

“Wha — but they took down fierce corpses so easily!”

Lan Qiren frowned deeply: “That just demonstrates how powerful *this corpse* is.”

While it continued to slice with its right hand, its left reached towards its back and grabbed onto the horsetail whisk. It snapped out like a whip, and, as if the soft, white strands had turned into poisonous spikes on a mace, it demolished the puppets that came its way. If it touched a person, it would undoubtedly leave a bloody gash in its wake.

Furthermore, to the now quite-sensitive watchers, the resentful energy the corpse contained was quite obvious. The beings it resembled most closely were the Ghost General, the Xuanwu of Slaughter, and the Yiling Patriarch himself, fresh out of the Burial Mounds.

(Though, thankfully, this new corpse appeared to be a little less powerful than those three.)

Fully aware of the necessity of multitasking, Wei Wuxian lowered his flute for a moment to shout at the children, “Nobody come here! Be good and stay in the corners!”

As soon as he finished speaking, he began playing his flute once again. The song switched back and forth between sounding vivacious and vehement, calling forth an endless stream of the paper mannequins. No matter how many puppets the cultivator’s powerful attacks destroyed, more would replace them shortly after. Once he destroyed

the ones on the left, a dozen more would swarm on the right; when he killed the ones in front of him, the rest would attack from behind.

No matter how powerful one was, it was impossible to deal with everything at once.

And that was the true worth of Wei Wuxian's power. No matter how many first class fighters Wen Ruohan had access to, none of them could wipe out an *army* by themselves. Demonic cultivation, on the other hand….

The corpse crushed a child mannequin's skull beneath its foot, then turned to face an approaching woman with knife-like claws. He kicked her to the side, getting a gash across his pants in the process. Suddenly, a Nether Brawler shot down from above and landed on him, pressing him against the ground with a foot on his shoulder. This action was immediately supported by three more Nether Brawlers, who also jumped down from the ceiling to crush the corpse against the ground.

Sounding as though he was reading from a textbook, Ouyang Zizhen began to recite, "In legends, Nether Brawlers had incredible strength. Therefore, when craftsmen designed them, they often added additional components to increase the puppet's weight. After being possessed by Senior Wei's roaming spirits, their weight was multiplied exponentially. A single one of them was as heavy as a mountain."

Lan Xichen looked over at the Nether Brawlers holding the corpse down and found himself wincing in sympathy at the obvious heavy strain on the man's arms.

The corpse tried to struggle out, but was quickly slammed to the ground again. With four puppets 'as heavy as a mountain' on it, its guts not gushing out was quite fortunate enough in itself. Thus, the hold the four mannequins had on it was quite secure.

Wei Wuxian approached the corpse, kneeling down to smooth out the rumpled, torn clothes on the cultivator's back. As he did, however, he noticed there was a thin wound near his left shoulder blade.

Frowning, Wei Wuxian gave a careless gesture to the corpses and ordered, "Turn him around."

They complied at once. With the cultivator's front facing up, it was much easier to inspect. Wei Wuxian smiled in a mix of satisfaction and pride at their work, then stepped closer to give them their reward. He held up the finger he had made the cut in, watching the blood drip down slowly.

Several of the watchers swallowed, feeling a signal from the resentful energy in the air, but unable to determine what it meant.

The reason why the message was so shaky became clear a moment later: *this* was only for the Nether Brawlers. Only the strongest puppets, which had done so well, deserved this prize.

Wei Wuxian extended his hand out, placing his finger near the lips of the closest puppet, and watched as a red tongue made of paper slowly slipped out. At first hesitant, the tongue slowly approached the finger, resting just below and allowing one drop of blood to make contact with it.

As soon as it did, there was a change in the air.

Someone sucked in a breath.

The tongue came out again, more ferocious this time, and licked up the finger as if getting a taste of paradise. Emboldened by the first's success, the others soon approached as well. They leaned forward, silently begging for a taste, and relished in the drops Wei Wuxian calmly set across their tongues.

The resentful energy within them *surged.*

Someone fell to their knees with a gasp.

All four silently fought to take in more and more of the liquid — not audacious enough to battle before their master, but certainly not above begging. They truly cherished the delicacy they had been offered, nearly worshiping the Patriarch's hand with the same fervor a drug addict would exhibit.

Then, at long last, Wei Wuxian pulled his hand away, forcing the Nether Brawlers to turn their attention back to the corpse under them. He covered the cut on his hand with a strip of fabric, turning his attention back to the former cultivator captured below.

However, the watchers couldn't forget that scene quite so easily.

"Did that just… happen?" Nie Mingjue asked, mouth gaping open.

Coughing awkwardly, Lan Xichen rushed to say, "It wasn't meant to be anything other than a… reward. Wei-gongzi is just encouraging the puppets to try harder, it wasn't-"

He cut off, a blush rapidly rising across his cheeks. Normally, most of the watchers would never consider Wei Wuxian in such a way. Normally, their tastes either ranged elsewhere, or their affections already lied in someone else. As the first jade of Lan, while not completely ignorant, Lan Xichen was highly sheltered in regards to more sensual acts, and would *normally* never consider it. However, the blood wouldn't be much of a reward if it wasn't desirable. Every vaguely resentful being in the area knew how much power that blood contained, and, with the extra kick Wei Wuxian's commands have given the feeling, wanted nothing more than to join those lucky puppets and wrap their own tongues around Wei Wuxian's offered appendage.

The simulation had forced that all-encompassing desire in them, and the only way their human souls knew to comprehend it was sexual attraction (not at all helped by the fact that Wei Wuxian *was* a very beautiful young man, no matter what body he resided in).

And then they'd had to stand back and *watch* as those impossibly long tongues twisted their way around his finger and sucked in his blood, trembling like the liquid had been-

"Very, very impressive," Jin Guangshan muttered, licking his lips.

"Excuse me?"

Still somewhat dazed by the show he had been given, it took Jin Guangshan a moment to respond, "Just fascinated by the power of demonic cultivation. It has quite a few different uses, doesn't it?"

"Nothing we need to worry about!" Jin Zixuan blurted out, too quickly to care about how discourteous he was being. "The Jin Sect has no reason to lead Wei Wuxian towards demonic cultivation, right?"

There was no reason for Wei Wuxian to have to do that again. There was zero reason for the Jin Sect to want him to. There was even less reason for Wei Wuxian to have to do that in front of Jin Guangshan, specifically.

The blush which had risen up Jin Zixuan's cheeks vanished at once as though washed away by a cold stream.

'*You…. What are you implying about your Sect Leader?*' he asked himself, looking down. '*Sect Leader? He's your* father. *Do you honestly think he would do anything like… anything like-*'

He couldn't finish, horrified enough by his thoughts.

'*A-Die wouldn't do that. Of course he wouldn't. I was just… saying that because of Wen Ruohan. Who knows what the Wen-dogs were thinking.*'

Unfortunately for Jin Guangshan, Jin Zixuan was the only one who had a reason to try to convince himself of that.

Quickly realizing that everyone present had become suspicious of where his thoughts had been leading, Jin Guangshan scoffed and turned his gaze on Lan Wangji, mentioning, "I'm far from the only one who thought of it that way. If even the ever-so-honorable twin jades thought it looked-"

"*Guangshan!*" Madam Jin snapped, standing up completely. "If you finish that sentence, I will gladly leave the simulation just to make you pay. Right now he's even — he's in your *son's* body!"

'Son's,' Madam Yu noticed, not 'bastard's.'

"That wasn't-"

"Enough," Wen Ruohan ordered.

"...Of course, my apologies," Jin Guangshan smiled, directing the apology at Wen Ruohan, rather than any of the people who had spoken before. Privately, he felt that if the simulation would just include a few women (not counting the terrifying, deformed ghost-girl) then perhaps he wouldn't have felt the need to think of Wei Wuxian that way.

(Meanwhile, Lan Wangji sat tenser than a taught bow, unable to deny what Jin Guangshan had said. After all, as he was watching the puppets clean Wei Wuxian's hand of blood, his mind had indeed twisted in such a way. Even with his Uncle's permission to pursue something with Wei Wuxian, that didn't mean he could think whatever he wanted about someone without their permission, no matter how infuriatingly tempting they-

The second jade bit his lip, taking in deep breaths and reminding himself to wait until he had ~~courted~~ met the real Wei Ying before thinking things like that.)

As the watchers' argument had transpired, Wei Wuxian had examined the corpse. The mark he had seen earlier also appeared on the front side; on the cultivator's chest, there was a long, thin wound. It appeared his cause of death was being stabbed through the heart.

Throughout it all, the corpse continued to struggle as hard as he could. Low growls came out of his throat, and blood the color of ink trickled down from the corners of his lips.

As Nie Huaisang squirmed at the disgusting scene, Wen Qing stepped closer, watching curiously.

Reaching forward, Wei Wuxian pinched his cheeks, forcing the corpse to open his mouth. Inside, he saw the source of the blood: the corpse's tongue had been pulled out from the root.

Quite a few people flinched back in horror, this time.

***'Another removed tongue?'* Wei Wuxian thought. '*Blind eyes and detached tongues. Why are these two traits appearing so often?*'**

If Jiang Fengmian weren't preoccupied with expressing his disapproval to Jin Guangshan, he would have nodded in agreement; it was honestly getting difficult to keep track of all this.

'*Come to think of it, this corpse is behaving pretty similarly to how Wen Ning had been when he was controlled by those black nails, huh?*' Wei Wuxian thought, frowning slightly as he reached forward to feel around.

Wen Qing nodded frantically, having noticed the same thing herself. Which meant this corpse might be a chance for her to figure out who was responsible for the nails that had been imbedded into her brother.

Before too long, Wei Wuxian found what he had been looking for. Two metal points were inserted into the acupuncture points on the corpse's head, altering him immensely.

Clearing his throat dramatically, the far future Jin Ling's disembodied voice explained, "These nails were used to control high level corpses so that they'd lose consciousness and the ability to think for themselves. Without knowing the corpses identity and character, Wei Wuxian didn't want to take them out, instead choosing to interrogate him first. However, since his tongue was no longer there, even if Wei Wuxian managed to help the corpse regain consciousness, he wouldn't be able to talk."

With every word Jin Ling spoke in a tone halfway between boredom and haughty annoyance, Jiang Yanli became happier and happier. The mystery surrounding her death was still a massive point of concern for everyone in her family, but, whatever went down in the future, it was clear that it helped her A-Ling see that Wei Wuxian was far more than just The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation.

'Which means it's entirely possible that will happen in our world too. It would be wonderful if A-Xian was allowed to explore whatever he wished in terms of his inventions,' she thought, her eyes drifting to her mother. '*By this point, I doubt even A-Niang would try to stop him.*'

A smile bloomed across her face.

Having thought over the problem for a while, Wei Wuxian finally turned to the Lan juniors and asked, "Does anyone here know how to play Inquiry?"

The three real Lans straightened at the question, their full attention immediately zeroing in on the simulated Lan juniors.

Unsurprisingly, the one who raised his hand was Sizhui, who confirmed, "Me. I have."

'*Impressive,*' Wen Ruohan acknowledged, and saw Wen Qing give an amused huff at the pride she saw in Lan Xichen's warm smile.

"Have you brought your guqin?"

"Yes," Sizhui confirmed, immediately pulling it out of his Qiankun pouch. It was a simplistic guqin, but the wood was bright and the spiritual energy within bold and pure.

Observing the instrument carefully, Wei Wuxian thought, '*Given the state of the wood, it would seem the instrument is fairly new.*'

He frowned.

"How proficient is your qin language? Have you had actual experience? Will the spirit you summon be able to lie?"

Excitedly, Lan Jingyi interjected, "Hanguang-jun said that Sizhui's qin language is fine."

Hearing that, Wei Wuxian settled, instantly relaxing.

The sheer *deviousness* in the grin Nie Huaisang sent Lan Wangji's way sent shivers down the second jade's spine. Normally, he would move closer to his brother in such a situation,

seeking to present a united front.

Unfortunately, the look on Lan Xichen's face wasn't much better.

'*Well, if Lan Zhan says it's fine, then it's definitely fine. He wouldn't exaggerate or understate Sizhui's skill, so there's no reason to worry,*' Wei Wuxian decided, nodding once to himself.

Jin Guangshan raised an eyebrow, finding Wei Wuxian's absolute faith in Hanguang-jun's character to be as surprising as ever. Then again, it was clear that Wei Wuxian possessed some manner of physical attraction towards the second jade, so it was quite likely that was clouding his judgement. Plenty of women had trusted Jin Guangshan far more than they should have, after all; he had plenty of experience with this sort of thing.

(Lost in his own thoughts, Jin Guangshan didn't notice the truly scathing glare his wife shot his way, having gotten a general picture of his opinion from his expression.)

Clearing his throat in embarrassment, Lan Sizhui cut off the continued praise Lan Jingyi was giving him to clarify, "Hanguang-jun told me to focus on quality instead of quantity. The spirit I summon will be able to avoid answering, but it will not be able to lie. If it is wiling to answer, it will have to speak the truth."

"*Hanguang-jun* told him to focus on that?" Nie Mingjue asked, turning a open grin towards Xichen. "It appears your brother's even more involved in teaching than you expected."

Lan Xichen nodded once in agreement, adding, "And it appears he's doing quite well at that."

As he spoke those words, Lan Xichen's gaze had been directed at Wangji, rather than Nie Mingjue. The second jade didn't flush (too drained from the constant embarrassment of the previous segments to manage that), but did turn away, focusing 100% of his attention on the simulation.

"Alright then," Wei Wuxian nodded once. "Let's start."

The guqin was laid across Lan Sizhui's lap, near the corpse's head. As he sat on the ground, the young Lan junior's robes spread out neatly around him, making him truly resemble the teenage version of Lan Wangji. He reached forward and flicked his wrist, practicing a few notes:

♪

♪

Spiritual energy flooded the room, tickling at Wei Wuxian's (and the watchers') senses. Feeling comfortable with the effect, Lan Sizhui looked up at Wei Wuxian and nodded once.

"Alright, first question: who is he?" Wei Wuian asked.

♪♪🎵

There was a pause.

🎵♪ the spirit responded.

The three present Lans all sucked in a breath of air, their eyes widening noticeably (an especially rare feat, given who the three Lans were).

"What?" Jiang Cheng asked, frowning at their expressions.

Seeing that Lan Sizhui had also widened his eyes at the answer, Lan Jingyi excitedly leaned forward and demanded, "What did he say? What's his name?"

"Song Lan!" Lan Sizhui revealed.

"What?" Jiang Fengmian breathed out. "Xiao Xingchen's-"

'*Xiao Xingchen's most intimate friend and fellow cultivator? That Song Lan?*' Wei Wuxian realized.

"I guess there was a reason we learned so much about those two," Wen Qing supposed. "The simulation really doesn't waste any time, does it?"

No one could respond, most still too shocked by the revelation to have processed her words.

In unison, everyone (both real and virtual) turned their heads towards the simulated Xiao Xingchen, who lay unconscious on the ground. Tensing up nervously, Lan Sizhui watched Xiao Xingchen carefully as he whispered to the rest:

"Does he know that this corpse is… Song Lan?"

"Probably not," Lan Jingyi responded, also lowering his voice. "He's blind, while Song Lan is mute, and has even become a fierce corpse who lost his sense of reason…. It's best if he doesn't know."

No one could argue with that. Jiang Yanli frowned, an ocean of pity for the man lying on the ground before her.

"Second question then: who killed him?" Wei Wuxian continued, unwilling to waste too much time.

♪🎵♪

This time, the silence that followed the question was three times longer than before. Then, right when the humans were starting to think the corpse wasn't going to answer at all, the strings of the guqin vibrated three times, their tones echoing grief:

♪🎵

Once again, the Lans jolted at his answer.

“That’s impossible!” Lan Sizhui blurted out, staring down at his own guqin in blatant disbelief despite having personally confirmed that the spirits couldn’t lie to him.

Seeing that Lan Sizhui was too stunned to continue, Wei Wuxian prompted, “What did he say?”

What could be so unbelievable about the person who had killed him?

“He said… Xiao Xingchen.”

“*What?*” Madam Yu demanded, scoffing once at the absurdity of that. “That can’t be right. The Lan boy must have done something wrong-”

“Everything he did was correct,” Lan Wangji calmly objected, bowing once in apology for having interrupted his senior so rudely, but not truly looking regretful.

But if Sizhui was right-

The juniors voiced their concerns:

“You played it wrong, right?” Jin Ling asked.

“But ‘who are you’ and ‘who killed you’ are two of the easiest and most common questions in inquiry!” Lan Sizhui insisted. “Those are the first two sequences one learns when studying inquiry. One would practice them no less than ten thousand times. I double checked them before I played; I am certain they were correct.”

“Either you played inquiry wrong, or you interpreted his response incorrectly!” Jin Ling insisted.

Lan Qiren just shook his head once, refuting the claim.

And Lan Sizhui shook his head at the exact same time, adding, “If playing them wrong is improbable, then interpreting them wrong is impossible. The characters of ‘Xiao Xingchen’ are extremely rare among spirit’s answers. If I interpreted a different answer wrong, it would not have sounded like that name.”

Seeing the questioning gazes from Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan, Lan Wangji nodded once to confirm Lan Sizhui’s words.

Deflating at the grim possibilities, Lan Jingyi quietly murmured, “Song Lan left the cultivation world to find Xiao Xingchen, and yet Xiao Xingchen killed him. Why would he kill his good friend? He didn’t seem like that kind of person.”

As Lan Jingyi dropped, Wen Ruohan wanted to scoff at the boy’s trust a man he didn’t know. Xiao Xingchen could very well have just been putting on an act, after all. However, a second before he did, he remembered that he had no room to talk on the matter.

His other-self’s death had been the result of a betrayal, after all.

“Let’s not worry about this for now,” Wei Wuxian suggested, patting Lan Jingyi once on the back in support. “Sizhui, for the third question, who is controlling him?”

Adopting a stern face, Lan Sizhui played the question, not daring to so much as breathe while he did.

♪🎵♪♪

Every person’s eyes were locked onto the guqin, waiting for Song Lan to answer. The response came slowly, one note at a time, and so Sizhui translated one at a time:

🎵♪♪🎵

“The. One. Behind. You.”

Everyone swerved to look back at once, laying their eyes on Xiao Xingchen’s sleeping form.

Or at least, what should have been Xiao Xingchen’s sleeping form. Instead, sometime during the discussion they were having with Song Lan, Xiao Xingchen had sat up, leisurely resting his chin on his hand. Giving them a dark smile, he raised his black-gloved left hand and snapped.

The sound waves travelled out, past Wei Wuxian, the juniors, and the watchers, until it reached Song Lan and *exploded* in power. Song Lan instantly stood up, throwing the mountain-heavy Nether Brawlers off him and unsheathing his sword once more. Before anyone could react, the paper mannequins had been cut to shreds, and the corpse’s sword was resting against Wei Wuxian’s neck, his whisk pointed threateningly at the disciples.

“*Wei Ying!*” Lan Wangji shouted, standing up at once and cursing the fact that his other-self had chased after the ghost when the most dangerous threat was clearly here.

Wei Wuxian continued forcing himself to breathe steadily, but it was clear that even just swallowing would be enough to cause his throat to make contact with the point of the blade.

Wen Ruohan took a deep breath in and out, watching as Lan Wangji marched forward and stood between Song Lan and Wei Wuxian. For once, the emotions on the Lan heir’s face were easy to read.

Fear. Worry. Guilt. And hate.

Not hate towards a person, necessarily, but hate towards the simulation, which dangled a situation Lan Wangji would give anything to intervene in before him, yet left him unable to act.

The visible emotions vanished a moment later as Lan Wangji forced himself to calm down, but they had been there nonetheless.

(Not that Wen Ruohan didn't understand. The audacity this 'Xiao Xingchen' had to play so helpless before Wei Wuxian and target his good will was as infuriating as it was impressive.)

(And the still-calm expression Wei Wuxian had only made the watchers even more nervous. He had never shown much fear in regards to his own death, after all.)

"Don't move!" Wei Wuxian suddenly snapped, directing the command at Jin Ling, who had been about to unsheath his sword. "Don't make this worse. In terms of swordsmanship, even everyone here combined wouldn't be a worthy opponent to this… Song Lan."

The juniors complied.

'*My body right now has almost no spiritual power,*' Wei Wuxian thought, his eyes drifting around and making note of the whole situation. '*I don't have a sword, either. Besides, I also have Xiao Xingchen to worry about, and I don't know what he's doing or which side he's on.*'

"Why does he sound so *calm?!*" Jin Zixuan asked, staring at the sword resting by Wei Wuxian's throat with wide eyes. His fiance could only shake her head, having no answer to give.

However, at that moment, Xiao Xingchen stood up (making the watchers and juniors flinch). He waved his hand dismissively at the kids, beckoning them out.

"The adults are going to talk; children can wait outside."

Jiang Yanli honestly didn't know whether or not to be relieved by that. Then again, even if the juniors stayed, they would probably only be liabilities, so perhaps she should just be grateful.

Song Lan moved to drive the children outside, but they hesitantly shuffled along until Wei Wuxian instructed, "Go outside for now. You won't be much help here, anyways. The corpse poisoning powder should have settled already. While you're outside, make sure you don't run around; you'll stir up the dust again. Breathe slowly."

At the words 'you won't be much help,' Jin Ling had shifted as though about to protest, only to cut himself off. There truly wasn't anything he could do, so he had no choice but to storm outside.

Jiang Cheng clenched his fists, far too familiar with that feeling of frustrated helplessness to not relate. And it wasn't as though the juniors were weak; they had more than enough talent for nearly any situation. They might have been able to help, if they had stayed. It simply wasn't fair. If Wei Wuxian wasn't so set on getting glory for 'bravely sacrificing himself-'

Jiang Cheng had slammed his hand into Wei Wuxian's injured chest, demanding 'If that hurts you so much, why did you play the hero back then? Serves you right. This'll teach you better!'

And then the Wens had come, just like Wei Wuxian said.

And then-

'I don't care if Lan Wangji or Jin Zixuan dies! Just let them die! What's their deaths got to do with us?!'

Jiang Cheng flinched at the memory, hating the mental image of the burning pier that accompanied the words. However, as he did, he was forced to admit something else too.

Even while he was choking Wei Wuxian, the simulated Jiang Cheng had known it wasn't really Wei Wuxian's fault. That the Wen's hadn't attacked just because Wei Wuxian wanted to 'play the hero.'

But still-

Before Jiang Cheng could finish that thought, Wei Wuxian turned to the still-hesitating Lan Sizhui and spoke: "Sizhui, you're the most sensible one here. Lead them for a bit, won't you? Can you do that?"

Lan Sizhui nodded.

"Don't be scared," Wei Wuxian ordered, smiling reassuringly.

Another nod: "I am not."

"Really?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Sizhui smiled, "Really. Senior, you remind me of Hanguang-jun."

"Eh?" Lan Xichen asked, watching as his brother straightened up at the unexpected words.

"Hanguang-jun? How are we alike?"

The puzzlement on Wei Wuxian's face made his thoughts clear. In everything — from clothes to status to reputation — it appeared that they couldn't be more different. The two of them were like fire and ice, and yet Lan Sizhui just grinned in reply, following the others out.

'*I can't explain it, either,*' the boy mentally continued. '*They just feel similar. It's as though, when either of them are present, I know I don't need to worry about anything.*'

Lan Wangji abruptly sucked in a breath of air, feeling his heart pulse at the comment. Although he didn't show anything on his face, the speed at which his heart was beating multiplied with every word. Around him, the group Nie Huaisang and Lan Xichen had formed were squealing quite loudly at the words, but Lan Wangji paid them no mind.

All he could focus on was the simulated Wei Wuxian's still-puzzled expression, and the warm smile Lan Sizhui sent back his way.

A powerful, overwhelming warmth spread across his chest.

The door clicked closed. After ensuring all the juniors had left, Xiao Xingchen took out a red elixir and popped it into his mouth, muttering a quick, sarcastic, "How touching~"

A few seconds after he swallowed, the purplish-red hue on his face cleared.

Raising an eyebrow, Wei Wuxian asked, "An antidote for corpse poisoning powder?"

"Correct! A lot more effective than your scary bowl of congee, right? And it tastes sweet."

"So not even deranged psychopaths can tolerate Wei-xiong's cooking," Nie Huaisang mused.

Frowning at the description of Xiao Xingchen, Jiang Fengmian clenched his hands into fists. He knew well the supposed 'curse' that fell on people who left Baoshan Sanren's mountain (his best friend had gotten caught up in it, after all). All her disciples had been promising individuals, and all had either gone missing or insane once enough time had passed.

(He wondered if 'the Yiling Patriarch' being Cangse's son had been incorporated into the legend as well.)

Part of Jiang Fengmian had hoped that Xiao Xingchen would be able to break that curse. He had already been disappointed enough to learn that Xiao Xingchen had gone missing. Going by the antidote the man had on him (and Song Lan's words), it was entirely possible that Xiao Xingchen had gone insane as well. If that was true-

The Jiang Sect Leader took a calming breath in and out, feeling that the worst was yet to come.

Breathing out as calmly as ever, Wei Wuxian spoke next: "Your performance was wonderful. From courageously killing corpses and tiring out from their attacks, to blocking the sword for Jin Ling and losing consciousness. Were they all for our entertainment?"

Grinning, Xiao Xingchen raised a finger and wagged it in front of his face, correcting, "Not for 'your' general entertainment, but 'your' *singular* entertainment. I've been looking forward to meeting you — the Yiling Patriarch, that is."

He smirked.

"How — why is *everyone* so willing to believe that Wei Wuxian *came back from the dead!* Now…" Madam Yu trailed off, abruptly realizing the danger this posed to her former disciple.

"Oh, no," Jiang Yanli whispered, horrified at the realization that *this man* had become the second to know after Lan Wangji. Was this blackmail? If he took the information to ~~the future Jiang Cheng~~ the other sects-

“It’s better to see first-hand than to listen to other people’s tales,” Xiao Xingchen continued. Those words were quite similar to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji’s earlier ones, when they had agreed not to pass judgment on Xiao Xingchen without confirming the full story for themselves.

(But that was just in regards to the literal meaning. With context, the words couldn’t be more different.)

Seeing that Wei Wuxian hadn’t reacted, Xiao Xingchen continued, “I’m guessing that you haven’t told anyone who you really are, right? So I thought ahead and sent those kids away, allowing you to keep your secret while we converse in privacy. How’s that? Aren’t I thoughtful?”

“That’s certainly *one way* to describe it, Madam Yu huffed, sarcasm dripping off every word like a poisonous sap.

Ignoring that mocking, Wei Wuxian asked, “Are the walking corpses in Yi City under your control?”

“Of course!” the man shamelessly answered. “Right as you guys entered the city, your whistles started, and I began to think that something was a bit weird. I headed over to investigate the matter personally. As I expected, someone who could imbue low level sorcery like The Summoning of Painted Eyes with so much power could only be the founder.”

The absolute glee in the man’s tone told the watchers all they needed to know. This was a demonic cultivator, and one who was skilled enough to have controlled everything in Yi City. Their past experiences told them they needed to be wary of judging him so quickly (Wei Wuxian’s circumstances certainly hadn’t been something any of them could have expected), but the utter delight the man exuded as he described what had occurred unsettled quite a few of them.

Violent, deceiving, and cruel — Xiao Xingchen seemed to be everything Lan Qiren had feared when he first heard about the invention of demonic cultivation.

Knowing that he couldn’t fool someone who knew the demonic path as well as Xiao Xingchen did, Wei Wuxian didn’t bother denying it and instead asked, “So, you took the children hostage. What is it you want me to do for you?”

Xiao Xingchen laughed: “Senior, I want you to do me a small favor.”

Several people raised their eyebrows at the ‘senior’ title, knowing that the rankings didn’t match up. This was not lost on the simulated Wei Wuxian either, and he raised an amused eyebrow at what his mother’s shidi had called him — proving that the future hadn’t somehow caused the standard order of seniority to change.

“Then again, he is the Yiling Patriarch,” Wen Qing supposed. “Could anyone be more senior than the founder of a path?”

Before Wei Wuxian could comment on the phrasing, Xiao Xingchen took out a spirit trapping pouch and placed it onto the table.

"Please," he whispered, desperation filling his tone.

'*Don't do it, A-Xian,*' Jiang Fengmian mentally requested. '*Whatever Cangse's shidi wants, it can't be good.*'

Then again, with the juniors as hostages, Wei Wuxian might not have much choice in the matter.

Wei Wuxian reached over to the pouch and rested his fingers on it for a while, as though he was feeling someone's pulse. After a few seconds, a tense frown formed on his face.

"Whose soul is this?" he asked. "It's already in shambles. Even glue won't stick it together. There's only one breath of life left!"

Remembering their initial fears about the state of Wei Wuxian's soul during his death, several of the watchers flinched. All of them, however, remained keenly aware that Wei Wuxian's soul not having been shattered was far from saying it was alright.

'*The world sucks,*' Nie Huaisang thought unhappily, scooting closer to his brother's reassuring figure as he did.

And yet Xiao Xingchen appeared unsurprised by Wei Wuxian's words, responding, "If this person's soul was easy to stick together, why would I need your help?"

"You want me to *fix* this soul?" Wei Wuxian asked, taking his hand away at last. "No offense, but there isn't much of it left in here. This person probably suffered a lot of torture while they were alive-"

A nearly-unnoticeable flinch passed through Xiao Xingchen's body, so slight that only Wei Wuxian and Wen Ruohan managed to notice it. If Hanguang-jun had been here, he most likely would have as well, but the fifteen year old version just barely lacked enough cultivation to do so.

The Wen Sect Leader hummed thoughtfully.

"It was undoubtedly rather painful," Wei Wuxian continued. "They probably committed suicide, so it's unlikely they'll be willing to come back to this world. If the soul itself doesn't have any desire to live, then it'll probably be impossible to save. If I'm not wrong, this soul was probably patched up by force. As soon as it leaves the spirit trapping pouch, it'll dissipate in an instant. You know this better than anyone."

"I don't know and I don't care," Xiao Xingchen snapped back. "Even if you don't want to, you'll have to do me this favor, Senior. Don't forget that your children are still waiting outside for you to come and rescue them from danger."

"Honorless brat!" Madam Jin hissed, infuriated he would use the children as hostages. And beyond that-

“Didn’t Wei Wuxian literally *just* tell him it was impossible?!” Jiang Cheng demanded. “Who gets told that and goes ‘I don’t care, do it anyways?!’”

“Insane lunatic,” Jin Zixuan agreed. “Wei Wuxian’s still human, you know. You can’t expect him to rewrite the laws of the universe with a snap!”

All of that was true. Even Wei Wuxian’s former sect motto, ‘do what is right, even if it seems impossible’ was a far reach from ‘make literal miracles happen because you’re Wei Wuxian.’

‘*But do we have any right to say that?*’ Jiang Fengmian wondered. ‘*Putting the simulation aside, we’re leaving our lives and sects in A-Xian’s hands right now, and the version out there is only fifteen. Only…*’

Fifteen, the same age the simulated Jin Ling was. *That* was who he was putting all this responsibility on?

Forget their roles as sect leader — not even a farmer would think that was a good idea.

However, Wei Wuxian remained unnervingly unsurprised by Xiao Xingchen’s unreasonable expectations, instead focusing on the way those words had been said:

‘*He speaks in a bit of a strange tone, doesn’t he? Affectionate — almost sweet — but with a viciousness that has arisen from nowhere. It seems like he could call me brother or senior one moment, and turn hostile or kill me the next…. Oh, I see.*’

“See what?” Jiang Cheng asked, becoming beyond impatient with being constantly left out of the loop of Wei Wuxian’s thoughts.

And that question was answer a moment later, when Wei Wuxian suddenly began to laugh.

“I must agree with you that it’s much nicer to meet someone in person rather than just listening to the tales!” Wei Wuxian exclaimed. “Xue Yang, why are you pretending to be a cultivator instead of the delinquent you truly are?”

“*WHAT?!*

After a momentary pause, ‘Xiao Xingchen’ reached up and removed the bandages around his head. They fell layer by layer, eventually coming to reveal two bright, shrining eyes.

Undamaged eyes, that *couldn’t* belong to Xiao Xingchen.

“...Oh.”

“Wait... what?"

The newly-dubbed ‘Xue Yang’ had young, attractive features, making him look almost handsome. The canine teeth that appeared when he smiled were childishly cute to an

extent that nearly concealed the untamed cruelty within his eyes. With a careless shrug, Xue Yang tossed the bandages to the side.

"Oh, no," he chuckled. "You found out."

Confirmation. Xue Yang, who had been executed by Jin Guangyao, was there before them. Now, Wei Wuxian's mere existence meant there was a chance Xue Yang had been killed then revived, but given the likelihood of that….

"Is there a traitor in A-Yao's sect?" Lan Xichen asked, clenching his fists nervously. Something as big as this could ruin Jin Guangyao's reputation if it got out. And to save a man as despicable as Xue Yang appeared to be-

"Or perhaps he just failed," Jin Guangshan suggested, feeling defensive of his sect. "I'm sure A-Yao did his best, but mistakes happen. And really, how much can you really expect from the son of-"

"Of someone like *you?*" Madam Jin snapped, practically seething where she sat. "Considering how well A-Xuan has done throughout his life, I'm sure the boy's parentage wasn't too much of a handicap."

There was a half-second pause, and then Madam Jin realized what she just said. Her eyes widened in a horror that nearly matched her husband's gaping shock. The two of them stared at each other for a moment, unable to speak.

Due to the unfathomable words that Madam Jin had spoken — ones that, for once, *didn't* blame the women Jin Guangshan had slept with because how could that feel right now when it was her *husband* who kept saying deplorable things about Wei Wuxian at every turn — complete silence engulfed the room.

Therefore, to the few who were still paying attention, it was quite easy to hear Wei Wuxian's deduction:

"I see," Wei Wuxian hummed, nodding once at Xue Yang in acknowledgement. "Purposefully pretending the pain was so unbearable that our consciences wouldn't allow us to take off your bandages and see; purposefully showing us some of Shuanghua; purposefully making it seem like you'd accidentally blurted out you were a rogue cultivator. You not only knew how to make yourself appear injured and defenseless, but also how to gain the sympathy of others. You truly brought out an image of the genuine, virtuous Xiao Xingchen. If you hadn't revealed that you knew things you shouldn't have, I might have believe you were him."

"I wish it *was* him!" Nie Huaisang grumbled. "Why do we keep running into scary things, here?"

Whoever that mysterious arm was would pay for dragging them around to these places, Huaisang would make sure of it.

‘*Besides,*’ Wei Wuxian added. ‘*During inquiry, Song Lan’s answer to the second question was ‘Xiao Xingchen,’ but his answer to the third one was ‘the one behind you.’ If ‘the one behind you’ was also Xiao Xingchen, there would have been no reason for him to answer the question so differently. Song Lan wanted to warn us that Xiao Xingchen wasn’t the person with them, but if he’d simply answered Xue Yang, the juniors and I might have remained ignorant. He could only answer as such.*’

Gratitude for this ‘Song Lan’ filled Madam Jin, and she thanked the heavens he’d seen it fit to warn them. Even if he hadn’t it was more than likely Wei Wuxian could have gotten everyone out alive, but it was hard to be sure.

Her grandson kept getting involved in insane messes, but there were luckily a few people willing to protect him.

Xue Yang shrugged, then grinned: “Well, it’s true that Xiao Xingchen’s reputation is better than mine. I had to pretend to be him; I’d never have been able to get your trust otherwise.”

Nodding once, the picture of unconcerned, Wei Wuxian complimented, “That was some excellent acting.”

“Now you’re flattering me,” Xue Yang laughed. “I have a very famous friend. His acting is what I’d truly call excellent. I still have a long ways to go.”

Nie Huaisang tilted his head at that explanation, wondering if the specified actor had anything to do with how Xue Yang escaped his supposed execution. You would need to be a truly excellent actor to fool the whole cultivation world.

(Not that he would know anything about that.)

“Anyways, enough with the chit-chat. Senior Wei, you really have to do me this favor.”

“You’re the one who invented those long nails that controlled Wen Ning and Song Lan, aren’t you?” Wei Wuxian asked. “You even managed to restore half the Stygian Tiger Seal, why would you need my help to restore a soul?”

Xue Yang smile faltered as he insisted, “It’s not the same at all. You’re the founder. If you’d never made the first half of the seal, I would never have been able to recreate the second half. There’s no doubt you’re better than me. If there’s something I can’t do, you must be able to do it!”

“...Hold up, *what?*”

“Is he serious?”

“...I think he is,” Lan Xichen disbelievingly confirmed. They had already seen first hand how illogical Xue Yang’s faith in Wei Wuxian’s abilities were, but for his logic to be ‘the second best can’t do it, therefore you can’ was an entirely different level of delusion.

Jiang Fengmian breathed out sharply through his nose, guilt rising once again.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian was much in agreement: '*I really can't understand why strangers always have an inexplicable sense of confidence in me. Am I supposed to pass a few compliments back out of respect?'*

Bringing a hand up to cover his bemused mouth, Wei Wuxian nodded once in return:

"You're too humble."

"I'm not being humble; it's the truth. I never exaggerate when I'm talking. If I say I'm going to end someone's entire clan, then I really will kill each and every one of them. I won't even leave a dog behind!"

"Like the Yueyang Chang clan, for example?"

The sheer *smugness* in every one of Xue Yang's revolting words sent shivers down Jiang Yanli's spine, and Jin Zixuan moved closer to her, ready to help if she ever needed more support.

(Some part of Jin Zixuan hoped Jiang Yanli would want some help with something just so that he could distract himself from what had just occurred. No one was discussing what his mother had said a short while ago, not even his parents, but it remained on every mind nonetheless.)

"What's wrong? You don't agree?"

"This may surprise you, but I-"

Before Wei Wuxian could finish, a black shadow swept inside. The pair were on their feet in an instant and quickly stepped back from the table, Xue Yang grabbing the Spirit-Trapping Pouch as he did.

"Song Lan?" Nie Mingjue asked, recognizing the intruder.

Resting one hand against the table, Song Lan flipped in the air and landed on top of it. As he steadied, he turned to face the door, black streaks of blood running down his cheeks.

There was a clink of iron. Then, chains trailing across the ground behind him, Wen Ning stepped out of the fog.

"A-Ning," Wen Qing gasped out. Now that she could see Wen Ning and Song Lan standing side by side, their innumerable similarities became even more apparent than before.

(But Song Lan was a corpse whose tongue had been ripped out and whose skull was embedded with nails — the last person her brother should have had any similarities to. She clenched her fists, swearing once again that she would not allow this to happen.)

'*It's a good thing I ordered Wen Ning to come over while playing to flute earlier,*' Wei Wuxian thought.

“Oh, of course he did. No wonder he seemed so calm,” Madam Yu sighed, wondering why she was still surprised by Wei Wuxian’s foresight.

(‘*Because you kept accusing him of ‘not thinking ahead before playing hero,’ remember?*’ some part of her brain felt the need to remind her.)

Glancing at Wen Ning calmly, Wei Wuxian ordered, “Fight outside. Be careful to not beat him up too badly. Watch the living people and don’t let any other corpses approach them.”

In answer, Wen Ning swung a chain at Song Lan with the *snap* of a viper’s attack, forcing the other corpse to defend with his whisk. It collided with the chain, and the two twisted together.

When Wen Ning took a tremendous leap back, Song Lan refused to let go, leading to the latter being dragged out of the room as a result.

Song Lan tried to crush Wen Ning’s skull, but the Ghost General slammed him to the floor first. The two corpses then engaged in battle, creating craters in the dusty ground each time they collided.

If it weren’t for the awkward situation created by his idiotic wife’s thoughtless words, Jin Guangshan would have given an impressed whistle at the scene. As it was, his desire to not attract attention meant he could only silently watch the destruction on display before him.

‘*So this is what a battle between two skilled demonic cultivators looks like,*’ he thought, watching the still-sitting pair as the corpses reigned destruction down on the general area. ‘*No wonder my other self was so desperate to get access to it. Even people who aren’t Wei Wuxian can use it as a powerful weapon.*’

If he wanted to gain access to Wei Wuxian before anyone else, Jin Guangshan would need to be the first to act once they left.

By the time the two fierce corpses had gotten outside, the disciples had already found another shop to hide inside. They understood the danger full well, and yet couldn’t help but peak out through the cracks in the walls, stretching out their necks to stare fixedly at the scene.

Seeing an equal amount of fascination on his brother’s face, Nie Huaisang found himself very, very glad the simulation couldn’t touch any of them (including his brother, who somehow thought it was a good idea to march close to the corpses and get a front row seat to their battle). Given who Nie Mingjue was, Nie Huaisang was sure his brother would be fine even if he could be touched, but-

But the future Nie Mingjue was already dead, and Nie Huaisang wasn’t going to forget that anytime soon.

To everyone other than Nie Huaisang, however, it was easy to see why the juniors were so captivated by the sight before them. With the horsetail whisk, the iron chains, and

the long sword, the battle had become a frenzy of clanks and clashes, each strike creating a grating sounds whose volume showcased the attack's power. Each move was ruthless, and each attack lethal — only two fierce corpses could fight in such a way. If two humans tried the same, they would soon become nothing more than severed limbs and battered flesh.

Even Wen Ruohan was impressed. He could now understand what Wei Wuxian meant when the boy had described a corpse's inability to feel pain as an advantage. This style of combat (with more focus on power, and less on technique), was clearly extremely effective despite how different it was from everything Wen Ruohan knew. It was no wonder everyone was captivated by the scene.

(Well, almost everyone. From what Wen Ruohan could see, the real Lan Wangji had barely taken his eyes off Wei Wuxian, and continued standing next to him as an ever-faithful guardian.)

Watching the titanic battle, Xue Yang's lips twitched up into a smirk as he asked, "If you had to guess, who do you think is gonna win?"

"Why would I need to guess? Wen Ning, of course," Wei Wuxian responded.

"Really?" Jiang Yanli asked. "But Song Lan seems so powerful-"

A kick from Wen Ning sent Song Lan flying through the air and skidding across the ground. Watching the fight occur, Wei Wuxian's lips twitched up into a smirk.

Although every cell in her body disagreed with the notion of Wen Ning fighting as a corpse, Wen Qing nonetheless couldn't help but find Wei Wuxian's unquestioning faith in her brother comforting.

Then again, perhaps it should be a surprise. Even when Wen Ning was still just human, Wei Wuxian had shown similar belief in his abilities; he had recommended Wen Ning for the archery competition, and hadn't shown even a trace of annoyance despite Wen Ning's failure.

Wei Wuxian had always trusted her brother, and he had responded with unwavering loyalty each time.

Xue Yang sighed: "Yes, you're probably right. It's such a shame. No matter how many nails I put into his head, he was still unwilling to obey me."

Wen Qing twitched.

"Things that are too loyal are also quite troublesome."

She stood up, her chair rattling against the floor as she growled, "*You*-"

"Wen Ning is not a 'thing,'" Wei Wuxian responded calmly, not showing even a trace of weakness.

Wen Qing froze. ‘Not a thing,’ Wei Wuxian had said. He was the one who had turned her brother into this, but, now, the very fact that had sparked Wen Qing’s hate for him at the beginning of the simulation served as a reassurance instead. Wei Wuxian was the Yiling Patriarch; as she had pointed out time and time again, he would know best.

Just a few days ago, she had been terrified of the fact that, outside of the simulation, the real Wen Ning was spending time with Wei Wuxian. Now, it reassured her more than anything else. Wei Wuxian respected her brother like almost no one else did, and Wen Ning had repaid that time and time again.

In all honesty, Wen Qing couldn’t ask for anything else.

“Not a thing…” Xue Yang repeated with a laugh. “Do you really think so?”

“You don’t?”

“Well, what you said *could* be interpreted a different way. Saying that he ‘isn’t a thing’ could just as easily be calling him a despicable person-”

Wei Wuxian dropped to the floor, dodging Xue Yang’s attack by a hair’s breadth. He immediately got up and darted to the side, gaining some distance as Xue Yang’s sword resumed its assault.

“What the-”

“Do you often sneak up on people while you’re in the middle of a sentence?” Wei Wuxian asked, easily dancing around Xue Yang’s attacks, his long robes fluttering elegantly with each twist and spin. The cocky grin on his face was both boyish and playful, as though this fight was just a game.

“Of course,” Xue Yang responded, sounding surprised Wei Wuxian had even asked. “I’m a delinquent, aren’t I? I’m sure you’d realized that already. Anyways, it’s not as though I want to kill you. I just want to make it so that you can’t move. Then, I can take you somewhere else.”

‘*Fair enough,*’ Jin Guangshan thought, feeling that the plan had a surprising amount of merit to it.

“You can take your time repairing the soul for me, then.”

“I already said that I can’t do anything about it,” Wei Wuxian reminded him, twisting behind Xue Yang with a well placed step.

Undeterred, Xue Yang continued, “Don’t be so quick to refuse me. If you don’t know what to do, then the two of us can discuss the matter together.”

“You — what is wrong with him?!” Jiang Cheng demanded. “If he’s willing to do all this, then surely there are easier methods! Why is he so convinced that Wei Wuxian is the only one who can possibly help him?!”

“Wei Ying’s reputation has gotten out of control,” Lan Wangji agreed. “They all have complete faith that he can do the impossible, but none of them believe he would every try to do anything righteous.”

No one could disagree with that.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian continued slipping out of Xue Yang’s grasp, the latter’s blade always just barely missing its target. Wei Wuxian dodged again and again, springing over the countless slips of paper that littered the ground.

‘*The little delinquent has some good moves,*’ Wei Wuxian admitted, hopping onto a table to leap over Xue Yang’s next attack and land behind him, keeping himself from getting cornered. The next attack from Xue Yang struck out at once, creating a small tear on the edge of Wei Wuxian’s robes.

For durable but flexible fabric to get cut like that, Xue Yang’s sword would need to be moving too fast for it to keep up. Although she had very little experience with combat, Jiang Yanli did at least know that much.

Which made the battle all the more nerve-wracking for her to watch.

Seeing Xue Yang’s attacks become even more lethal and breathtakingly fast, Wei Wuxian exclaimed, “Are you taking advantage of my body’s low spiritual power?”

“Of course!” Xue Yang answered.

Both Wei Wuxian and the watchers faltered, shocked to meet someone more shameless than even the Yiling Patriarch.

Twisting out of the way of yet another attack, Wei Wuxian returned Xue Yang’s smile and said, “It’s better to upset a hero than a rogue, which is you, in this case. I’m not interested in dealing with you any longer. Let’s have someone else.”

“Who else?” Xue Yang laughed. “Hanguang-jun? While he was out there, I got more than three hundred walking corpses to gang up on him! And I sent even more after him later.”

Lan Xichen sucked in a breath as if he’d just been punched, and Lan Wangji straightened further. Now, he finally knew why his other self was taking so long to find the one spirit.

And because of that, Wei Wuxian had been isolated with Xue Yang.

The maniac grinned, “It’s just us right now! We won’t need to worry about him for quite a while. Now he-”

Before he finished his sentence, a white robed figure dropped down from the sky, and Bichen’s icy-blue gleam cut forward through the air. Then, surrounded by an ambience of frost and ice, the white figure paused before Wei Wuxian.

“It’s Hanguang-jun!” Jin Zixuan exclaimed, lighting up in relief.

The hiding juniors reacted the exact same way.

Jin Zixuan blushed at their parallel responses. Even knowing that most of those juniors were older than him, the fact that they came from a later generation made them seem much younger than they actually were.

Shuanghua collided with Bichen, just barely managing to fend of Lan Wangji's attack. The two blades ricocheted off each other, then flew back to their respective owners.

"Would this be 'to come on time is better than to come early?'" Wei Wuxian asked. Lan Wangji nodded once in answer.

The second their short exchange finished, Lan Wangji turned his attention on Xue Yang.

The battle began a moment later.

Unlike Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation, Lan Wangji's spiritual cultivation was a package ready for use at any time. His tools were always easily carried on him, and his power never fluctuated depending on the surroundings. Where a demonic cultivators' capabilities could alter through a huge range depending on how much time they'd had to prepare, Lan Wangji was always ready to fight.

Therefore, Wei Wuxian could comfortably step back and allow Hanguang-jun to take over the fight. Going by how much Xue Yang was already being pushed back, Wei Wuxian knew the demonic cultivator's spiritual cultivation was far less than Hanguang-jun's. Right now, Wei Wuxian would be better utilized elsewhere.

Right as he was about to leave, he saw Xue Yang reach into his sleeve and froze.

'*Corpse poisoning powder?*'

Lan Qiren tensed.

But that wasn't it at all. Instead, Xue Yang unsheathed another blade, and seamlessly adjusted to a dual-wielding fighting style instead.

"...The pinnacle of unorthodox," Lan Qiren mumbled, instinctively disagreeing with it (even if watching Wei Wuxian's experiences had shown him that such a concept wasn't inherently bad).

Despite adding the second sword, Xue Yang didn't falter at all. The new blade was grim and dark, seemingly emitting a black aura as it was wielded which stood in direct contrast to Shuanghua's blinding white. Using both swords equally well, Xue Yang's hands kept in perfect time with each other. He gained the upper hand at once.

As Lan Wangji leapt back, dodging an especially fierce attack, he frowned and questioned, "Jiangzai?"

There was a laugh: "Hmm? Hanguang-jun, you know of this sword? What an honor!"

Huffing once in disgust, Nie Mingjue wondered, “Why am I not surprised that’s his sword.”

And the meaning behind his words was clear. Like its name and its owner, Jiangzai was an ominous sword that carried with it the stench of bloodshed. It fit someone like Xue Yang perfectly.

If it weren’t for the fact that Lan Xichen had absolute confidence in Hanguang-jun’s combat prowess, he might have gone against every teaching he’d ever received and cursed Xue Yang’s line for generations.

Jiangzai shot forward, and Hanguang-jun jumped away yet again. This time, however, the tip of his hair was nearly grazed by the blade — closer than Xue Yang had ever gotten before.

“Hanguang-jun,” Wei Wuxian called out, but-

“Step back. You’re not needed here,” Lan Wangji instructed him, continuing the fight. Wei Wuxian had been about to leave before Xue Yang unsheathed Jiangzai anyways, so he humbly stepped back upon Hanguang-jun’s request.

Outside, an expressionless Wen Ning was gripping Song Lan by the neck, lifting him into the air and slamming him against the wall repeatedly (creating a man-shaped dent). The action continued, Wen Ning drawing his captive back only to crush him against the wood over and over and over again.

“...A-Ning?” Wen Qing asked, not recognizing the man before her. She wasn’t scared — she could *never* be scared of Wen Ning — but the violence was so opposed to everything she knew about her brother that she couldn’t help but gape at it.

Nie Mingjue had to agree. Although Huaisang was a very different person than Wen Ning was, they shared their general aversion to violence despite being members of cultivation clans. If it was somehow revealed to Nie Mingjue that his brother was actually a ruthless, terrifying monster, he would undoubtedly react the exact same way.

Luckily, there was no chance of *that* happening.

However, Song Lan wasn’t defeated yet. Just as expressionlessly as Wen Ning, the former rogue cultivator grabbed onto Wen Ning’s wrists and, with a backflip, threw him onto the ground. Both corpse’s fought expressionlessly, ceaselessly smashing and banging.

‘*Since neither of them can feel pain, they’ll continue fighting even if one of them loses a limb or two,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, watching the battle with an expression that could only be described as bemusement. ‘*Unless they get cut to pieces, nothing will stop them.*’

And yet, his faith in Wen Ning never wavered. It was that alone that allowed Wen Qing to relax her hands from the tense position they had been in. If Wei Wuxian trusted him, then she would as well.

'*I guess I'm not needed here, either,*' Wei Wuxian supposed, turning again to look at the juniors. Lan Jingyi was frantically waving at him from inside a dimly lit shop, doing everything he could to silently attract Wei Wuxian's attention.

"He's definitely needed there," Lan Xichen laughed, finding the relief on Lan Jingyi's face upon seeing Wei Wuxian adorable.

Right as Wei Wuxian left, an explosion of spiritual energy burst out of Hanguang-jun's body from behind him, making Wangji's blade light up like the moon.

Xue Yang tensed instantly: '*He was holding back? I-*'

Before he could finish that thought, Lan Wangji shot forward, Bichen knocking Shuanghua out of Xue Yang's grip. The blade flew through the air for a moment before Hanguang-jun caught it.

The next attack Xue Yang let out was even more vicious than all the others combined, and it was aimed at the arm that held Shuanghua. As the attack was dodged, a chilling rage flashed in Xue Yang's eyes.

"Give me the sword back," he ordered.

Undeterred, Lan Wangji calmly responded, "You do not deserve this sword."

A choking, bitter laugh escaped Xue Yang, the look in his eyes turning crazed with hate.

Nie Huaisang gave a long, low whistle.

"I take it back, Wangji-xiong. You're still as scary as ever."

On the other hand, as relaxed as he always was, Wei Wuxian walked over to the disciples.

"Everyone alright?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"We all listened and held our breaths."

Wei Wuxian nodded, "Good. If anyone doesn't listen to me, I'll feed him congee again."

The undeniable *flinches* each junior who had tried to congee exhibited were far more telling than they had any right to be. Once again, quite a few of the watchers found their morbid curiosity piqued.

Wei Wuxian gathered the juniors together again and quickly did a headcount. Luckily for everyone involved, each junior was present and accounted for. Right as Wei Wuxian was about to direct them to a farther location, he heard a rumbling sound in the distance and froze.

“What’s that sound?” Jin Ling asked, swerving to face the source. In the distance — barely visible through the endlessly-thickening fog — was yet another squadron of corpses.

(And Song Lan had already destroyed all of Wei Wuxian’s mannequins.)

“Are you *kidding me?!*” Jin Zixuan asked. “We literally just got rid of the last swarm.”

“They seem endless,” Lan Xichen agreed.

Frowning, Lan Wangji commented, “Xue Yang must have summoned more while Wei Ying was distracted.”

“These are… walking corpses?’ Jin Ling realized.

“Gah! How can there be so many of them?”

“Is this an army?”

The juniors stepped back, shuffling away from the direction Wei Wuxian wanted them to go in. Then, sending Bichen hurling forward to continue the fight alone, Hanguang-jun pulled out his guqin and flicked his wrist across the strings.

♫

The walking corpses’ heads were crushed and their bodies were sent flying through the air. Lan Wangji returned to his fight with Xue Yang a moment later as though he’d never faltered at all.

And the real Lan Wangji watched on in awe. For all his skill with the guqin, he could tell at a glance that what Hanguang-jun had just done was far beyond his capabilities.

But it would be possible for him one day.

And, with that realization, came a sudden urge to practice — to try — to find a way to make his technique even remotely resemble the skill he saw before him. It was exceedingly rare for Lan Wangji to meet someone more skilled than him in anything, musical cultivation most of all.

Now that he had seen it, he found his drive to grow spurred on like never before.

Xue Yang was soon pushed back, unable to gain an advantage over Lan Wangji even though Hanguang-jun had been fighting a battle on two fronts just a second before.

“He’s amazing,” Jin Ling couldn’t help but blurt out.

There was a shuffle of papers, and then Lan Jingyi (the one from the far future, putting together the simulation) suddenly exclaimed, “Ooh! This seems fun! I want to read this one.”

“Jingyi-”

A groan from Jin Ling and Lan Sizhui’s no doubt reasonable protest was cut off as Lan Jingyi cleared his throat and began, “Jin Ling had seen Sect Leader Jiang and Jin Guangyao go on night hunts and kill beasts, leading him to believe his two uncles were the two most powerful cultivators in the world. Toward Hanguang-jun, however, he’d always felt more fear than respect, especially towards his awesome ability to silence others and his admirable cold temper-”

“I don’t think ‘awesome’ or ‘admirable’ are in the script,” Ouyang Zizhen pointed out.

“Well, they should have been!”

“I told you we should have read through the script before recording,” Jin Ling grumbled, sounded quite tired.

“No need!” Lan Jingyi insisted. “So Jin Ling had always been irrationally scared of Hanguang-jun. However, right now, had no choice but to admire Hanguang-jun’s abilities!”

A warm flush dusted Lan Wangji’s ears.

And the simulated Lan Jingyi approved: “Of course he’s good; that should be obvious! He just never likes to show it off. He’s very low-key, right?”

That blush got darker.

The ‘right’ had quite clearly been directed at Wei Wuxian, who tilted his head and asked, “You’re asking me? Why are you asking me?”

“The kids can sense what’s between you,” Madam Jin proudly declared, making Lan Wangji flush darker than ever. However, as she was his senior, rather than his peer, he couldn’t even glare at her for the comment. Lan Xichen gave a tiny cheer.

Seeing that Wei Wuxian clearly didn’t know why he’d been asked, Lan Jingyi gave an angry stomp and demanded, “Are you trying to say that you *don’t* think Hanguang-jun is strong?”

After thinking it over for a moment, Wei Wuxian touched his chin with a smile and admitted, “Yeah, he’s strong.”

“He’s super strong!” an excited Lan Jingyi agreed.

“Of course he’s good,” Wei Wuxian nodded again, then broke into a *heartbreakingly* soft smile to whisper, “He’s the best.”

Everything around Lan Wangji might as well have turned to dust in that instant for all the attention he was paying to it. The laughter of the watchers, the grins of the simulated juniors, the battle in the distance, and the annoyed huff the real Jiang Cheng gave were all nothing more than washed-out background noise. All he could focus on was Wei Wuxian.

‘*Wei Ying,*’ he thought, watching that warm smile until his heart felt like it melted into goo. ‘*Wei Ying.*’

They might not have officially met yet, but Lan Wangji would stop at nothing to get to know Wei Wuxian once he returned to the real world.

‘*We need to move quickly,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, shaking himself out of the dazed state his previous thoughts had left him in. ‘*Soon, it will be dawn, and when that happens the fog will become thicker than ever. It would be fine if it were only me and Lan Zhan, but with the juniors here too… I can’t promise nothing will happen.*’

“Who even brought those kids here?” Madam Yu huffed, not having forgotten the cat story all the juniors told.

As Wei Wuxian tried to think of a solution, there came a series of taps from behind him. They were the pats of the bamboo pole; the ghost girl was back.

Without any hesitation, Wei Wuxian straightened up at once and ordered “Let’s go!”

He took off after the bamboo pole, and the confused juniors began following behind. A moment later, the world shifted, and everything faded to black.

Soon, the light returned, easily illuminating the still-flaming ears on Lan Wangji’s face as he tried (and failed) to stop thinking about how Wei Wuxian had looked while whispering ‘he’s the best.’

Unfortunately for him, not every watcher was willing to pretend they didn’t see it.

“My, are you already this enamoured?” Madam Jin asked, making even the ever-unflappable Lan Wangji flinch at the accuracy. If it was anyone other than his mother speaking, Jin Zixuan would have offered his fellow embarrassed romantic a helping hand; as it was, however, the Lan heir was on his own.

“...No,” Lan Wangji finally answered, but, despite the perfectly even tone, not a single person believed him.

(And what kind of friend would Nie Huaisang be if he didn’t immediately capitalize on such weakness?)

“How can you say that Wangji-xiong!” he cried out, gasping in shock and covering his mouth with one hand. “And to think, after all this time… what will the kids say?!”

“The kids?” Lan Xichen asked.

“Of course! The little juniors. I know some of them will only exist in the future timeline, but we’ve already gotten it confirmed that A-Ling, Sizhui, Jingyi, and Zizhen are going to be born! Wangji-xiong, you know my Da-ge. He’s never going to get married!”

“What? How am I part of this-”

“If you and Wei-xiong don’t get together, then-then Wangji-xiong,” Huaisang sniffed. “I won’t be an uncle anymore!”

“You are not an uncle,” Lan Wangji bit out, doing his upmost to avoid giving Nie Huaisang the reaction the boy was looking for. So long as Lan Wangji managed to remain calm, the vultures would eventually lose interest and move onto new prey.

(He hoped.)

Those hopes were immediately dashed when, in the biggest betrayal of all, *Lan Qiren* commented, “You should at least speak to Wei-gongzi before giving the children up, Wangji. I quite like the idea of being Sizhui’s grand uncle.”

“Wha — I-”

“Definitely!” Jiang Yanli jumped on, sharing a conniving grin with Lan Xichen. “After all, it simply wouldn’t be fair for A-Ling to lose his Shishu without ever getting to meet him.”

Wei Wuxian was Jiang Yanli’s martial brother, so, if Lan Wangji married him, he would actually be Jin Ling’s Shishu.

If they married.

Married.

Jin Zixuan jumped slightly as Lan Wangji swerved to face him, the dangerous glare in his eyes quite clearly saying ‘stop your fiance or I will *eviscerate* you when we get back to focusing on your relationship instead of mine.’

The Jin heir gave a nervous laugh.

Watching it all, Jin Guangshan felt a smile form on his face. Just a short while ago, he had considered to pros and cons of attempting to baby trap Wei Wuxian by forcing a child on him. However, as it turned out, that wasn’t even necessary. Both the real Lan Wangji and the virtual Wei Wuxian had grown attached to the juniors in only a few hours; all Jin Guangshan would need to do would be to find an orphaned child in the Jin Clan and put them in danger around Wei Wuxian.

Well, so long as he maintained his alliance with Wen Ruohan, this would all turn out to be far easier than he’d feared.

“While we’re on the subject of A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian spoke up. “Have we considered offering him more assistance? The real one, that is. I’m concerned.”

“Assistance?” Lan Xichen inquired.

Nie Mingjue frowned, “You want to tell him more? What could we tell him now that we can’t tell him later? Won’t it be easier to explain it all at once after we’ve left the simulation?”

“Yes,” Nie Huaisang added with a too-sharp grin. “Why does it matter *when* you find something out so long as you eventually learn it? It’s not as though there are any secrets certain people might keep that could have saved their own lives if they’d just told someone a little sooner, rather than continuing to train using a faulty method that led to them dying young.”

Nie Mingjue jerked back as if shot by an arrow, and fell silent once more.

“And what do you expect to tell him?” Wen Ruohan asked, frowning minutely. “That Mo Xuanyu is his future-self? That he becomes the Yiling Patriarch and invents demonic cultivation?”

“Perhaps,” Jiang Fengmian agreed. “Too many half-truths and lies may cause unforeseeable problems later.”

“And yet the truth can cause quite a number of *foreseeable* problems in the near future,” Wen Ruohan countered. “Based on his reports, I’m assuming members of the gentry are already turning against him. Whether that is due to the fact that he has the most information on the simulation or because he gained control of Yunmeng Jiang is irrelevant; if you reveal something like that, you’ll only give the opposition ammunition to use against him.”

Lan Qiren frowned, “Our sect’s wouldn’t-”

“Wei Wuxian initially *died* in a siege your sects led against him,” Wen Ruohan pointed out. “Are you really going to risk destroying such a unique mind for no reason?”

After thinking it over for a moment, Lan Xichen pointed out, “I understand the concern that people would turn against him, especially after how we initially reacted, but I don’t see why they would know. So long as we only tell Wei-gongzi, it should be… fine.”

“Should be,” Wen Ruohan agreed, showing quite clearly how little faith he had in that assurance.

“I must apologize, but I’m afraid I have to say that I don’t think the current Jin representatives would react well to that information,” Jin Guangshan pointed out, quite firmly cementing himself on Wen Ruohan’s side. “A-Xun, in particular, tends to err more on the side of caution with such things.”

‘*A-Xun,*’ Madam Jin mentally repeated, still reluctant to speak up after the disaster that was her earlier thoughtless words. ‘*I suppose Jin ZIxun would indeed react poorly if he thought he had a way to get one over Wei Wuxian. Especially if the Yunmeng Jiang sect is doing better under Wei-gongzi than the Jin Sect is under him. And given that that’s undoubtedly the case, the ‘son of a servant’ having a weakness such as this….*’

So now it was just a question of whether they could offer help to Wei Wuxian without letting everyone else find out about Wei Wuxian’s future. If they were all outside the simulation, they could regulate other people’s decisions through their power as the leaders of the great sects. As it was, however….

“I’m sure, so long as we tell A-Xian to keep it a secret, he will,” Jiang Fengmian insisted. “I understand that we could tell him later, but I can’t, in good conscience, leave A-Xian to continue doing my job for me without any assistance.”

After thinking it over for a moment, Madam Yu nodded once and said, “I agree. The brat is capable of quite a bit, but helping him couldn’t hurt.”

“Yeah!” Jin Zixuan spoke up. “I’d rather… not be like Xue Yang. We just need something we can tell Wei Wuxian that would help him.”

Something that wasn’t Yunmeng Jiang telling Wei Wuxian’ their sect’s secrets in front of all the other clans, went unsaid.

“And what about when the other Clans ask Wei Wuxian for information about Mo Xuanyu?” Jin Guangshan asked. “For now, he can honestly say ‘I don’t know.’ If it’s revealed later that he was hiding the fact that it’s himself, I have no doubt many of our sects would be quite furious.”

Lan Xichen frowned at that, unable to discount the point.

Wen Ruohan thought for a moment. Normally, he would have no problem with the information being revealed, even with the reasons he had already mentioned. After all, Wei Wuxian was currently Yunmeng Jiang’s representative. No matter what happened, he would probably be fine.

Unfortunately, after watching the simulation, Sect Leader Wen’s trust and faith in the Yunmeng Jiang Sect had reached rock bottom.

‘*They didn’t even* try *to prepare for my attack,*’ Wen Ruohan thought. ‘*Wei Wuxian had helped the other sects escape the Xuanwu cave several months before my army came, and yet Yunmeng Jiang hadn’t done a single thing to prepare. The only one who’d even suggested they should prepare was Wei Wuxian, who was all but imprisoned on the pier at the time. I predicted they wouldn’t, of course — that’s half the reason my other self attacked, but doesn’t that just make this worse? If something happens that causes the information to be revealed to the Jins. A-Xu doesn’t have enough information to defend Wei Wuxian’s case. If we let things go on too long before we tell everyone the full truth, Wei Wuxian’s reputation will take a hard hit.*’

At the beginning of the simulation, Wen Ruohan had found all the rumors surrounding Wei Wuxian to be an amusing parallel between the boy and himself. However, now that he knew just how wrong most of the rumors were (as well as the consequences they had), he couldn’t view them the same way.

“...We will not tell Wei Wuxian who Mo Xuanyu is, nor will we tell him who invented demonic cultivation,” Wen Ruohan decided, speaking the words as an order, rather than a suggestion. “However, so long as I can trust you to not do that, there may still be a way for you to help.”

His eyes transition to his useless second son, who was a distracted lump sitting on the floor. As annoying as the boy was, perhaps Wen Ruohan would finally be able to put him to use. Then, he turned his attention to the array etched into the floor, and glanced back at Jiang Fengmian.

Sect Leader Jiang's eyes widened in understanding.

Jiang Fengmian hesitated, obviously wary of what Wen Ruohan had in mind, but paused when his son and daughter walked close to him to whisper something. The other watchers were no doubt unable to hear, but Wen Ruohan's superior senses meant the words were just loud enough for him to make out.

"A-Die," Jiang Wanyin whispered. "...A-Jie and I were talking. We-we think we should try."

Jiang Yanli nodded, "I'd like to help A-Xian, if we can. I know the simulation hasn't happened to him, but I still feel as though he needs a break. He also sounded a little tired last time he called, so…."

'It's the least we can do,' was no doubt the end to that statement. It was quite interesting to hear that from the Jiangs, who, as far as Wen Ruohan had seen, loved to hold the debt Wei Wuxian supposedly owed them over the boy's head. Then again, perhaps that was just Madam Yu.

(Who, despite being close enough to have heard her children, made no move to interfere.)

"Are you sure?" Jiang Fengmian whispered.

Jiang Cheng clenched his fists, looking toward the ground.

'*Ah,*' Wen Ruohan realized. '*So the boy is finally accepting that Wanyin's future self is indeed out to torture Wei Wuxian, and has hunted down similar people for years. I suppose 'better late than never' is the phrase to use, here.*'

No matter. If that guilt was what it took to get Wen Ruohan what he wanted, then he would gladly accept it.

Jiang Fengmian looked up at him, then nodded once.

Wei Wuxian groaned, stretching his arms over his head as he leaned back in his seat. Serving as Yunmeng Jiang's acting sect leader was far from an easy task, and it left him with almost no time to work on the simulation. So, as a compromise, Wei Wuxian had (of course) cut down on the hours he slept instead.

Finished with his stretching, Wei Wuxian forced himself to turn his eyes back on the paperwork before him. He stared for several seconds, but exhaustion had turned his brain into glue, and each neuron was fighting an uphill battle to get from one place to another. The characters before him began to blend together, until Wei Wuxian wasn't sure whether he was looking at one of the budget reviews, or another report of a night hunt gone awry.

“Da-shixiong! Da-shixiong!” someone shouted from the hallway.

“Over here!” Wei Wuxian called out, rubbing his drooping eyes and slapping his own face a few times to wake himself up. “What is it? Is Wen Ning finally ready to join me in the Fabulous Kite-Painting Competition I challenged him to?”

“It’s the Sect Leader!” the frantic disciple shouted. “He’s — it’s Sect Leader Jiang!”

Wei Wuxian was on his feet in an instant.

He tore through the hallway, not even waiting for the disciple to finish his report (forcing said disciple to run after him while shouting the update on the way). Within a minute he had arrived at the medical bay.

Without waiting for permission from the healers inside, he threw open the door.

“Changze?” a voice asked, sounding mystified, yet hoarse and dry.

Wei Wuxian looked down, quickly realizing that he was still wearing his father’s old robes (left over from a meeting he had with the Nie representative earlier that day), until his brain caught up with him and he realized who had spoken.

“You… you’re…” he blinked several times, half certain he was hallucinating from lack of sleep. “Uncle… Jiang?”

“Oh, A-Xian,” Jiang Fengmian smiled, shaking himself further awake from the deep sleep the simulation had put him in. “I’m back.”

“I… you-”

It was rare to find Wei Wuxian this speechless. He blamed the lack of sleep, but he supposed Jiang Fengmian returning to the outside world was a good enough reason too.

Jiang Fengmian sat up from the medical bed he was resting on and turned to face him, giving a warm smile. It wasn’t Wei Changze, but it *was* Wei Wuxian, and Jiang Fengmian knew he would never be able to pay back the unending loyalty Wei Wuxian’s other self had given him.

He patted Wei Wuxian on the head twice, making the boy freeze. Jiang Fengmian would normally have never shown physical affection, too wary of accidentally offending Madam Yu and getting into another needless argument. Now, however, he was sure she would understand.

“You’ve done well, A-Xian,” he whispered.

Quite some ways away, in the fortress of Qishan, Wen Chao snapped awake from the simulation, full of new instructions to give Wen Xu, and leaving behind a very grateful Lan Wangji (who was elated he would no longer have to stay with both Wen Chao and Jin Guangshan when the concealment zone activated).

Chapter End Notes

Does anyone else ever forget how scarily powerful Wei Wuxian is in the book? Even in Mo Xuanyu's "weaker" body, he's clearly far more physically capable than the juniors! Either Mo Xuanyu was stronger than we thought, or Wei Wuxian's reactions are just so good that he can still manage to play with them them. And that's essentially his only weakness!

(Oh, and no need to worry. I'm far from done with JFM's character arc. He still has more to learn!)
:)

My Heart Being Stolen by A-Qing — Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Sect leader Jiang," Jiang Fengmian's third disciple called out. "Training's going to start soon, but Da-shixiong hasn't gotten out of his room yet. Should I go wake him up?"

"No need," the man responded, giving a warm smile. "He often enjoys sleeping in and staying up late, doesn't he?"

"Er-yes. He just — recently, he…" the disciple trailed off awkwardly, allowing Jiang Fengmian to fill in the rest himself. 'Recently,' Jiang Fengmian had been gone, so it was Wei Wuxian's job to run all of Lotus Pier. 'Recently,' he had been forced to take on far more responsibility than he should have been expected to, just like in the simulation. Which was why Jiang Fengmian was there now-

'*By leaving your actual children behind? They may have agreed that they wanted you to help A-Xian, but that doesn't mean they won't feel abandoned.*'

All this time, they had constantly accused Jiang Fengmian of valuing Wei Wuxian over them. He had always been certain that it wasn't true, but had he just proved them right?

(He didn't think so, but that had been the first thing Wei Wuxian had worried about when Jiang Fengmian had explained why he was out. 'What about Jiang Cheng or Shijie?' the boy had asked. 'What if they need you?')

Yu Ziyuan was there with them-

(And since when had *that* ever been a good thing?)

But she was changing.

(Was she?)

(Hopefully.)

Jiang Fengmian bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from sighing. As per usual, his thoughts were running in circles without getting anywhere. Every option before him seemed like a wrong choice, and Jiang Fengmian's instinctive response was to simply do nothing — to wait until there was a more obvious solution.

But if there was one thing the simulation had taught him, it was how bad of an idea *that* was. It was one of the main reasons why the Massacre of Lotus Pier had happened, after all.

Forcefully suppressing the discomfort he felt, Jiang Fengmian journeyed to the open training grounds, greeting every disciple he passed with an encouraging smile (which he hoped they

didn't realize was a lie). Although every part of him was overwhelmed by shame for feeling this way, he couldn't help but be certain of one thing:

In a situation like this, the best thing would be to figure out what Wei Wuxian would do.

(What a fifteen year old child would do?)

He didn't stay fifteen forever. Jiang Fengmian had already seen him at twenty two.

'*Because that's* so *much better,*' a voice that sounded quite a lot like Yu Ziyuan's snapped. '*No matter how smart the boy may be, he died even younger than us. Can't you come to a decision on your own?*'

The answer to that was a humiliating, resounding 'no.'

Besides, there was plenty of good that could come from this. If the simulated Jiang Fengmian had just listened to Wei Wuxian's warning and prepared for the coming Wens, Yunmeng would never have been destroyed, and Wei Wuxian would never have been forced into demonic cultivation. The question of whether demonic cultivation was *actually* evil and corruptive was a moot point; what mattered was that it alienated Wei Wuxian from the rest of the world, and had only happened because Jiang Fengmian had failed to protect him.

'*And A-Cheng,*' a scolding voice reminded. '*You also failed to protect him. And what about A-Li? Don't focus all your attention on one kid.*'

How did Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji make raising a large group of kids look so easy? The pair had only been with those future juniors for a few hours, and their relationship had already been better than Jiang Fengmian's was with any of the children under his care. It was true that Jiang Fengmian had relatively good relations with his other disciples, but even they were all aware of how tense the relationship between their Sect Leaders was. Whenever Madam Yu returned to the sect, their shouts could be heard across the city (to say nothing of the punishments she would often dish out when annoyed). And Jiang Fengmian, despite being sect leader, had just let it happen. And that wasn't even considering the mess that was his immediate family.

(How would Jiang Cheng feel, back in the simulation? Did he think he was being abandoned? *Was* he being abandoned? And what about A-Li? Would she simply worry for her brother, not caring how *she* felt because she had long since adjusted to not feeling like her own opinion mattered?)

"Sect Leader, are you sure you're okay to start up again?" one disciple he passed asked, worry clear on his face. "I-I can take over if you need-"

"Thank you, but it's fine," Jiang Fengmian responded. "Have the disciples finished warming up?"

"Yes, Sect Leader."

“Then let’s pair up,” he said to the group as a whole, raising his voice accordingly. “Go through the first five repetitions twenty times each with each other. The upper disciples and I will give assistance where needed.”

“Yes!” the disciples responded. Despite that, his highest ranking disciples paused before walking off, question clear in their gazes:

‘*Are you sure you’re alright, Sect Leader?*’

Of course he was; leading a sect was the easy part. The hard part was, ironically, qualifying as at least a *decent* parent. He took a deep breath in, returning his attention to the present for the time being.

“How many new recruits do we have?” Jiang Fengmian asked his third disciple, noticing the plethora of unfamiliar faces.

After counting on his fingers for a moment, the disciple gleefully responded, “Two to three hundred, Sect Leader.”

“Of an appropriate age for cultivation?”

“A few that are a bit old, but the ones that are were checked out by Da-shixiong personally; we’re sure they have potential. Recently we’ve actually had to start refusing even the qualified newcomers. We don’t have enough space or money to take them all, even with the increased trade here,” he reported with a grin, then thought for a moment and added, “Oh, though Da-shixiong did bring in one new one even after that.”

“Really?” Jiang Fengmian asked. “Were they unusually talented?”

“No sir. They weren’t even old enough to start training yet.”

An confused expression crossed Jiang Fengmian’s face, but his disciple could only shrug, equally perplexed.

“I’m not entirely sure why, sorry Sect Leader. Da-shixiong just went around one day with a kid no one had ever seen before and told us that he would be staying. He should be in the library right now.”

“And what is that boy’s name?” Jiang Fengmian required.

“It was Lu… no, no,” he thought for a moment. “Ah, *Mo*! It was ‘Mo Xuanyu.’”

The stunned double-take Jiang Fengmian did at those words made the third disciple flinch, and he bowed at once toward his sect leader, apologizing for distressing the man.

“Should I… get Da-shixiong?” the boy asked. “I-I’m sure he can explain-”

“No, it’s… there’s no need,” Jiang Fengmian responded. “You’re certain that boy’s name is Mo Xuanyu?”

“Yes, sir.”

‘*Jin-xiong’s son,*’ Sect Leader Jiang recalled, frowning at the horrible conditions he could remember the boy in the simulation living in. ‘*And, as far as A-Xian knows, the person who created the Píngxíng Gateway.*’

Although he didn’t have any real objections to Mo Xuanyu’s presence, it was quite clear that Wei Wuxian’s decision had been founded upon the lie the Yiling Patriarch told him. He must have become curious about the man who had (supposedly) created the simulation, leading him to seek out Mo Xuanyu's younger-self. An urge came over Jiang Fengmian to explain at once, the falsities between him and his head disciple scratching maddeningly at his mind.

But Wen Chao had woken up as well.

‘*It’s just insurance,’ Wen Ruohan had said. ‘Chao-er will be there to ensure those of us inside will be alerted should something go wrong. After all, if word of who Wei Wuxian becomes gets released, we’ll need to be able to respond as soon as possible.’*

‘I can handle it myself,’ Jiang Fengmian objected, not liking the idea of Wen Chao watching Wei Wuxian so closely.

But Wen Ruohan had just smiled — not a trace of warmth in sight — and ignored Jiang Fengmian’s objection. Wen Chao wasn't good for much, but telling Wen Xu that 'any hints of Jiang Fengmian disobeying Wen Ruohan's orders should be met with violence' was tragically within his capabilities.

Still, there were options. It was actually quite likely that Jiang Fengmian would be able to keep it a secret between just himself and Wei Wuxian, so long as he explained the situation. If he stressed the importance of discretion, Wei Wuxian would know to not allow word of it to spread around. It would probably be fine.

Probably.

(But he knew, from the too-calm way Wei Wuxian would sometimes observe him, that that wasn’t completely true. After all, Wei Wuxian was watching — constantly, closely — for any sign of side effects from the simulation. A too-slow reaction, or a trace of the insanity he had suspected them of. If Jiang Fengmian truly tried to explain everything that Wei Wuxian’s future self had done to end up in Mo Xuanyu’s body, there was little doubt Wei Wuxian would discuss the matter with Wen Ning, his assistant. If Wen Ning went to check for the same signs in Wen Chao or Wen Xu, would Jiang Fengmian truly be able to keep what he’d done a secret?)

(No. Absolutely not.)

“Move a bit slower, A-San,” Jiang Fengmian recommended to one of the younger disciples. “You can try speeding up once you’ve mastered the details of the form.”

“Yes, Sect Leader!” the young boy enthusiastically agreed.

And yet Jiang Fengmian's mind was elsewhere.

(He really should have stopped Wen Chao from joining him.)

'*Did you hear?' Jiang Fengmian's disciples had whispered to each other, unaware that their sect leader was listening in. 'Apparently Wen-er-gongzi, Wen Chao, has gone crazy!'*

'Wen-er-gongzi? Isn't he the one-'

'Who came out at the same time as Sect Leader Jiang did? He is!' the first nodded frantically. 'According to the watermelon seller down the street, he's gone and bought an entire army of dogs!'

Jiang Fengmian had frozen, unable to take another step forward.

'Seriously? What's he got a bunch of mutts for?'

'Not sure. Apparently, he's training them in the dungeons of the Wen Sect, and takes them everywhere with him. Because of that, he stays within the walls of Qishan all the time now.'

Confused, his companion repeated, 'Because *of that?'*

'Yeah. Rumor has it that Wen Ruohan ordered him to keep the dogs inside. Not sure how Sect Leader Wen knew Wen Chao would go and get dogs, but…'

They shrugged at each other, equal confusion on both their faces.

"Take a wider stance, A-Ruo," Jiang Fengmian advised, grateful that teaching came so naturally to him now that he could dedicate his mind to other matters.

"Understood, Sect Leader," the man responded, determination failing to hide his growing exhaustion.

If he was being honest, Jiang Fengmian felt the same way. No matter how long he stayed up at night thinking over Wen Ruohan's goals, he couldn't figure them out. After all, unlike his disciples (who heard everything through rumors), he knew what Wen Ruohan's instructions had been. Jiang Fengmian hadn't been meant to hear, but he supposed Wen Ruohan hadn't cared enough about the Jiang Sect Leader to lower his voice as he gave his son those commands. It wasn't 'if you get any pets, keep them inside Qishan,' or even 'don't go outside.'

'*If you touch so much as a hair on Wei Wuxian's head, I'll crush your skull against the castle walls and leave you to the crows,' Wen Ruohan had said.*

'I — Father-'

'Considering what your actions brought our sect in the other timeline, I'm being generous. Am I understood?'

And Wen Chao could do nothing but nod his head.

(Was it comforting that Jiang Fengmian was at least a better father than Wen Ruohan, Jin Guangshan, and Qingheng-jun? Or was it pathetic that those were the people he was comparing himself against?)

At the very least, Jiang Fengmian could rest assured that Wen Chao wouldn't do anything against Wei Wuxian. A coward and a monster though he may be, he would never disobey his father. Nor was Wen Xu likely to believe just anything Wen Chao said unless it matched what he already knew. The chances of the Wen Sect launching an unprovoked attack against Yunmeng were quite low.

(And besides, Wen Chao had already seen first hand just how badly his last attempt at killing Wei Wuxian went.)

However, despite all the negatives, there was still one unquestioningly positive thing that would come out of Jiang Fengmian's presence here. Now that he had left the simulation, it was possible for him to contact the future Wei Wuxian as well. Due to how busy he had been (and how exhausted his Wei Wuxian currently was), Jiang Fengmian had not yet gotten a chance to speak with the future version of his best friend's son. After having spent so long seeing 'Mo Xuanyu' in the simulation, it was bound to be quite an experience.

(As well as a way to apologize. What for, exactly, Jiang Fengmian wasn't sure yet — there were almost too many things to choose from. 'I'm sorry for not stopping what San-Niang did to you' was simply redirecting the fault and felt too much like avoiding responsibility. 'I'm sorry I didn't treat you like a real son' would be perceived as a lie; Jiang Fengmian's own last words had proven to Wei Wuxian exactly where he stood in their family. 'I wish I had been able to protect you' went without saying, but it didn't even come close to capturing what Jiang Fengmian was trying to say.)

But, other than that, Jiang Fengmian actually found himself somewhat looking forward to the experience. Wei Wuxian had always had a personality that was quite easy for Jiang Fengmian to get along with. Once the apology was out of the way, perhaps he could speak directly with the twenty-two year old Wei Wuxian and ask for advise. It would be somewhat embarrassing to seek help from his former ward, but given everything Wei Wuxian had ended up becoming it was impossible for Jiang Fengmian to still view him as a child. The only problem was whether the past Wei Wuxian's presence would make the conversation too awkward to have. Asking him to leave would make it obvious that Jiang Fengmian had something to hide, but talking to Mo Xuanyu (who, as far as the current Wei Wuxian knew, was a relative stranger from twenty years in the future) about how to raise his children would be equally bad. Unfortunately, Jiang Fengmian couldn't imagine a better person to ask than him.

'*You could at least try to figure it out by yourself,*' the voice inside his head pointed out. Although he did acknowledge that point, he had also found his faith in his own decisions significantly lowered by the simulation, and was reluctant to do so.

With that thought in mind, Jiang Fengmian glanced back at the emergency rooms where his family laid. Although he felt somewhat comforted by the fact that the people inside couldn't touch each other, he was nonetheless nervous. After all, he was ~~abandoning~~ leaving his children behind in a room with Wen Ruohan himself.

He prayed nothing would happen.

A scowl crossed Madam Yu's face as a shiver ran down her spine. She didn't know how she knew, but she was certain her husband had just said one of his usual, hopeless, despairing comments about her. What, did he not think she could take care of their children on her own? Who was it, exactly, that had defended Lotus Pier for him when the Wens attacked?

~~And had failed in the process.~~

And her husband wasn't the only one. Now that he had left, her children had become more on edge too. They didn't look as though they regretted encouraging him to leave, but the newfound tension in their bodies was obvious. Apparently, they didn't trust her either. The thought infuriated her.

She had already acknowledged her mistakes, hadn't she? What more could they ask after that? She hadn't said a single word against Wei Wuxian in hours!

(It took several seconds for it to occur to her how warped her standards had gotten.)

But what else was she supposed to do? It wasn't like the boy was there for her to make amends with. And now that Jiang Fengmian had already left to join him, she had no choice but to stay.

(So why were her children looking at her like that?)

It was almost a relief when world blurred in fog as the simulation started again. If nothing else, it would distract from the less-than-ideal thoughts she had running through her head.

From within the fog, frantic, fast-paced footsteps echoed. Some were soft and controlled, the weight evenly distributed despite their speed. Most of the others, however, were slamming against the gravely ground like a symphony of drums that projected their positions even through the fog.

The yelling didn't help either:

"Why are we following the sounds of the bamboo pole?!" Lan Jingyi cried out, huffing loudly as he did. Normally, such a run would have been child's play for a cultivator, junior or not. However, after the stressful day they'd had of running through the fog and encountering Xue Yang, the boy's mental reserves were all used up.

"We're going after the ghost," Wei Wuxian explained, far too cheery for someone who knew full well he wasn't actually answering the question.

Jin Ling growled, "You want us to follow a ghost? Are you insane?! Who knows where she's going to take us to!"

"That's exactly what we're doing. The sound's been following you ever since you came into this city, right? You all were trying to go deeper in, but she was trying to lead you to

the city gates, where you ran into us. She was trying to chase you out — to save you!"

"Oh!" Jiang Yanli gasped at once, realizing how true Wei Wuxian's statement was. She relaxed at having located another ally for her son, and saw Wen Qing giving her a warm, encouraging smile.

'*I see,*' Sizhui thought. '*So those strange, sporadic sounds she was making with her bamboo pole were a technique she used to scare people away from the city.*'

'*That Nether Brawler's head I stepped on earlier must have been her doing as well,*' Wei Wuxian mentally agreed. '*Something meant to startle and alert us.*'

"Well, she certainly chose the wrong people to use something like that on," Nie Mingjue rolled his eyes, finding Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and the juniors' insistence on investigating dangerous matters exhausting. Not that he had much room to talk, he supposed. Given the death-glare Huaisang was sending him, he still hadn't forgotten Nie Mingjue's easy acceptance of his own death.

The young sect leader turned to Lan Xichen in search of support against his brother, but found an expression that matched Huaisang's just a little too well. The first jade hadn't forgotten either.

Nie Mingjue — in all his 191 centimeter glory — wilted on the spot.

Finally, Wei Wuxian continued, "Do you remember? Last night, she wanted to tell us something really important, but she disappeared as soon as Xue Yang came. She was most likely going to tell us to avoid Xue Yang."

Jiang Yanli tensed in apprehension.

"Anyways, she definitely isn't working with him."

"...Wait, did you say Xue Yang?!" an uninformed junior repeated disbelievingly.

"Huh? Why is Xue Yang here as well?"

"Yeah! Wasn't it just Xiao XingChen and Song Lan? I mean, the Chief Cultivator executed Xue Yang!"

Lan Xichen frowned, silently vowing to watch carefully to figure out who had betrayed his sworn brother's trust. Clearly, something had gone wrong.

But the juniors insisted, "It can't be Xue Yang!"

"Um… I'll explain later," Wei Wuxian said instead. "Anyways, the one fighting Hanguang-jun inside isn't Xiao Xingchen; it's Xue Yang. That delinquent was pretending to be him."

The bamboo pole's *wacks* picked up in intensity, as though the ghost girl was becoming impatient and was urging them to hurry up. Without needing any spoken directions,

Wei Wuxian and the juniors all picked up their paces.

Nie Huaisang was very glad the simulation would simply bring them along. If he had been forced to run this far, he had no doubt he would have given up and accepted death long ago.

(In all honesty, he probably would have just climbed onto his Da-ge's back and been carried the rest of the way, but that was embarrassing even for him! There was only so much laziness he had the face to show after watching Wei Wuxian literally crawl out of the Burial Mounds ~~without his golden core~~.)

They traveled for some time, the ghost girl's sounds getting farther in tandem with their progress so that she could keep leading them away. At times they could see a small, vague shadow through the thin fog in the distance, but it would often disappear shortly after. Behind them, the sounds of Hanguang-jun and Xue Yang's battle rang clearly through the fog, the clangs piling together to create a barrage of notes.

Jingyi's head turned back to the sound as he ran, worry clear on his face.

Another clang resounded.

Finally, unable to take it anymore, he turned to Wei Wuxian and asked, "So we're just going to run off like this?"

In response, Wei Wuxian turned toward the distant fight without pausing in his steps and shouted, "Hanguang-jun, it's up to you now! We're gonna go ahead!"

The strings of the guqin vibrated as though Lan Wangji was responding with an *'mn.*'

"He's seriously just *leaving*?" Jiang Cheng asked, and Madam Yu felt much the same. After all, Wei Wuxian choosing to prioritize the safety of the kids while letting someone else fight the main villain was-

'Would Wen Chao really have dared to do anything to the two young masters of the GusuLan and LanlingJin Sects? Even if he did, that'd just mean they ran out of luck! Since when was it his turn to play hero?'

-It was further proof that she truly hadn't understood a thing about him.

(Well, that's fine. She understood him now. She wouldn't make a mistake like that again, and her husband leaving the simulation showed that he trusted her judgement. She was a changed person now.)

(And yet the skeptical glance Madam Jin sent her way every once in a while left her just the slightest bit uncertain about that.)

The juniors and Wei Wuxian had continued running, getting farther and farther from that battle. However, as the fight went on behind them, Lan Jingyi found he couldn't take it anymore:

"That was it? You're not going to say anything else?" he asked.

“‘Anything else?’” Lan Qiren repeated.

“What else could I have done?” Wei Wuxian responded. “What did you want me to say?”

Jiang Yanli curiously tilted her head.

Lan Jingyi gaped as though he couldn’t understand why Wei Wuxian was asking such an obvious question:

“Why did you two not say ‘I’m worried about you, I’m staying!’” he gasped and reached a yearning hand out, before sweeping his hand back as if forcefully pushing the earlier words aside, responding to himself with, “‘Just go!’”

“What?”

“No! I’m not going! I won’t leave you behind! If I go, you’re coming with me!’ ‘But-’ ‘Please!’ I… Is that not a must?”

“...Is it?”

Wei Wuxian gaped speechlessly, and the juniors behind him all perfectly matched his expression.

“...Who on earth taught you that? Who told you that’s a conversation that needs to happen?! It’d sound fine coming out of my mouth, but can you even imagine your Hanguang-jun saying such things?!”

“No.”

“No way.”

“Zero chance,” the juniors chorused one after the other.

The real juniors (as well as Lan Qiren) all nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

“Right?” Wei Wuxian continued. “It’s a waste of time.”

When he saw how disappointed Lan Jingyi was in that answer, Lan Qiren sighed. Truly, it was a good thing Sizhui was there; he would have lost all faith in his bloodline otherwise.

Smiling warmly, Wei Wuxian continued, “Besides, someone as reliable as Hanguang-jun will definitely be able to deal with it. I can just focus on my own things and either wait for him to find me, or go find him myself.”

At the sheer, unquestioning trust in Wei Wuxian’s words, Lan Wangji felt a burning heat spread across his cheeks. Although by now everyone knew better than to mention it (given that doing so would quickly cause the boy to simply malfunction), none were ignorant to the glowing red that painted the ivory skin pink.

The group continued to follow after the ghost girl, travelling across a significant portion of the town as they did.

And Lan Wangji's ears glowed rose.

They turned a corner, at least two juniors stumbling with how long they'd been sprinting for.

And the second jade remained red.

They crossed a long stretch of land, the nearby banners fluttering ominously in the cloudy day. Quite a few minutes had passed since they'd left.

And yet Lan Wangji remained just as red as ever. After a while, Lan Xichen began to grow concerned. Surely simple embarrassment couldn't be lasting this long. Was Wangji somehow sick?

He thought for a moment.

...Unlikely. Putting aside how difficult it was to get a cultivator of Wangji's caliber sick, they were in the simulation right now; there was no way Gusu Lan's healers would have allowed someone to infect their real bodies during this time.

But, even as the other watchers began to grow bored with the unending display of nothing but running, Lan Wangji remained just as flushed as ever. In fact, if Lan Xichen wasn't mistaken, his cheeks were actually getting *darker* overtime.

'*Is watching Wei-gongzi run really enough to provoke this sort of reaction?*' he wondered, tilting his head idly. '*That seems unlikely, but what else could be making him so flustered-*'

Ah. Although the scene was over now, Lan Wangji had never gotten time to process Wei Wuxian's flirtation in the cold springs. Or process Wei Wuxian climbing onto his bed and trying to disgust him. Or that time they were in the Xuanwu cave and Wei Wuxian tricked Wangji into letting out bad blood by undressing. Or-

Really, there was a countless number of things Wangji could be remembering right now. Lan Xichen truly pitied his brother; due to the fact that Wangji had gotten no alone time between segments, he had simply needed to continuously suppress whatever he felt after those scenes. It was no wonder he was falling into those memories now.

Slowly, Lan Xichen glanced from side to side and made eye contact with Madam Jin, Jiang Yanli, and Nie Huaisang. Understanding at once, the quartet all nodded in agreement.

It would be their sworn duty to help Wangji once they left the simulation. They would not fail.

Finally, just as Lan Xichen starting to get bored as well, the sounds of the bamboo pole abruptly came to a halt. Wei Wuxian and the juniors had arrived at their destination.

The house stood alone in a field of fog that was rapidly becoming thicker and thicker. The virtual children, who could feel the temperature, felt goosebumps quickly spread across their arms despite the way they had been running just a short while ago.

Shivers ran up several people's spines.

Wei Wuxian extended an arm out, silently commanding the juniors to stay behind, and walked toward the house.

'*Careful, A-Xian,*' Jiang Yanli thought, nervousness seeping into her body. Once again, she found herself quite grateful that the real version of her martial brother had some help now. Given everything she had seen Wei Wuxian go through alone, her father's current presence outside was quite reassuring.

A *squeak* resounded as the door swung open, pushed into position by an unseen force before Wei Wuxian could reach it. Although the juniors tensed nervously at the welcoming gesture, Wei Wuxian remained calm.

"We've already come this far. Let's go in," he advised.

'*Stupid boy. What kind of logic is that?!*' Madam Yu internally demanded, before abruptly realizing she had just called *the Yiling Patriarch* 'stupid' and grumbling to herself instead.

By now, even she couldn't deny that Wei Wuxian planned his every action through. Still, it was difficult to break such old habits, and it would take quite some time to unlearn her instinctive scorn.

"Watch for the threshold," Wei Wuxian called out as he hopped inside. "Don't trip."

As expected, one of the boys nearly tripped over the threshold a moment later.

"Why is the threshold so high?!" he complained, rubbing his sore foot. "It's not like this is a temple or anything!"

Sighing, Wen Qing gave the troublesome brat a quick once-over, quickly confirming that there were no injuries.

"It's not a temple," Wei Wuxian confirmed. "That doesn't mean it doesn't need a high threshold."

When Wei Wuxian didn't elaborate, Jiang Cheng tensed, his Wei-Wuxian-instincts immediately alerting him that there was probably another lesson coming up.

Spreading out, Wei Wuxian and the juniors lit the house up with a dozen fire talismans. The flickering orange light offset the icy blue of the outside fog, giving the area a far warmer feeling than it would have otherwise had.

The ground was decorated in a field of straw, which practically served as a carpet over the floor. In the center, there was an alter next to a few fallen stools, each at a different

height. On the right, there was a small, unlit room, as well as seven or eight black coffins.

Jin Guangshan shuddered, having never been in such a disgusting building in his life.

Luckily for everyone else, his grandson was nowhere near as bad about it.

“This is a so-called ‘coffin home?’” Jin Ling asked. “Where the dead are temporarily put?”

Grinning proudly, Wei Wuxian nodded and confirmed, “That’s right. Corpses that aren’t claimed by anyone, ones that would make a house ominous, and ones that are waiting to be buried are often put into coffin homes. It could be described as a courier station for dead people.”

“He sounds far too cheerful about that,” Nie Huaisang grumbled, still vividly recalling his brother’s foretold death. Considering the truth behind the Nie sabers, he had no doubt his brothers corpse had ended up in a state that would ‘make a house ominous.’

Now, he found himself wondering what his other self had done with his dear Da-ge’s body.

“Senior Mo, why is the threshold to the coffin home so high?” Sizhui asked, helping everyone find a place to sit as he did.

Smiling lightly at the question, Wei Wuxian calmly answered, “In case any corpses transform.”

A shudder ran up the watcher’s bodies. Somehow, hearing those words from the Yiling Patriarch gave them a very different feel than they would have coming from anyone else.

Frowning in confusion, Lan Jingyi tilted his head: “How does a high threshold prevent the corpses from transforming?”

“It doesn’t prevent the transformation, but it can sometimes keep already-transformed corpses from going outside. Say, for example, that I’m dead and I’ve just transformed-”

“Strange to hear that from someone who *was* dead,” Lan Qiren pointed out, then scolded himself for his callous words when he saw a slight twitch in his younger nephew. Although none of them had ever forgotten what had happened to Wei Wuxian, his cheerful attitude made his death was somewhat hard to recall.

Truly, that boy and his mother were two of a kind.

But Wei Wuxian (of course) couldn’t hear the comment Lan Qiren had made. Instead, he moved to stand by the threshold, acting out the part of a freshly-transformed zombie.

“Since I’m a corpse, my limbs are really stiff, right?” he asked, demonstrating as he did. “I can’t perform precise actions?”

“That goes without saying,” Jin Ling agreed. “You can’t even walk. You’d trip if you stepped forward, so you can only… jump….”

He trailed off, an ‘oh!’ expression filling his face.

“Correct, I can only jump,” Wei Wuxian agreed. Sticking his feet together, he tried to jump outside several times. However, due to how high the threshold was, he failed every time.

Watching this, the twin jades nodded in understanding, committing what they saw to memory. Their uncle was a phenomenal teacher, and his teaching style worked very well with them, but there was something about Wei Wuxian’s lesson that sucked them in like nothing else ever had before.

(The laughter of the simulated juniors didn’t hurt either.)

“Do you see now? Don’t laugh!” Wei Wuxian scolded, but the blinding smile on his face told a different story. “This is the ingenuity of common folk. Although it’s lame and seems too simple to work, it is indeed effective against low-level corpses. If a corpse who has transformed gets tripped by the threshold, they’ll fall to the ground and, given their stiff bodies, won’t be able to get back up for quite some time. When they finally do manage to rise, the sun will nearly be up and the rooster will call, or the person guarding the coffin home will have discovered them. It’s actually quite impressive how ordinary people with no knowledge of cultivation were able to come up with such an effective solution.”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes at those words. Yes, non cultivators could manage slightly against low level corpses, but Wei Wuxian’s praise was a bit excessive for something any two-bit cultivator with a sword could deal with easily. The common people were reaching a bare minimum due to their limitation; that was hardly something to be stunned by.

(After all, even though it was solved almost immediately after, he hadn’t forgotten the sheer helplessness that had encompassed his other self when Wen Zhuliu destroyed his core. Without cultivation — without his golden core — he would only ever be able to reach this standard. Then again, there was no point in being mad; Wei Wuxian clearly understood the severity of the situation. After all, he was the one who had told Jiang Cheng how to get back his core.)

Although he had laughed with everyone else earlier, once he’d managed to calm down, Jin Ling gained a serious expression: “Why did that ghost girl bring us to a coffin home? Don’t tell me it’s so that we can avoid being overwhelmed by walking corpses. And where did she head off to, anyway?”

“It is indeed likely that it’s so we won’t be overwhelmed by them,” Wei Wuxian announced simply. “We’ve been standing still for a long time already. Has anyone heard any walking corpses?”

Jin Zixuan shook his head along with the simulated juniors, forgetting for a moment that he wasn’t actually there.

One of the juniors was about to add more, only to cut off when he saw a flash on the right. They all turned toward the movement, tensing and bringing their hands to their swords, only to relax again once they realized who it was.

The ghost girl had appeared on top of one of the coffins.

Despite the girl's still-ghastly appearance, all the juniors had relaxed at once upon seeing her. The reason why occurred to Lan Qiren a moment later. Wei Wuxian had already forced them all to get used to her appearance one by one.

It was just as Jiang Fengmian had said: despite his unconventional methods, Wei Wuxian was a phenomenal teacher.

The girl didn't have a physical form. She was a soft, dim, wispy figure surrounded by a pale blue aura. Both her face and her figure were small, but, after some grooming, she could easily appear to be a charming girl-next-door. However, her body language and posture weren't delicate at all. She sat with her legs apart, swinging them back and forth anxiously while her bamboo pole rested against the coffin.

Jin Guangshan nearly clicked his tongue in annoyance. She was quite a fine girl, but her unrefined body language ruined most of the charm she had. Unfortunately, given her age, he knew voicing such a thought aloud would only lead to angering his wife all over again. With an annoyed huff, he remained silent.

From where she sat on the coffin, the ghost girl began insistently tapping on the lid. She then hopped down and circled around the coffin a few times, gesturing at it while she did.

"She… wants us to open the coffin for her?" Jin Ling guessed.

"Obviously," Madam Yu sighed, having trouble believing that this particular night hunt relied so heavily on what essentially amounted to a game of charades. Then again, that sort of weirdness was just par for the course when Wei Wuxian was involved, so perhaps she should have expected this.

"Perhaps it's her body inside there," Sizhui suggested, approaching the coffin cautiously. "She may want us to burry her and bring her to peace."

'*Not an unreasonable assumption,*' Wen Ruohan supposed. '*The next generation of Lans had quite a few diamonds in the rough, doesn't it? I'll have to keep that in mind for the future.*'

All in agreement with Sizhui's suggestion, a few of the juniors approached the coffin to help open it, only for Wei Wuxian to interrupt, "You don't have to help me. All of you, stand farther back. What if it's not a corpse in there, or some more corpse poison spurts out and gets all of you?"

The juniors backed away quickly at that.

‘*And what happens if it gets you?*’ Wen Qing wondered, pursing her lips together. ‘*I’m sure you’re more than capable enough to deal with nearly anything that comes your way, but… you’ve already died once. You should know better than anyone that you’re not invincible. Don’t be a moron, Wei Wuxian.*’

Luckily for everyone involved, that was not what happened. The lid cracked open without any attack from the inside, and Wei Wuxian was able to calmly set it on the ground. When he stood up again to see what had been inside, he saw not a girl, but a young man.

The man lay still, his hands folding together over his chest, on which rested a single horsetail whisk. The cultivation robes he wore were as white as snow, and the silhouette of his face appeared handsome and refined. The upper half of his face was covered by bandages wrapped tightly over where his eyes should be. Instead of eyes, however, the bandages sunk in to reveal two gaping holes, hollow where there should have been flesh.

Shuddering at the creepy image, Nie Huaisang slowly began inching closer to his brother.

Having heard the coffin open, the young girl frantically stumbled over. She stuck her hands into the coffin and, after a short stint of searching around, located the corpse’s face. She stomped her feet, having no other way to convey the desperate agony she was experiencing, and tears of blood fell from her eyes.

A sight that had been so horrifying just a short while ago now only seemed tragic to Jiang Yanli. She moved closer to the ghost, watching helplessly as crimson tears trickled down to the floor.

It was clear to everyone who the corpse was.

“Xiao Xingchen?” Lan Wangji spoke aloud, approaching the body calmly.

After taking a moment to search through the other possibilities, Lan Xichen was forced to nod in agreement: “So it seems.”

Suddenly, the girl straightened up and spun toward Wei Wuxian, beginning to gesture again. Her body language was both angered and irritated, as though her desperation to be understood was quickly giving way to impatience.

Pulling out his guqin, Lan Sizhui asked, “Should I play inquiry again?”

“There’s no need,” Wei Wuxian responded. “We would probably ask the wrong questions. It would take far too much time to get somewhere productive. Besides, it seems likely that her reply will end up being quite complex and difficult to interpret. Inquiry is unreliable, in this case.”

Hanguang-jun could probably have managed it. Although he knew dealing with Xue Yang was just as important, Lan Wangji couldn’t help but wish the simulated second jade was there to help Wei Wuxian more.

But Wei Wuxian had trusted him to deal with Xue Yang; he could offer Wei Wuxian the same.

Sizhui, on the other hand, struggled to feel such confidence. Wei Wuxian's words hadn't contained even a trace of blame, and yet the young Lan disciple still felt rather ashamed.

'*I'll practice Inquiry more diligently when we get back. I will have to be as fluent, as quick, and as accurate as Hanguang-jun.*'

Lan Xichen chuckled at the boy's resolve, finding the enthusiastic child adorable (despite the fact that they were technically about the same age). Perhaps, when they left the simulation, they would be able to get in contact with this parallel future. He would love to get advise from his other-self on how to teach such students.

"So, if we can't use Inquiry, what are we going to do?" Lan Jingyi asked, finally pulling Sizhui's thoughts back into the present.

Without considering the matter for long, Wei Wuxian easily suggested, "How about empathy?"

Jiang Cheng jolted at that, a sudden rush of glee going through him at the suggestion. After all, empathy was a Jiang technique; even if Wei Wuxian was spending his time with the Lans and Jins right now, there was plenty of Jiang left in him.

However-

"That's too dangerous!" Jin Ling protested at once. "Using such a dark technique without someone-"

"Okay, okay, we're running out of time," Wei Wuxian cut him off at once. "Stand up properly. Quick. We still need to go back and find Hanguang-jun once we're finished. Jin Ling, you'll be the supervisor."

"That is *not* an expression you want your supervisor to make when they find out their role," Wen Qing glared, giving an internal sigh at the gobsmacked disbelief on Jin Ling's gaping face.

"Me?" Jin Ling finally asked. "You want a Young Mast… you want me to supervise you while you do this?"

"If young master Jin does not want to, I can do it," Sizhui volunteered.

But Wei Wuxian just focused on Jin Ling again and asked, "Jin Ling, did you bring a Jiang Sect's silver bell?"

"Ah," Wen Ruohan said at once, realizing Wei Wuxian's thought process.

And the narration of the far-future Jin Ling filled in the rest: "The silver bell was a signature accessory of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect. When I was young, I was brought up by

two sects, living at the Lanling Jin sect's Jinlin Tower half the time, and Yunmeng Jiang's Lotus Piers the other half. I, of course, was carrying things from both my sects."

To further support his future-self's claim, the simulated Jin Ling reached into his robes and, with a complicated expression on his face, pulled out a small silver bell.

Jiang Cheng was grinning so much it physically hurt.

A moment later, delighted laughter filled the air and Jiang Yanli turned to her brother to whisper, "Thank you, A-Cheng. This is… this is wonderful, I-"

She cut herself off, smiling at her equally-elated brother, as Jin Zixuan added, "I can't believe you managed to get Meng… *Jin* Guangyao to agree to borrowing the heir — his nephew. Thank you for being there for him. Maybe we can… do something similar in our world."

"Maybe," Jiang Cheng agreed, nodding enthusiastically, then blushing at the attention.

Contrary to their elation, Wen Ruohan couldn't help but feel like certain things made a lot more sense now:

'Proud, headstrong, condescending… he's learned all of his uncle's and father's bad traits, and none of his mother's good ones,' Wei Wuxian had thought, watching Jin Ling attack the charlatan over his Yiling Laozu paintings.

However, at that moment, Wei Wuxian wasn't thinking anything of the sort. Instead, his eyes were focused on the bell, a memory forming around him. It was something added in by the spirits, to show what the simulated Wei Wuxian was thinking of.

The Yiling Patriarch stood before them. Wei Wuxian's original body, hair down as it had been when they had last seen him. Across from him stood the Ghost General, who the watchers now knew truly possessed the human consciousness his solemn expression implied.

'So long as my martial nephew wears this silver bell, no weaker ethereal creatures will be able to approach him,' Wei Wuxian observed.

Jiang Yanli sucked in a breath.

"He has A-Ling's bell?" Madam Yu asked. "When was this? Did Wei Wuxian ask to look at the bell after A-Ling was born? Why would the Ghost General be near my grandson?"

"A-Ning wouldn't hurt him," Wen Qing pointed out. Madam Jin was about to snap back that Wei Wuxian and the Ghost General had allegedly killed Jin Zixuan, only to suddenly stop herself.

Regardless of the public's consensus on what happened, it was clear that Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning would not have voluntarily killed her son. Until she understood what had happened, she couldn't speak on the subject.

However, the little faith she had in Wei Wuxian was tested further when the man adopted an overwhelmingly morose expression. The regret in it was clear, as was the guilt that-

“What?” Jin Ling suddenly asked, snapping Wei Wuxian out of his thoughts.

“...Wait, what as that about?” Jiang Cheng asked, not understanding why they had seen such a memory.

“Wei Ying had been staring at Young Master Jin’s bell for quite some time,” Lan Wangji observed, watching the simulated Wei Wuxian wave off Jin Ling’s concerns. “Given his expression... this scene may become relevant again later.”

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli whispered, worry filling her mind.

“Here,” Wei Wuxian offered Sizhui the bell. “The silver bell of the Jiang Sect can steady one’s focus and calm one’s mind. Use this as the code-”

Before he could finish, Jin Ling suddenly snatched the bell back with a rushed, “Actually, I’ll do it!”

Lan Xichen hid a laugh.

Lan Jingyi rolled his eyes, “You — first you didn’t want to do it, and now you insist on it. With such a hot-and-cold temper… are you a young mistress?!”

Nowhere near as reserved as Lan Xichen, Nie Huaisang burst out into laughter at that: “Both Jiang-xiong’s future self and this junior called him the same thing! It’s just that obvious!”

A deep flush spread across Jin Zixuan’s cheeks, and the simulated Jin Ling reacted with an explosion of rage.

Ignoring the interactions the juniors were having, Wei Wuxian turned to the ghost girl and requested, “Come in.”

All other conversations stopped at once, everyone turning their attention toward Wei Wuxian and the girl before him. She hurriedly wiped her eyes and her face, then crashed into his body.

Her soul was squeezed inside.

Wei Wuxian dropped to the ground.

Once again, Lan Wangji reached forward to catch him, only to realize belatedly that Wei Wuxian was just going to slip through his fingers. It was somewhat embarrassing how often he forgot that.

(No one could blame Lan Wangji though. After watching Wei Wuxian get thrown into the Burial Mounds, they couldn’t deny how much most of them had also wished their other selves had been there to catch him before he fell.)

(Unfortunately, as time went on, many of them were beginning to wonder if their other-selves had instead been the ones to push Wei Wuxian down.)

The boys hurried to bring over a pile of straw for the sleeping Wei Wuxian to sit on, and Jin Ling clutched the bell tightly, his expression carefully blank.

There was a surge of darkness, and the watchers were pulled inside the Empathy as well.

Considering how difficult it would be for someone else to see through the empathy, Lan Qiren found himself wondering if the ghost girl was one of the spirits who had put together the simulation. He had to admit, it wouldn't surprise him if that was true; the humor occasionally on display in the editing certainly seemed to match her behavior.

However, a moment later, Wei Wuxian suddenly thought of a problem: *'Wait, the maiden is blind. If I empathize with her, won't I not be able to see anything either? The effectiveness will plummet. Oh, well. Only being able to hear will work well enough too.'*

"This is a dangerous technique. Your response should not be 'oh, well' when it turns out to be less useful than you thought it would be!" Wen Qing scolded, glaring quite fiercely at Wei Wuxian. Some of the other watchers backed away from her nervously.

After a few more dizzying moments in the blackness, however, they suddenly jerked to a stop as if landing on the ground, and the girl opened her eyes.

A bright landscape with clear colors appeared before them.

"Eh? She wasn't blind?" Nie Mingjue asked, looking around disbelievingly.

"Apparently not," Lan Xichen agreed, fairly mystified as well.

'*I guess she wasn't blind yet when this memory occurred,*' Wei Wuxian agreed, quickly adapting to his new circumstances. '*Empathy shows the scenes in her memories with the strongest emotions — the ones she most wants to express to other people. I'm in her memories right now, so I can just sit back and relax as we go through this. Her eyes are my eyes; her mouth is my mouth.*'

Considering the horrors Wei Wuxian had gone through, Nie Huaisang was suddenly very, very glad that their simulation didn't work the same way.

Sitting by a brook, the girl smiled sweetly at the water. She kicked her feet in, combed her hair back with her fingers, and observed her own reflection while humming a joyful tune.

Clearly the actions of someone who could see, despite her dull, grey eyes.

Suddenly, right as the girl reached toward the back of her head, there was a jerk of aqua light from around her.

"Wha — what was that?!"

‘*Based on what this feels like… is she fixing a hairpin?*’ Wei Wuxian assumed.

And the watchers, who could still see in 360°, knew that she was. That didn’t explain the flash of blue.

At that moment, there was another slight flash. Those who were watching closely could see its source.

“It’s Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji realized.

Jiang Yanli did a double take: “It’s A-Xian?”

“Empathy laid his soul on top of her in her memories, but they are still technically separate. When he focuses his attention somewhere or reacts with a jerk, as we saw just now, his soul must separate from her body slightly.”

“I see. So it’s is the outline of his soul jumping away from hers,” Wen Qing supposed, turning back to the simulation with a thoroughly dissecting gaze. Now that she knew what to look for, she could indeed see how the whisps of motion appeared to be Wei Wuxian’s soul seeping out of her body.

“But…” Jiang Cheng looked back toward Wei Wuxian. “Empathy is supposed to lay the user’s soul directly on top of the spirit’s. We shouldn’t be able to see individual reactions from Wei Wuxian. It should just be his thoughts.”

“Well, has anyone ever looked at empathy from the outside?” Nie Huaisang countered, and Jiang Cheng had no way to respond to that.

Once the girl had fastened her hair, she dusted off her clothes and leaped up. Grabbing the bamboo pole by her feet, she skipped along the road, speeding forward at a rate only the most energetic of non-cultivators would be able to manage. She swung the bamboo this way and that as she walked, swatting the branches above her head. In the process, she knocked over several rocks in the road, terrorizing innocent grasshoppers with her movements.

Although she wasn’t his type — far too brash, dirty, and crude to even come close — even Jin Guangshan had to admit she had a certain youthful playfulness about her that was quite enticing.

(A shudder ran up Madam Jin’s back as her instincts began sounding alarms at full force, and a second later she was death glaring at her husband despite not being entirely sure why.)

A moment later, however, they heard footsteps in the distance, and the girl halter her skipping. Holding onto her pole properly, she knocked it on the ground and slowly stumbled forward, feeling her away across as though she truly couldn’t see. The sounds of the footsteps had come from a few villager women, who stepped out of the way upon seeing her, whispering among themselves as they did.

The girl nodded hurriedly, “Thank you. Thank you.”

One of the women watched for only a moment longer before her face collapsed with pity. Lifting the white cloth covering her blanket, she took out a steamed bun and handed it over.

"Sister, be careful. Are you hungry? Take this and eat it," the woman offered.

Seeing the open generosity, Jiang Yanli couldn't help but smile at the scene. After all the endless tragedies the simulation had shown them, it had become a little difficult to remember that there were genuinely good people out there.

The reassurance was comforting.

As if agreeing, the girl gasped at the offer and responded, "H-how could I take it? I-I…"

The woman shoved the bun into her hands, commanding, "Take it."

She finally did.

"Sister, A-Qing is very thankful!"

'*Ah, we finally have a name,*' Wei Wuxian realized.

"A-Qing," Wen Qing repeated, a trace of amusement in her tone. Her aunts and uncles tended to refer to her like that when they visited; it was somewhat odd hearing that refer to someone else.

But, if it had to refer to someone else, Wen Qing was quite pleased that it was for such a resourceful and fearless young lady. A bit of affection sparked within her.

Bidding the women farewell, A-Qing continued forward, finishing the bun in just a few bites before resuming her earlier skipping. As a spirit attached to her memory, Wei Wuxian ended up bouncing up and down with her, the blue light of his soul serving as an after-image for the half second it took him to be dragged along.

'*I'm getting dizzy,*' he mentally complained. '*This maiden is so full of energy. Now I understand; she's pretending to be blind. She was probably born with those white eyes. Although she looks blind, she can actually see; she's just pretending to be sightless to make people feel sorry for her.*'

Unable to help herself, Madam Yu scoffed: "Pretending to be weak to garner sympathy. Well, I've never heard of anything more pathetic. Has she no pride? With everything as it is, I bet she's a lowly thief too. Though I guess that's all that can be expected of a *commoner*."

Jiang Yanli flinched slightly at the words, that last one having been given the exact same tone and hate as what Madam Yu would use when she said the words 'the son of a servant.'

'*What's wrong with servants?' Wei Wuxian had asked, disliking the way Jiang Cheng had described MianMian. 'I'm also the son of a servant, aren't I?*'

And worst of all, as the simulation had shown them, the child Wei Wuxian had been living in even worse conditions before Jiang Fengmian had picked him up. Jiang Yanli could only be grateful that Wei Wuxian had managed to remain confident in himself regardless.

And he continued to be so now:

'*She's a girl who roams the streets alone. If she pretends to be blind, people will naturally think she truly can't see and lower their guards. However, in reality, she actually can see, and can therefore adjust according to the circumstances. That is indeed a clever method of self preservation. Though, there must have been something to make her lose her sight before she died….*'

Wei Wuxian fell silent once more, pondering the circumstances that could have led up to that.

Some of the watchers, however, were more focused on what he had said before.

"...I agree," Lan Wangji spoke up. "There should be no shame in doing the best she can to survive, given the conditions she lives in. Thievery aside, pretending to be blind is not a sin."

Nie Huaisang gaped, having never known Lan Wangji to speak so rudely to one of his elders in his life. The words were as polite as could be, but the implied scolding of Madam Yu was obvious to everyone listening in. And yet Lan Qiren didn't bother to berate his nephew for it.

A hot fury sparked within Madam Yu-

And got doused a moment later when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw her two children flinch at her reaction.

A voice in her head seemed to laugh:

'*Didn't you just get done saying you would be fine without Fengmian? Where did all that confidence go?*'

But even if Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren had stepped in front of Lan Wangji protectively, she couldn't allow a slight like this to go unpunished-

A-Qing laughed, skipping along the road as she went. Everytime someone passed by, she shrunk down and pretended to be blind, occasionally earning herself a bit of food through that.

And Madam Yu shifted uncomfortably, quickly glaring at the ground to mask it as annoyance. From what she could see, the look Wen Ruohan was giving Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji was just as approving as usual (and the fact that Wei Wuxian experiencing the Chief Cultivator's approval had become *commonplace* was a topic she wasn't willing to delve into quite yet). Perhaps it shouldn't have been a surprise — regardless of his own illustrious rank and bloodline, Wen Ruohan had always been perfectly happy to raise up any low born trash he saw-

Where was she even going with this?

Jiang Cheng, who had been watching his mom warily in preparation for the inevitable explosion, watched in abject disbelief as she instead looked away, backing down from the fight the second jade had all-but challenged her to.

By now, A-Qing had arrived at a marketplace.

It was bustling with people, which made it a perfect time for A-Qing to show off her skills. Sinking deep into her performance, she knocked her pole against the ground frequently, practically radiating wariness as she did. Slowly walking through the crowd, she suddenly tripped and ran into a man with expensive-looking, brightly colored clothes. She flinched back, pretending to be frightened:

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I can't see! I'm sorry!"

'*Can't see?*' Wei Wuxian mentally repeated. '*She clearly rushed right to him.*'

Pursing her lips together, Madam Yu quite forcefully prevented herself from speaking any of the thoughts she had. Everyone else was grateful.

The man she had run into faltered. When he had felt someone run into him, he had angrily turned around, prepared to curse whoever had been responsible. However, seeing that it was not only a blind person, but also a young maiden who looked rather pretty, he knew that slapping her would result in fervent criticism from the surrounding crowd.

After thinking it over for a moment longer, he could only grumpily snap, "Watch where you're going!"

A-Qing continued to apologize, but the gaunt-faced man merely sneered. The man turned to leave, but, as he did, he decided he still wasn't satisfied. Smirking to himself, he reached over and squeezed A-Qing's buttocks with his right hand.

Wei Wuxian's soul flinched back with a yelp, goosebumps rising up his arms-

And Lan Wangji and Wen Ruohan simultaneously stood up, knocking their chairs to the ground with the force of the movement. The man didn't know Wei Wuxian was also there — not that that made it better — and yet that sheer *audacity* he had to attack the *Yiling Patriarch* like that….

The other watchers gulped nervously at the bloodlust Lan Wangji was letting out, and, as Jin Guangshan saw the ice-cold expression on Wen Ruohan's face, he found himself very glad that he had managed to avoid laughing at the scene. He had no doubt that would not have been received well.

Keeping up her act, A-Qing had shrunk down into a seemingly-frightened ball, making it even more obvious that the blue glow of Wei Wuxian's soul was repeatedly jumping out of her body, reacting with utter indignation. Once the man had gone a significant distance away, she tapped her way into an obscure alley, shivering as she did.

Then she tsked and spat on the ground.

"Eh?"

By now, she was out of sight of the street, so she had no reason to keep up her act any longer. She reached into her robes, fishing out a money pouch made of cheap leather.

"...It was all just an act?" Nie Mingjue asked disbelievingly.

"Wah! How scary!" Nie Huaisang shuddered. "She looked completely genuine! People who can hide their intentions like that are terrifying!"

"You think *everything's* terrifying," Jiang Cheng blandly pointed out, rolling his eyes at the act of fear. Out of the corner of his eye, however, he carefully watched his mother.

(Rather than being smug that A-Qing had indeed been proven to be a thief, Madam Yu merely seemed tired, now. Jiang Cheng wasn't quite sure what that meant.)

A-Qing poured the pouch's contents into her palm, counting out the scant number of coins and clicking her tongue again:

"Those lousy men. All of them are like this. Dressed like they're something, but without even a penny on them!"

Wei Wuxian looked halfway between frowning and bursting into laughter.

'*She looks younger than fifteen, but it appears she's already quite adept at cursing,*' he observed. '*And even better at snatching people's money pouches.*'

Some part of Nie Mingjue wanted to frown at the girl's dishonorable action, but, remembering how the child Wei Wuxian had looked (starving and freezing in the bitter snow), he couldn't muster up the energy to do so.

That supposed-victim's inexcusable actions didn't help either.

Watching the girl furiously recount the coins in her hand, Wei Wuxian couldn't help but reminisce, '*If I had been the one you'd stolen from, you wouldn't be cursing like that. Back then, I used to be quite wealthy as well…*'

"That isn't something you should *want* to happen," Wen Qing pointed out with a roll of her eyes. Normally, Jiang Cheng would have joined her, but at that moment he was so smug over Wei Wuxian remembering the good of being in the Jiang Sect that he didn't have the concentration to focus on anything else.

'*There, you see,*' he grinned, the thoughts slipping out despite himself. '*Lan-er-gongzi might not mind when you steal his pouch, but we gave you your own. You don't need him.*'

And that was all that mattered.

Just as Wei Wuxian finished sighing about how he had become poor, A-Qing found her next target. Resuming her act of blind helplessness, she walked out of the alley startled with an "ah" as she ran into a white-robbed cultivator.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I can't see! I'm sorry!"

'*Are you not even going to change your lines, Little Beauty?*' Wei Wuxian wondered incredulously.

Having been jolted by her, it took the man a moment to turn around. In complete juxtaposition to the previous man A-Qing had stolen from, this one moved to help her up before anything else.

"It's fine," he calmly assured. "Young Maiden, you can't see either?"

The man was fairly young. His cultivation robes were simple, yet clean, and he carried a sword wrapped in white cloth on his back. The visible part of his face was quite handsome, though thin and emaciated. The rest of his face, however, was covered with white bandages thick enough to completely cover his eyes. A soft tinge of blood vaguely seeped from beneath them.

Although no one said it aloud, everyone had the same thought at once.

'*Xiao Xingchen!*'

Realizing that she had been asked a question, A-Qing straightened up and nervously responded, "Y-yes."

"Then, walk a little slower. Don't move so fast. You don't want to bump into someone again, do you?"

Once again, the differences between Xiao Xingchen and the person A-Qing stole from earlier couldn't be more apparent.

Holding A-Qing's hand, Xiao Xingchen led her to the side of the road and instructed, "Walk here. There aren't as many people."

His words were gentle, yet careful. They made A-Qing pause for a moment, but, after a bit of thought, she nonetheless reached out to snatch his money pouch.

Nie Mingjue sighed slightly, but didn't otherwise protest. It made Nie Huaisang quite hopeful; perhaps, as impossible as it seemed, his stubborn, obnoxiously-meatheaded brother was learning to be understand nuance! He could only hope this newfound generosity would carry over to Huaisang's study habits when they left the simulation.

"Brother, A-Qing is very grateful to you!" she chirped out.

Smiling warmly, Xiao Xingchen corrected, "It's not 'Brother,' but 'Daozhang.'"

The girl blinked: "But you're both Daozhang *and* Brother."

“Then, since you’re referring to me as Brother, why don’t you give back Brother’s pouch.”

Although *they* hadn’t been caught doing anything, Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang all jumped at the accurate accusation, and were forced to fight the urge to protest the claim.

‘*Ah,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, then huffed, a smile on his face that was truly and undeniably *dripping* in amused smugness. ‘*No matter how quickly a mortal street roamer like A-Qing is, she won’t be able to fool the senses of a cultivator.*’

And Wei Wuxian would know that better than anyone, having been surrounded by street kids for a good portion of his life. At that thought, Lan Wangji found himself unconsciously clenching his hands into fists.

Startled, A-Qing took off a moment later, but she hadn’t made it more than a few feet before she was grabbed by the back of her collar and pulled back.

“As I just told you, you shouldn’t run so fast,” Xiao Xingchen warned. “What if you bump into someone again?”

“Is his composure limitless?” Jin Guangshan wondered, looking on in disgust at the struggling little thief. Although many of them didn’t approve of the tone he had used, no one could disagree with Sect Leader Jin’s words. The aura of calmness Xiao Xingchen exuded hadn’t faltered in the slightest.

Seeing that her struggles weren’t working, A-Qing bit down on her upper lip.

‘*Oh no,*’ Wei Wuxian realized, ‘*She’s going to shout ‘molester’ and-*’

However, before she could, the *actual* molestor from earlier stormed out of the street corner. Upon seeing her, he was overwhelmed by fury and began to shout:

“You little bitch! I’ve finally caught you. Give me back my money!”

He pulled his arm back, ready to swing towards her face.

Jiang Yanli flinched back, and Jin Zixuan jumped protectively in front of her.

Yet, before the slap could land on her cheek, it was forcefully stopped.

A-Qing blinked her eyes open.

“Sir, please calm down for a moment,” Xiao Xingchen requested, his hand quite firmly wrapped around the man’s wrist. “That’s quite an impolite way to treat a young maiden, don’t you think?”

At that, Jiang Yanli was finally able to release the breath she had been holding, and tension poured out of her body at once. Even if Wei Wuxian wasn’t currently fighting for his life in

the Burial Mounds, the simulation could still prove fairly stressful. She sent a grateful look Jin Zixuan's way, and was met by a blush and a smile in return.

Although the man had used quite a bit of strength just then, Xiao Xingchen had no problems stopping him. The seemingly light grip the latter had on the man's hand didn't let him move a centimeter, which only made the fury within that man grow.

Although he was clearly nervous, he nonetheless stubbornly accused, "What is an eyeless freak like you doing here? Saving the damsel in distress? Who do you think you are, playing the hero right now?! So the little bitch is your lover? Don't you know she's a theif? She stole my money! If you protect her, then you're also a dirty thief!"

He continued to curse, and, as the words became increasingly vulgar, the little warmth that had been in Madam Jin's expression seeped out completely. Several people backed away from her nervously.

(Unfortunately, that brought them closer to Madam Yu, whose expression had gone carefully blank at the words "playing the hero.")

"Thieves like you should be castrated before the town!" the enraged man continued. "You-"

Then, with the man in one hand and A-Qing in the other, Xiao Xingchen turned toward the girl and instructed, "Give the man back his money."

A-Qing immediately fumbled out the small bits of money and handed it over. At that, Xiao Xingchen finally relaxed his grip, allowing the man to count the coins out. After ensuring that everything had been returned, the man looked back over toward the blind cultivator.

'*Not worth it to kick up anymore of a fuss,*' he decided warily. With that, he awkwardly trudged away.

"Good," Madam Jin scoffed. "It's more than he deserves after what he did to that girl!"

Although they didn't say anything out loud, it was clear by the darkness in their expressions that both Wen Ruohan and Lan Wangji completely agreed.

Finally, seeing that the man was out of hearing distance, Xiao Xingchen set A-Qing down and commented, "You really are too bold. Stealing from him even though you're blind?"

A-Qing leapt five centimeters in the air in indignation, shouting "He touched me! He pinched my butt, and it hurt so much! What's so wrong about me taking some of his money?! There were only a few coins inside such a bit pouch, and yet he was being so mean about it! He's clearly gonna die flat broke."

Although there wasn't any condemnation in his expression, Wei Wuxian nonetheless disagreed: '*You were clearly intending to steal by bumping into him, but now you're trying*

to imply that he wronged you first. What a misleading argument.'

Nonetheless, Xiao Xingchen once again shook his head: "Even in that case, you really should have known better than to provoke him. Today, if you were alone, the matter wouldn't have ended with a mere slap. Maiden, take care."

And with that, he turned and began walking away.

'*He didn't even ask for his money back,*' Wei Wuxian realized, eyes widening.

'*What a fool,*' Madam Yu instantly thought. '*Is he honestly just going to accept that? Look at the state of his clothes. Of course he's only able to wear that; if he gives all his money to any thief he runs across, then what else could be expected? Does he really care that much about feeling good about himself? That foolish-*'

'*This Shishu of mine is gentle towards women as well,*' Wei Wuxian concluded, a smile forming on his face.

And Madam Yu's thoughts screeched toward a blinding halt.

She didn't have to agree with Wei Wuxian on everything — knew she wouldn't, in fact — but their differing observations here laid out a picture that the Madam of the Jiang Sect wasn't sure she liked. After all, Wei Wuxian saw this action in nothing but a positive light.

(And who was it, exactly, that she had constantly accused of 'playing the hero' until her other-self's last breath?)

But she was thinking this about Xiao Xingchen, not Wei Wuxian. She had been wrong about Wei Wuxian; that didn't mean she was necessarily wrong about Xiao Xingchen.

(Right?)

Holding tightly onto the money pouch she had stolen, A-Qing stared blankly for several seconds as Xiao Xingchen walked away. Suddenly, she stuffed the bag into her lapel and chased over with her pole, promptly crashing into Xiao Xingchen's back.

The cultivator immediately steadied her again.

"Is there anything else?" he asked.

"I still have your money pouch!"

The exclamation rang out into the distance, and Lan Xichen couldn't help but laugh, "To tell that to the person himself…."

"Hm. Good on her," Nie Mingjue grinned, pleased that Xiao Xingchen's actions had altered the girl's behavior.

However-

“It’s yours now,” Xiao Xingchen told her. “There’s not much inside anyways. Make sure to spend it all before you steal from someone else, alright?”

‘*Is he serious?*’ Wen Qing sighed, looking upon the scene with an undeniable layer of fond exasperation. ‘*Honestly, that's just… ridiculous.*’

“I heard that filthy man curse,” A-Qing said instead, changing the subject. “So, you’re blind too?”

At that question, Xiao Xingchen’s expression faltered at once, and his smile vanished as well.

‘*The bold, innocent remarks of children are often the cruelest,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*Children don’t know anything. But it’s precisely because they don’t know anything that they can hurt people’s feelings in the most direct ways.*’

And at those words, Lan Wangji couldn’t help but recall Wei Wuxian’s expression as he watched the children playing cultivators. They had recreated the Sunshot Campaign, and yet needed to decide on a new leader. The kid pretending to be the Yiling Patriarch had volunteered with the endless confidence of the real version.

Then, another kid had objected.

‘I’m Sandu Shengshou. I’m the most powerful!’ and then, ‘Hmph. Why can’t I be better than you? Don’t you remember how you died?’

The children hadn’t even been speaking to Wei Wuxian, and yet-

On the bandages wrapped around Xiao Xingchen’s eyes, a red smear of blood formed. It grew darker and darker, almost seeping through the cloth. He raised his hand to hover it over his eye, his hands trembling.

‘*The pain and injury that came with gouging out one’s eyes were not easy to heal,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, his expression shifting into something that could only be described as sympathetic. ‘*However, A-Qing had no way to understand that.*’

‘*He must be feeling dizzy,*’ she thought, proving Wei Wuxian’s point.

Wen Qing could only shake her head. If Wei Wuxian's core was where she thought it was, then he would know that all too well, wouldn't he?

Xiao Xingchen moved to leave.

“Wait!” A-Qing insisted again, running in front of Xiao Xingchen to cut him off. Although Xiao Xingchen was genuinely blind, his enhanced senses as a cultivator allowed him to stop without running into her.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I’ll go with you!”

“Hm?” Lan Qiren asked, startled once again by the girl’s unhesitant lack of formality. Her actions would be inexcusable among his own students, but….

Could he really say that remaining outwardly formal while singling out Wei Wuxian to answer questions in class (and claiming that it was “only to be expected” when the boy got them all right) was somehow more appropriate than how A-Qing was acting now?

“Why would you want to follow me?” Xiao Xingchen finally asked, his still-pleasant smile showing that his question was out of curiosity, rather than disapproval. “Do you want to become a cultivator?”

“No,” she disagreed at once. “You’re tall-blind, and I’m little-blind. We’re both like this, but if we travel together, we can take care of each other. My parents are gone and there’s nowhere I can stay. I can follow anyone to anywhere!”

Xiao Xingchen shifted at that, but remained hesitant.

Thus, as any respectable street urchin would do, she cleverly zeroed in on the man’s weakness: “I spend money really quickly. If you refuse to take me with you, the money will be gone at once, and I’ll have to go steal from and trick people again!”

“...Is she-”

“And-and when that happens, someone will slap me hard and I’ll fall down and I won’t be able to get up again so I’ll be lost! I won’t be able to find my way after that! Poor me!”

Her silver, pupil-less eyes glistened with tears.

A laugh slipped out of Wen Qing’s lips, and she looked upon A-Qing with newfound admiration: “Going straight to the heart of it, huh?”

“She’s impressively shameless,” Nie Mingjue agreed.

But Xiao Xingchen just laughed, “Someone as clever as you will just fool other so that *they* can’t find their way. Who in the world would be able to do the same to you?”

‘*See, this is what happens when you let people realize how smart you are,*’ Nie Huaisang thought, feeling pity for the young girl.

‘*Huh. I’m starting to get a feel for what Xiao Xingchen’s personality was like. Seems as though Xue Yang’s impersonation was really spot-on,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*Aside from his face, he was basically indistinguishable from the real Xiao Xingchen. If someone had told me he was the genuine one, I’d have believed them.*’

Meanwhile, still pleading, pestering, and pretending to be pitiful, A-Qing clung onto Xiao Xingchen, demanding to be brought along. Xiao Xingchen warned her quite a few times of how dangerous it could end up being, but she stayed firm in her determination.

Considering the ghost she had ended up as, the watchers were hesitant to support that mindset.

What came next was the voice of Ouyang Zizhen, the disembodied words serving to provide further context:

"In the following days, Maiden A-Qing wandered freely with Xiao Xingchen. He continued to work as they did, night hunting when the opportunity came, and traveling toward the sources of any rumors they came across."

"Ah, Uncle, doesn't this remind you of Wangji?" Lan Xichen asked, keeping his voice low so as to not disturb the other watchers. "His future-self, I mean."

"Hm. Hanguang-jun goes wherever the chaos is, they said," Lan Qiren agreed, casting a proud look upon his nephew. For all the pain and suffering in the future, it was reassuring that there would be sources of joy as well.

"Xiao Xingchen kept warning her, but Young Maiden Qing never listened. Even when Xiao Xingchen had to go exorcise an old castle that had gained sentience, she remained unafraid. She continued calling him 'Daozhang,' sticking to him as though she was syrup, and never getting more than three meters away!"

And the simulation displayed this accordingly, showcasing a montage of their travels, and displaying the obvious bond coming into being between the pair.

"After she had followed him for a while, possibly realizing that A-Qing was quick-witted, brave, and never a hindrance despite being a young, blind maiden, Xiao Xingchen finally gave her permission to stay with him. Ah, Lady A-Qing is so cool!"

Jiang Yanli giggled at the romantic boy's proclamation, finding his overt enthusiasm adorable.

'*Huh. I thought Xiao Xingchen might have had a destination in mind while he was traveling, but I guess not,*' Wei Wuxian thought as he watched the scenes flash by. '*Based on the climates and dialects of these memories, he's not following a direct route at all. He's simply going wherever people mention things are happening.*'

"He is?" Jiang Cheng asked, having not noticed anything of the sort. He turned to his right to look at his sister and her fiance, then to his left to look at Wen Qing and Nie Huaisang, but all four could only shake their heads. They hadn't memorized the geography of random towns according to their accents, so they could only take Wei Wuxian's word for it.

Luckily, if there was anything they had learned to trust throughout the simulation, it was that.

Finally, after thinking it over for a bit more, Wei Wuxian mentally added, '*Maybe the Yueyang Chang's case was too big of an blow. Perhaps he doesn't want to be among the clans and sects anymore, so, unable to give up on his aspirations, he's chosen to night hunt around, solving as many problems as he can.*'

Remembering the corpse that had been found in Yi City, Lan Wangji thought for a moment, then bowed lowly in respect for the fallen cultivator. However, as he did, he couldn't help but connect the line "doesn't want to be among the clans and sects anymore" to someone else:

'Why is he here?' the newly-returned Wei Wuxian had asked, seeing Hanguang-jun coming to the aid of the juniors. 'I need to get out of here.'

Part of Lan Wangji hoped that the events which led Wei Wuxian to want to leave behind the cultivation world were not as severe as the ones that had led Xiao Xingchen to do so. The rest of him knew that was a foolish wish.

Right now, Xiao Xingchen and A-Qing were walking down a wide, flat road with grasses as high as a person's waist growing on both sides.

Suddenly, A-Qing stumbled with an "Ah!"

"What's wrong?" Xiao Xingchen immediately asked, turning towards her.

"Ugh. Nothing. My ankle's just twisted."

Except it… wasn't. Even without Wen Qing's confirmation, that much was obvious. A-Qing exclamation had been one of surprise, upon seeing a black figure in the grass.

(A figure she wouldn't have been able to see if she had actually been blind, necessitating the lie.)

'*Dead or alive, dealing with that will be a pain,*' she thought, glaring at the possibly-alive body. '*I don't want Daozhang to find it.*'

Lan Qiren sighed, but knew trying to lecture someone in the simulation would be about as effective as trying to lecture the real Wei Wuxian.

"Daozhang, let's go, let's go," the girl requested. "Let's rest a bit in whatever city's up ahead. I'm so tired!"

"Didn't you twist your ankle? Do you want me to carry you?" the kind man asked.

Lighting up at the suggestion, A-Qing knocked her pole against the ground a few times and ecstatically shouted, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

The cultivator turned around and kneeled on one leg, waiting for her to get on. Just as A-Qing was about to throw herself over, Xiao Xingchen suddenly stopped her.

"Daozhang?"

Pursing his lips together sternly, Xiao Xingchen stood up and looked around: "...Something smells like blood."

"Hm," Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow, slightly impressed Xiao Xingchen had been able to smell it from such a large distance away. It appeared his cultivation was truly as high as the

rumors said.

However, at that moment a gust of wind swept by, bringing the air near the body toward them.

'*Ah, I can smell it too,*' she observed.

But then-

"Really? Why can't I smell it?" the girl asked. "Do you think families around here are killing livestock?"

"She's scarily good at lying!" Nie Huaisang gaped, and quite a few people nodded in agreement.

However, a moment later (as though Heaven itself wanted to go against her wishes), the person in the bushes coughed. It was nearly imperceptible, but Xiao Xingchen's hearing was good enough to identify it. He immediately turned toward the source.

With hurried steps, he approached the man laying on the ground. Stepping into the bushes, he squatted down beside the collapsed person, reaching over to check on them.

Seeing that Xiao Xingchen had already discovered the person anyway, A-Qing stomped on the ground, then pretended to find her way over. After a few (faked) wrong turns, she eventually made her way toward Xiao Xingchen.

Jiang Yanli moved close, but, due to all the blood, was unable to make out the victim's face.

"What happened?" A-Qing asked.

"Someone is lying here," Xiao Xingchen responded, feeling for the person's pulse.

"So *that's* why the smell of blood is so strong. Are they dead? Should we make a ditch and bury them?"

Uncaring for the typical tradition of respecting the dead, she reached forward with her bamboo pole and poked the body a few times, digging into its shoulder.

Watching the interaction, Wei Wuxian couldn't help but snort: '*Of course. A dead person is much less trouble than a living person. A-Qing must deeply hope this person is dead.*'

However-

"He's not dead yet, just badly injured," Xiao Xingchen revealed. After giving it some thought, he gently shifted so that he was carrying the person on his back. A-Qing pouted seeing her seat stolen, but, unable to see that expression, Xiao Xingchen simply began to walk towards the city without another word. Knowing that there was no way Xiao Xingchen wouldn't help, A-Qing soon sighed and began to follow along. A mere moment later, it because obvious where they were going.

‘*Wait, isn't that… the path Lan Zhan and I took to get into Yi City?*’ Wei Wuxian realized.

Once again, a heavy layer of foreboding dread filled Jiang Yanli’s blood.

Sure enough, Yi City was at the end of the road. However, unlike before, its gates were unmarred by graffiti, and the doors remained in pristine condition. The inside of the town was also quite fine. Despite being an obscure place, there was a distinct liveliness to the area. Disaster had yet to strike.

‘*Considering the state of the person I’m carrying, no shop will let me inside,*’ Xiao Xingchen realized.

Luckily (or unluckily, depending on your point of view), he knew where to go.

“Excuse me, sir,” he nodded once at a city watchman. “Are there any idle coffin homes in this city we could rest in?”

Nodding once, the guard responded, “There’s one over there. The guy guarding it passed away last month, so there’s no one living there right now. Say, you’re blind, aren’t you? Here, let me lead you over.”

And thus, he did. As they went, they passed by bustling crowds of children all playing together, their parents either working or watching fondly on the side. All the town’s citizens seemed content.

And all of them had been gone in the future.

Lan Xichen frowned, casting a glance at a young girl who had just tripped in the street. Her older brother rushed over to help her up at once, and she quickly returned to the game they were playing.

What had happened to all these people?

Finally, the group reached the coffin home.

It was the building Xiao Xingchen’s body had been found inside.

Lan Wangji frowned.

“Thank you,” Xiao Xingchen told the watchman, heading inside to set the injured man down. Reaching into his Qiankun pouch, he pulled out several valuable elixirs and pushed them through the person’s teeth.

‘*Genuine elixirs?*’ Jin Guangshan gaped. ‘*Is he really going to waste them on a stranger?*’

It appeared he was.

Meanwhile, A-Qing wandered around, feeling at the surroundings and pretending to investigate what was there. It was truly a great act; even though Xiao Xingchen wasn’t

watching, they wouldn't have been able to tell she wasn't genuinely blind without prior knowledge.

"Wow, there's so many things in here!" she observed. "Here's a basin!"

"Is there a stove?"

"There is!"

After thinking over the danger for a moment, Xiao Xingchen requested, "A-Qing, why don't you try to boil some water. Be careful. Don't hurt yourself."

Although she pouted at the request, A-Qing nonetheless got to work. Soon, Xiao Xingchen had cleaned up the unknown person's face, revealing a handsome young man.

One who they knew.

"Oh, *come on! Him?! Seriously?!*" Jiang Cheng shouted.

Despite having already suspected it, Wei Wuxian's face fell as well.

It was Xue Yang.

'*Enemies really can't avoid each other, huh?*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Xiao Xingchen you really are… hopelessly unlucky.*'

It was clear that Wei Wuxian wished he could do something, and was angry at his own helplessness.

The watchers (who were currently viewing a possible future in which Wei Wuxian was watching a past which happened while he was dead) were even more helpless, and understood his feelings quite well.

***'If I'm guessing the years correctly, this is probably after Jin Guangyao became Chief Cultivator,'* Wei Wuxian thought. '*The damage on his body seems to imply he just got out of a difficult situation; Xue Yang most likely just escaped Jin Guangyao's 'elimination.' Since he had failed to kill him, Jin Guangyao naturally wouldn't want anyone to find out. Or maybe he believed that Xue Yang was going to bleed out, and thus told the public that he had already been eliminated.*'**

Nie Mingjue cursed, furious at the carelessness of his to-be sworn brother.

"Let's not make assumptions… Da-ge," Lan Xichen told him, switching to the term his future self would one day use for extra reassurance. "Whether A-Yao thought he was dead, or simply didn't want the public to panic will be revealed eventually. I'm sure everything will make sense then."

After thinking the words over for a moment, Nie Mingjue finally nodded in acceptance.

The blue silhouette of Wei Wuxian sighed: '*Villains always tend to outlast heroes, huh? On the brink of death, Xue Yang was saved by his old rival Xingchen. It's unfortunate that Xiao Xingchen wasn't cautious enough to examine his face. He's saved his enemy — the one who made his life this way — completely by accident. Although A-Qing can see, she isn't a cultivator, she she has no way of knowing of Xue Yang, much less the intense hatred between him and Xiao Xingchen. She doesn't even know Xiao Xingchen's name.*'

"This is just getting worse and worse," Lan Qiren pursed his lips together, frowning deeply.

Unable to resist, Nie Huaisang piped in, "It's too bad Da-ge isn't still alive. The only reason Xue Yang wasn't executed to begin with is because of that, right?"

"Huh?" Nie Mingjue paused. "Well, I-"

"It sure is fortunate that he thinks so little of himself that he didn't even bother *trying* to find a solution. I really don't know why he would ever think his life could possibly involve more people than just himself. Well, let's hope everything Xue Yang does after this justifies that decision of yours, *Sect Leader Nie.*"

By this point, even Wen Ruohan couldn't resist gaping at the now cheerfully-smiling Nie heir. The faked aura of innocence was blinding in its intensity, and Nie Mingjue couldn't muster up a single sound. The blow wasn't just powerful; it had a layer of unjustified *cruelty* that made it truly devastating beyond compare. Lan Xichen hadn't even known Huaisang had it in himself to be so ruthless.

(Privately, Lan Qiren felt that if Nie Huaisang had managed to show even a *tenth* of that bravery and audaciousness while night hunting, his brother would have had far less to worry about.)

Luckily (unlike all of them), the simulated Wei Wuxian continued focusing, unable to hear what Huaisang had said. Watching Xiao Xingchen continue to tend to Xue Yang, he sighed.

'*Xiao Xingchen really couldn't be any more unlucky. It's as though all the ominous energy in the world has tainted him.*'

Suddenly, Xue Yang frowned. Having been in the middle of tending to his wounds, Xiao Xingchen noticed right away and rested a hand on the other's chest firmly.

"Don't move," he ordered.

Xue Yang tensed at once. His eyes sprang open and he sat up, throwing aside the arm that had been on his chest and tumbling into the corner of the room. He glared at Xiao Xingchen, eyes bloodshot and wide. They made him resemble a trapped beast, filled with undisguised malice and cruelty.

Was this where Xiao Xingchen died? It seemed hard to believe Xue Yang would be able to beat him while so heavily injured, but this *was* the place Xiao Xingchen's body had been found, and-

Jiang Yanli gasped, clenching her hands together as the tension in the room became thicker than blood.

The watching A-Qing gripped tightly onto her bamboo pole, her breath stalling, and Wei Wuxian glared.

'*Talk!*' he mentally ordered of the scoundrel. '*Xiao Xingchen definitely won't have forgotten Xue Yang's voice.*'

Madam Yu's eyes narrowed, and she checked on the positions of her children again as though she would need to protect them in the coming conflict.

Finally-

"What…" Xue Yang gasped out.

And Wei Wuxian's face fell.

"Oh, no," Nie Mingjue clenched his fists, his brother's earlier words ringing in his mind.

There was damage to Xue Yang's throat. It didn't matter if Xiao Xingchen knew his voice, there was no way he would possibly be able to recognize it now. The rascal coughed up a large quantity of blood, making his voice even hoarser.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Xiao Xingchen raised his hands peacefully and assured, "I told you not to move. Be careful, your wounds are going to open. Don't worry; I saved you, so I obviously won't hurt you."

"You won't hurt him; that doesn't mean he won't hurt you," Madam Jin hissed out, the 'idiot' in her tone quite clear. To her right, her son nodded once and clenched his fists. As the only legitimate heir, Jin Zixuan had been spared a lot of the attacks and verbal traps that went on in Koi Tower. That didn't mean he wasn't aware that they went on behind the scenes.

And right now, watching this disaster unfold before his eyes, he couldn't help but move closer to Jiang Yanli, wanting to share some of the emotional strength she wielded every day.

After staring for several more seconds, breathing harshly through his damaged throat, Xue Yang began to understand the situation. It was obvious that Xiao Xingchen didn't recognize him, and he hadn't given himself away quite yet. With a roll of his eyes, he coughed once again then straightened up.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"You have eyes. Can't you see for yourself?" A-Qing interrupted. "He's a roaming cultivator. He went through such lengths to carry you here on his back — he even gave you magical elixirs to save you — and yet you're so mean!"

'Mean' she said. And yet, due to his throat, there was no way for her to have known he was being 'mean' just from his voice. She would have had to see him roll his eyes. Xue Yang frowned.

Wen Qing cursed, and Wen Ruohan leaned back in his chair. As clever as the girl was, she had no chance now that she'd given herself away.

The delinquent turned his cold eyes upon her and spoke sharply: "...You're blind?"

Someone swore-

"Do you discriminate against blind people?! Well, it was a blind person that saved you! A blind man was the one! No one else would have cared even if you rotted on the side of the road! The first words you said weren't even to thank Daozhang! How rude! And you called me blind in such a tone…" she turned away, breathing in sharply as if hurt by his words. "...What's wrong with being blind?"

The words had trailed off right at the end, and she began muttering to herself dejectedly. At once, Xiao Xingchen turned towards her, a look of calm sympathy on his face.

Even Wen Ruohan was impressed.

"Not bad," he admitted, watching as Wen Qing relaxed at once. It appeared A-Qing had truly been lying her whole life, to be able to react to Xue Yang's accusation so smoothly.

Xiao Xingchen moved to comfort A-Qing, and, once she was calm again, turned to Xue Yang to say, "Don't sit by the wall. I haven't bandaged your leg yet. Come here."

Xue Yang didn't respond, merely continuing to analyze the situation with an indifferent expression.

Sensing the hesitation, Xiao Xingchen added, "If it's not treated soon, you might end up crippled."

"All the better then," Jiang Cheng grumbled, quite visibly recalling the danger his future-nephew was put in thanks to the man.

However, Xiao Xingchen had no clue of what was to come, and remained earnest in his offer. Rather than attempting to run again, Xue Yang acknowledged the state his body was in and relaxed marginally in the corner. Based on the frown marring his face, it was clear he was thinking hard.

And it was easy for Wei Wuxian to guess what about.

'*His body is covered in wounds. If he doesn't get help, he's not going to be able to go anywhere, no matter how much he wants to. I'm sure he thinks Xiao Xingchen is an idiot who placed himself right at Xue Yang's disposal. In that case, he might as well accept the help.*'

Lan Xichen withheld another sigh. It was truly unfortunate that Jin Guangyao hadn't managed to kill this 'Xue Yang.' The wounds on the other's body made it clear the new Chief Cultivator had put in a valiant effort, but Xue Yang had wound up found by the worst

possible person. A flash of pity filled him for both Xiao Xingchen and his to-be sworn brother.

It appeared Wei Wuxian's thoughts were right on the money. At once, Xue Yang's expression changed. He smiled and, in a voice full of gratitude, responded:

"Then… thank you, Daozhang."

Nie Huaisang couldn't help but shiver watching Xue Yang change from merciless to affectionate in an instant. Honestly, people who could act that well were terrifying!

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian's thoughts were much the same. Based on the tense expression on his face, as well as the way his gaze drifted toward A-Qing, it was clear that he was concerned for the girl.

'*She can see just fine,*' he recalled. '*If Xue Yang discovers this*….'

He cut off, recalling the ghost form of the girl he knew was inevitable.

Xiao Xingchen approached with the water basin, ready to apply more care to Xue Yang's wounds. Silently, so as not to attract the other cultivator's attention, Xue Yang hid his left hand behind his back.

A hand which, as Wen Qing and the simulated Wei Wuxian moved closer to observe, was revealed to be missing a finger.

'*Oh, so that's why he wore a black glove earlier,*' Wei Wuxian realized. '*It looks like an old wound. And based on his actions, Xiao Xingchen definitely knows about it.*'

Jiang Cheng lit up with a grin: "Then maybe, if Xiao Xingchen notices that-"

"He dies. We don't know how or why, but we *do* know that," Madam Yu snapped, the reminder sucking away the enthusiasm Jiang Cheng had felt. "A-Cheng… don't get your hopes up."

As soon as Madam Yu's attention left her son, Jiang Yanli moved closer to him, smiling comfortingly.

(A sharp pain stabbed into Madam Yu's heart, and she wondered if her husband would have said it a different way.)

While that was happening, Xiao Xingchen completed his aid rather admirably. After applying medicine to the wound, he bandaged it in a remarkably neat manner.

Wen Qing smiled slightly in approval.

"It's finished, but it's best for you to avoid moving right now, or your bones might dislocate again" Xiao Xingchen reported.

Rather than considering the words themselves, Xue Yang narrowed his gaze on his caretaker: '*He really doesn't recognize me.*'

Quite a few people sent fierce glares over, clearly communicating just what they'd do to fix that if they were able to interact with the simulation. It was nowhere near as bad as when Lotus Pier was burned, but this slow build-up of tension towards the inevitably tragic conclusion left them quite annoyed at their own powerlessness.

Unfortunately, there was nothing they could do.

Although he was covered in blood and wounds, a lazy grin formed on Xue Yang's face as he asked, "Is Daozhang not going to ask who I am? Or why I'm so badly injured, for that matter."

Turning to put away the medical kit and bandages, Xiao Xingchen softly responded, "If you won't answer regardless, then why would I ask? I just happened to see you and decided to lend a hand. It's not difficult for me anyways. After your injuries heal, we'll go our separate ways. If I were you, there would be many things I wouldn't want others to ask me about."

Giving an internal sigh, the blue glow that was Wei Wuxian thought, '*Even if Xiao Xingchen did ask, Xue Yang would probably just make up a seamless explanation and keep messing with him. It's natural for people to have complicated pasts; Xiao Xingchen only avoided inquiring too much out of respect…. After Xue Yang recovers, I'm sure they won't just 'go separate ways' either.*'

Unfortunately, ignorant of what was to come, Xiao Xingchen then picked up a large pile of straw, telling the girl, "A-Qing, since he's injured, we're giving him the bed. I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you to sleep in the coffin. I'll set down a layer of hay, so it should stay relatively warm."

Despite her occasionally bratty behavior, A-Qing's response was a simple: "There's nothing troublesome about it. It's good enough just having a place to sleep. I won't be cold, so you don't need to give me your outer robes this time."

Smiling at that response, Xiao Xingchen reached over and patted her on the head twice.

Jin Zixuan shifted awkwardly. Although his mother wouldn't say as much, he knew she had reacted the same way as Madam Yu when A-Qing's thieving was first revealed — with scorn and distrust. After all, she had even tried to steal from Xiao Xingchen, who had been so kind to her.

And yet here she was, perfectly satisfied with living conditions that Jin Zixuan had never experienced in his life. Her cleverness and confidence had seemingly been offset by her greed before, but, after watching this, Jin Zixuan couldn't deny the complexity of the situation.

He let out a large breath of air and rubbed his temples tiredly.

“Well then, off I go,” Xiao Xingchen informed them, venturing outside to go night hunting once again and leaving A-Qing alone with Xue Yang. As they had seen in the montage earlier, Xiao Xingchen never let A-Qing follow when there was a chance of it being a dangerous night hunt. It was quite responsible.

“But that’s assuming she’ll be *safer* here,” Madam Jin sighed.

As if to prove her right, a moment later Xue Yang’s voice rang out: “Little Blind, come here.”

Jiang Yanli sucked in a breath.

“What?” A-Qing asked, poking her head out from the coffin she had been laying inside.

“Do you want candy?”

At the suggestion, A-Qing lit up for a moment, before she forced herself back and responded, “I’m not interested. I’m not coming.”

“Smart girl,” Wen Qing breathed out, nodding once.

“Are you sure you don’t want to eat it?” Xue Yang asked, his smile stretching out into a threatening sweetness. “Are you too scared to come? Do you think I actually can’t move? If you don’t head on over, I’ll just go and find you.”

“*You*-” Nie Mingjue stood up at once, righteous *fury* burning through his soul.

(Suddenly, Nie Huaisang wondered if implying that his brother was responsible for what was to come was a little crueler than he had intended for it to be.)

After another moment of hesitation, A-Qing slowly got out of the coffin and tapped her way over to Xue Yang’s room. She slipped through the door, and saw a small object fly towards her.

Jiang Cheng subconsciously flinched back, and even Lan Xichen tensed at the attack.

Wei Wuxian also reacted, the blue outline of his soul jerking back, a strangled, ‘*Watch out!*’ echoing in his mind as he tried to determine what the weapon was.

Then, simultaneously, Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened in horror as they realized the same thing.

It was a *trap!*

And then-

The object hit the expressionless, unblinking A-Qing’s forehead, and she jumped back at once, shouting “Hey! What did you throw at me?!”

Annoyance and confusion were clear in her expression now, but, even when she'd first noticed the flying object, there had been nothing before. It was only after the red sphere made contact with her body that she had acknowledged it.

"He was testing her blindness," Wen Ruohan realized. "And she…."

"Kept up the act," Lan Qiren finished. Trickery and the ability to lie were not skills that the Lan Sect had ever valued, and yet, given the situation, even Lan Qiren couldn't help but be awed by the girl's skill.

Now that A-Qing had passed his test, Xue Yang began to relax.

"It's candy for you," he responded. "I forgot that you're blind and can't catch. It landed by your feet."

"Stop calling me Blind-this and Blind-that. I have a name — my name is A-Qing!" A-Qing humphed and squatted down, searching around for it with her hand as though she were really blind. Once she found it, she wiped it off on her clothes, swallowed, and then plopped it in her mouth.

She had never tasted anything like this before.

Despite the tense situation, Jiang Yanli couldn't help but smile as A-Qing crunched the candy in her teeth, practically glowing in joy. It reminded her of Wei Wuxian's reaction every time he got to have her Lotus Root and Pork Rib Soup.

"You're a strange person," A-Qing said at last. "You're covered in blood and you're this injured, and yet you have candy with you."

Hearing that, Xue Yang grinned and responded, "When I was young, I really liked candy, but I couldn't get it no matter what. I could only watch other people eat it. I always told myself that if I became wealthier one day, I would always carry an infinite amount of candy with me to eat."

Right as he finished that explanation, A-Qing swallowed what was left of the candy. Although she was still scared of the person before her, her desire for candy outweighed that.

"This is good. I've never had it before. Do you have any more?" she asked.

"Of course I do," he smirked. "Come here, and I'll give you some more."

A-Qing stood up and, using her bamboo pole, walked over to him.

"It's a promise then," she insisted, acting out the tapping of her bamboo pole on the ground. "If I come over, you better give me some more!"

One step. Two. She got closer and closer, and then, when she was just a meter way, saw a silent flash of silver from Xue Yang's sleeve. Jiangzai pointed towards A-Qing.

“He’s *still* testing her?” Nie Mingjue gaped. “I mean, he’s *right* to be suspicious, but-”

But A-Qing continued forward in a calm and orderly manner, not showing even the slightest trace of hesitation. When the tip of the sword was a half inch from her stomach, Xue Yang finally lowered it and put it away.

Lan Xichen was starting to feel lightheaded from the constant stress.

(That was at least still better than Nie Mingjue, who looked about twenty seconds away from trying to fist-fight the simulated Xue Yang, regardless of how futile that would be.)

Fulfilling his promise, Xue Yang pulled out two pieces of candy. He gave one to A-Qing, and plopped the other in his own mouth. A few seconds passed as he rolled the treat around his tongue, and A-Qing maintained her act of blindness dutifully. Finally:

“A-Qing, where’s that Daozhang of yours gone in the middle of the night?”

Licking and munching on the candy, A-Qing thought for a moment before responding, “I think he went hunting.”

“Hunting?” Xue Yang tittered. “More like night hunting.”

“Eh? Is that it? The two are pretty much the same anyway, what’s the difference? It’s just helping people fight ghosts and beasts without receiving any money for your efforts.”

Several of the watchers laughed at her reaction, but paused when the illusion of Wei Wuxian gave an impressed whistle.

‘*What a clever girl,*’ he grinned. ‘*I see. It’s not that A-Qing can’t remember what Xiao Xingchen told her; in fact, she probably remembers better than anyone. She said ‘night hunt’ wrong on purpose. Since Xue Yang corrected her, he practically confirmed that he’s also a cultivator. His test failed, and then he got tested by her. This maiden is so young, and yet she already has such tactics.*’

“*That’s* what she was doing?” Lan Qiren asked, having trouble believing Wei Wuxian’s claim. He looked over at A-Qing again, focusing on her still-calm face. Despite everything that had happened, A-Qing’s act hadn’t faltered once.

(But she still ended up dead, and Xue Yang had lived. Clearly, this wouldn’t last.)

As A-Qing left the room, having convinced Xue Yang of her blindness, she finally allowed herself to frown: ‘*This person is probably a cultivator, too. And a very dangerous one. I have to tell Daozhang as soon as possible.*’

However, the next morning, after hearing A-Qing’s explanation, Xiao Xingchen responded, “You already ate his candy. You should stop trying to chase him off. He’ll leave once his injuries are healed — no one could be willing to stay in a coffin home.”

‘*Ahh! Tell him! Tell him about the missing finger!*’ Wei Wuxian mentally shouted. ‘*Otherwise Xiao Xingchen won’t know he’s Xue Yang! Ah… but A-Qing doesn’t know why the missing finger’s important, so she won’t tell!*’

Nie Mingjue gave a groan of defeat, and even Nie Huaisang (who had often heard that groan in regards to himself) couldn’t disagree. The kind, foolish man before them was going to end up a corpse in this coffin home, after all. And the brilliant girl doing her best to save the other would wind up a ghost with a torn-out tongue.

“A-Qing, there’s no need to worry.”

“But he-”

“Are you talking about me?” a voice asked from behind.

Jin Zixuan jumped in his seat, already on edge from the previous interactions.

But A-Qing recovered without missing a beat, snapping back, “You think we’re talking about *you?!* Don’t flatter yourself! Narcissist!”

With one last huff, she shook her bamboo pole angrily in the air and then stormed back inside. Once out of sight, however, she hid near the door and learned close to it, listening in on the conversation.

Outside, Xiao Xingchen had turned to Xue Yang and asked, “Your wounds haven’t healed yet, but you’re walking around already. Are you sure you’re fine?”

“It’ll heal faster if I walk around,” Xue Yang answered easily. “And it’s not like my legs are broken or anything. I’m used to injuries like these. I grew up getting beaten by others, you know.”

“As in… training?” Jiang Cheng asked, scowling in confusion at the man.

Similarly befuddled by Xue Yang’s words, after a long pause Xiao Xingchen could only respond, “...Oh.”

“Daozhang, are the things you brought here gonna be for repairing that roof?”

Nodding, Xiao Xingchen explained, “Yes, I’ll most likely be taking up temporary residence here for a while. The broken roof won’t be beneficial to A-Qing or you, given your injuries.”

‘*Idiot. You’re putting trust in the wrong person,*’ Wen Qing cursed, Wen Ning’s corpse flying into her mind. ‘*Why are half the people I meet like this? I thought A-Ning was unique in his stupidity, but you and Wei Wuxian are also idiotically self-sacrificing, no matter what happens to you. Honestly....*’

Easily reading Wen Qing’s thoughts, Wen Ruohan couldn’t help but mentally comment, ‘*Qing, if your other-self really did perform a traitorous golden core transfer for two boys you’d only known for a handful of days, then you have no room to talk.*’

Then, to the surprise of most of the watchers, Xue Yang then asked, "Should I help?"

"No need. I'll be fine."

"Daozhang, do you know how to do this?"

With an awkward laugh, Xiao Xingchen responded, "Sorry, no. I've never done this before."

And so the two of them began to work together, Xue Yang giving verbal directions (with the helpful addition of a few witty comments), and Xiao Xingchen doing the work.

"That Xue Yang… his style of speaking is quite unusual," Lan Qiren observed, finding the man's inflections and sense of humor to be odd. His nephews nodded in agreement, while Nie Mingjue fell silent, thinking that over.

"I think it's… a sense of humor common in street markets?" Nie Huaisang finally spoke up, then (flinching back when everyone turned their attention on him) quickly explained, "Wei-xiong brought me to one before, and taught me how to not draw attention. He-he said most of their humor uses a 'presumptuous tone' and that I should try to fit that if I wanted to go, um, unnoticed."

"When was this?!" Nie Mingjue demanded.

"I… think it was a few years ago, when we went to Lotus Pier!" Nie Huaisang said (lied), knowing that telling him it happened during the last discussion conference would go quite poorly. After all, during that time, Nie Huaisang was technically supposed to have been studying in preparation for the competition.

Luckily, his Da-ge seemed to buy that lie, so Nie Huaisang's life would go on a little bit longer.

Within the simulation, however, one person wasn't so easily convinced. As A-Qing stood and listened to the way Xiao Xingchen kept laughing at Xue Yang's remarks, she moved her lips, looking to be mouthing out syllables.

Focusing on the girl's mouth, Wei Wuxian tried to read the words, '*That looks like… 'let me… kill you, damn thing.' Ah. Well, I feel the same.*'

Madam Yu held in an urge to snort, finding the girl's outrage amusing.

'*The severe injuries that nearly took Xue Yang's life were partly due to Xiao Xingchen. The two had a relationship of absolute hatred. In his heart, Xue Yang probably hopes Xiao Xingchen will die in the most gruesome way possible, and yet he's still able to converse with Xiao Xingchen in such a lighthearted manner,*' Wei Wuxian frowned.

Nie Mingjue nodded in agreement, having trouble believing anyone would be able to hide so much animosity behind such a realistic grin. He unconsciously shifted closer to Nie Huaisang, and noticed his bother lean close to him as well.

“And then — do you know what that man told me?”

“No, what did he say?” Xiao Xingchen asked, turning his attention to Xue Yang once more.

After watching for a moment longer, Wei Wuxian sighed and continued, ‘*If I was the one hiding behind the window watching all this, I would have killed Xue Yang regardless of the consequences to avoid later trouble.*’

Although Jiang Yanli shivered at the cold tone her shidi spoke in, Wen Ruohan and Nie Mingjue both nodded in agreement, the latter glaring at Xue Yang hatefully. Knowing the tragedies that were to come, even Lan Xichen found himself wishing that was possible. However-

‘*The one watching all this isn’t me; it’s A-Qing. I’m not in my own body, and, even if A-Qing wants to take action, she isn’t capable of killing him.*’

So Wei Wuxian could only frown in silence, watching the memories continue. Having been just as helpless as him throughout the entirety of the simulation, the watchers could certainly understand that.

(Most especially Lan Wangji.)

There was a flash forward, and the fog grew even thicker.

“About a month later — in A-Qing’s memory, not a month the real world,” Lan Jingyi elaborated, then, voice lowered as though he was whispering to his friend, added “Say, is anyone else getting confused about all the layers of time here?”

“Well, that’s why *I* said we should do everything chronologically, but *you-*”

“Jin Ling, not now,” Lan Sizhui desperately requested. There was an annoyed humph in the background.

Jin Zixuan grinned at the interactions, and Madam Jin give a fond smile.

Meanwhile, A-Qing had been slowly getting ready for bed on the pile of hay she had made her own. The evening sunlight peaked out through the clouds, giving the air a lackadaisical atmosphere. Before her was a Xue Yang in casual clothes, his bandages long-since discarded.

“Under Xiao Xingchen’s meticulous care, Xue Yang’s wounds had mostly healed,” Lan Sizhui revealed, and (steadily ignoring the groans of annoyance the other three had given at his words) continued, "Aside from how he limped slightly as he walked, nothing posed any inconvenience. Despite this, he still hadn’t mentioned anything about leaving. He continued to live in the cramped coffin home with the two others.”

‘*What is he scheming?*’ Wei Wuxian wondered.

“Hmm,” Nie Huaisang thought for a moment, then turned to Jiang Cheng to suggest, “Revenge?”

A frown: “Why would he keep waiting? Surely he’s healthy enough by now to do something.”

“Hm.”

Checking one last time to ensure that A-Qing had been taken care of, Xiao Xingchen turned to leave, only to pause when Xue Yang’s hoarse voice asked, “Daozhang, why don’t you take me with you tonight? You’re going night-hunting, right?”

“That’s strange,” Wen Qing commented. “His throat should have healed by now. It *looks* healed, so-”

‘*He’s purposefully disguising his voice now,*’ Wei Wuxian realized with a curse.

“That clever little rat,” Nie Mingjue growled, his eyes switching back and forth between the resting A-Qing and the ignorant Xiao Xingchen. If something happened to them-

(Except, they already knew what was going to happen, didn’t they?)

Unaware of all that, Xiao Xingchen thought over Xue Yang’s request for a moment before laughing and shaking his head: “You probably shouldn’t. If you start talking, then I’ll start laughing. If I start laughing, my sword won’t be steady anymore.”

Giving a piteous pout, Xue Yang promised, “Then I won’t talk. I’ll carry your sword and help you. Please don’t give me a cold shoulder.”

After hesitating for a moment longer, Xiao Xingchen (well-accustomed to having to take care of his shidi on Baoshan Sanren’s mountain) found himself nodding and caving in.

‘*Xue Yang definitely isn’t so nice as to offer Xiao Xingchen help on the night hunt,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*If A-Qing doesn’t go, she’ll miss something important.*’

But, contrary to Wei Wuxian’s fears, A-Qing was far too clever to fall for Xue Yang’s innocent tone. After the two had left, she waited a handful of seconds, then sprung out of the coffin and followed them. Unfortunately, in waiting to ensure she wouldn’t be discovered, A-Qing had lost sight of the other two.

‘*While he was washing vegetables earlier, Daozhang told us to be careful while playing around because there’s a small village being plagued by walking corpses nearby. I bet they’re there,*’ A-Qing thought. She rushed over to the village. Once there, she slipped into a small dog hole in the fence, then hid behind one of the houses, sneakily peeking out.

The blue shadow of Wei Wuxian suddenly flinched and straightened up.

Lan Wangji tensed.

Before them, under Xue Yang's playful watch, Xiao Xingchen stood with his sword through a man's chest. This wasn't a walking corpse; based on the man's appearance and reactions, it was clear that he was still alive.

"What?" Lan Xichen breathed out. His uncle approached in a hurry, but, no matter what angle he looked at it from, the situation remained unchanged.

Trembling, Jiang Yanli backed up and fell to the ground, a sickened feeling filling her stomach. After watching the massacre of Lotus Pier (the endless deaths of her friends and family as they fell one after another) this was too much for her to handle. A sudden lightheadedness overwhelmed her, and her breaths came out in rushed, desperate gasps.

Where a normal young girl might have screamed at the sight, A-Qing merely stiffened, her breathing stopping momentarily. Standing amid a sea of villagers' corpses, Xiao Xingchen sheathed his sword.

"How can there not be even a single living person in this village?" he wondered, tranquil as ever.

All at once, Wen Ruohan realized what Xue Yang had done. Raising an eyebrow, he gave a low hum and turned his gaze on the street rat once more. It appeared brat's cruelty was even more impressive than the Chief Cultivator had realized. No wonder Jin Guangshan had been willing to risk so much for him.

'*Still, he's nowhere near as valuable as Wei Wuxian,*' Sect Leader Wen couldn't resist adding.

The ignorant Xiao Xingchen then disbelievingly added, "It's quite strange. They were *all* walking corpses."

"No," someone shook their head. "No they *weren't*-"

"Yeah. Good thing your sword can identify corpse energy on its own," Xue Yang answered, his voice solemn, confused, and somewhat pained — completely at ends with the devious grin on his face. "Or else, with just the two of us, we might have been in a lot of trouble."

Nodding in agreement, Xiao Xingchen added, "Let's examine the village again. If there really aren't any survivors, we should burn these corpses on our own."

They walked into the distance side by side, leaving A-Qing behind. She waited for nearly a minute, frozen in shock, until finally strength began to return to her legs. She sneaked out from behind the house toward the corpses, her hand covering her horrified, gaping mouth.

She looked down.

'*They were all killed by a stab to the heart,*' she and Wei Wuxian noticed. '*Wait… aren't these people-*'

A memory formed on top of the one they were already watching.

“Several days ago~” Ouyang Zizhen sang out, clearly having no idea what that time period referred to. The new memory displayed Xiao Xingchen, Xue Yang, and A-Qing walking through town and coming across a handful of idle men playing dice at the entrance to a village. As the men looked up, they saw a blind man, a blind girl, and another man who limped, and couldn’t help but laugh at the pathetic sight. They pointed and snorted and attracted each other’s attention toward the scene, lording their own superior health over the trio before them.

‘*Oh? I wonder, would you still be able to laugh at them if I paralyzed your legs and kicked you toward a pack of wolves?*’ Wen Qing wondered, a truly *vicious* smile on her face. However, a moment later, that smile of hers disappeared.

Her mostly-exaggerated desire for revenge had just been carried out to the fullest, after all.

Now that A-Qing thought about it, Xue Yang’s grin at the men hadn’t carried even a trace of amusement back then. His eyes hadn’t been smiling with him. She shivered and clutched her arms tighter around herself.

“Rotten man,” she hissed.

Then, she shook herself out of her fear and moved to investigate. After flipping over quite a few corpses, she began moving through them one by one and opening their eyelids. All of them had white eyes. Livor mortis had already climbed over most of their faces. As he watched A-Qing investigate, Wei Wuxian’s heart sunk lower and lower.

‘*Although they look a lot like walking corpses, these people had indeed been alive. The only problem was that they had been under corpse poisoning.*’

Nodding in agreement, Wen Qing kneeled close to one of the bodies, observing the reddish-purple powder around the woman’s mouth.

‘*Even if they haven’t finished transforming into walking corpses yet, the people infected will exhibit several traits walking corpses have,*’ the Yiling Patriarch added. ‘*One of which is emitting corpse energy.*’

Remember how close the situation his disciples had been was to this, Lan Xichen’s frown grew increasingly stern. Lan Jingyi had also been infected by corpse powder, but, thanks to Wei Wuxian’s help, would be able to return to normal with no consequences. These people, whose circumstances had been so similar, were instead murdered.

(Regardless of whose weapon had done the killing, it was clear that these villagers were victims of Xue Yang’s malice.)

A-Qing opened a victim’s mouth.

“Huh?” she blinked. “Why has his tongue been cut off?”

“A cut-out tongue yet again?” Nie Huaisang complained, inching away from the gruesome scene. “I’m starting to think that Xue Yang guy has a fetish for this.”

Nie Mingjue sighed at the comment, but was too emotionally exhausted by the simulation to put up much of a fight.

'*I see,*' Wei Wuxian's thoughts continued. '*They would have shouted for help. Although Xiao Xingchen can't see, Shuanghua can point towards corpse energy. Because the villagers had lost their tongues, the only sounds they would have been able to make were mangled groans similar to the noises real walking corpses make. Xiao Xingchen would have had no reason to doubt that all the villagers he had come to protect were already dead.*'

"That's horrible!"

"That *little*-"

Nie Mingjue couldn't even finish his curse, too overwhelmed by fury to speak another word.

'*It's too bad Da-ge isn't still alive,' Nie Huaisang had said, giving a dramatic sigh. 'The only reason Xue Yang wasn't executed to begin with is because he died, right?'*

It wasn't Nie Mingjue's *fault*, but it was — if he hadn't been so careless with his own life — if he had looked for another solution sooner, trained Huaisang better-

Perhaps, this wouldn't have happened.

"That bastard," A-Qing muttered, staring at the white eyes of the corpses. "Is he really helping Daozhang?"

'*No!*' Wei Wuxian mentally shouted. '*Those people were still alive at the time. They could have been helped! Please don't believe Xue Yang just like this!*'

Jiang Yanli sucked in an apprehensive breath.

Luckily, A-Qing had sharp intuition. Although she lacked the cultivation knowledge required to understand what happened, she continued to listen to her gut instinct:

'*No. No way. I don't know what that guy's problem is, but that bastard can't possibly be a good guy. From now on, every time they go out night hunting, I'll have to follow them.*'

Wei Wuxian's figure nodded insistently in agreement.

"With A-Qing's mind made up, she turned on her heel and began to run back, desperate to return to the hut before Xiao Xingchen and Xue Yang did," Lan Jingyi revealed. "Meanwhile, Senior Wei watched on, helpless to change what was to come."

The world faded to black.

And returned to white shortly after.

The atmosphere was tense and sensitive, as though they were all wound tightly enough to snap. With the exception of a scant few (read ‘Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan’), everyone was too worried about Xiao Xingchen and A-Qing to raise their voices.

Luckily, someone eventually got up the nerve to speak.

“Will there be any way for us to find Qing-xiaojie after we leave the simulation?” Lan Wangji asked. “Regardless of whether we manage to stop Xue Yang or not, it may be wise to get in contact with her.”

“One street-rat orphan among a million?” Wen Ruohan asked. “I highly doubt it. Not with the amount of information we have.”

The second jade frowned at that response, but didn’t disagree.

“And what about Xue Yang?” Lan Xichen asked. “We need to determine what to do with him.”

“Well… we agreed to not punish for events that have yet to occur, but given what he did *I’d* say it’s obvious that-”

“No,” Lan Wangji shook his head, bowing once in apology for cutting Yu-furen off. “We made a decision at the beginning of the simulation, and I would like to stick to that. We will not punish for events that have yet to occur. The current Xue Yang is only a young child.”

“So we can’t kill him, but we can’t just leave him alone either,” Nie Mingjue concluded.

After thinking for a moment, Madam Jin suggested, “Why not just have one of the sects take him in? Not necessarily to be a cultivator — it would simply be best to make sure we monitor him.”

Jin Guangshan straightened up, but (at his wife’s bloodthirsty glare) refrained from volunteering the Jin Sect as a place to take him. In all honesty, that was probably for the best. Given that it had been revealed that he had protected Xue Yang after Nie Mingjue’s death, he doubted that would go over well.

To Jin Guangshan’s left, Wen Ruohan considered whether to volunteering his own sect. The other sects would no doubt disagree, but he was sure they could be pressured into caving over something like this. However, the more he thought about it, the less appealing it seemed. Even Xue Yang himself had admitted that Wei Wuxian was his superior in every way (except, of course, in senseless cruelty). If Wen Ruohan did accept Xue Yang, the other sects could use that as further justification to hinder his relationship with Wei Wuxian. In addition, he had no reason to believe the two would get along even if he did attain both.

No sense in aiming for a rat if it meant loosing track of the prized fox.

“There’s also a matter of finding him,” Nie Mingjue pointed out. “ Though… if we do manage to track him down, the Nie Sect would be willing to take him. Given what we’ve seen of him, I’d say he probably fits better with us than with the Lan or Jiang Sects.”

No one asked why the Jin and Wen hadn't even been considered.

“We can search for ways to find the boy later,” Lan Qiren decided. “For now, I would prefer to hold off on making any decisions until we’ve seen all there is to see of him. The simulation has an annoying habit of hiding certain information for a more surprising reveal later.”

Wen Qing flinched at that, wondering once again whose core it was that burned in the future Jiang Cheng’s chest.

“Fine, then. But what-”

There was a pulse of energy from above.

Conversation cut off at once, and everyone looked towards the pure white ceiling (their sensitivity to resentful energy having apparently increased once again).

Someone cleared their throat, then greeted, “Yu-furen, Sect Leaders. Is this an okay time?”

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli lit up, greeting her shidi enthusiastically. Jiang Cheng straightened as well, about to ask about the situation outside when-

“A-Li, A-Cheng. I… are you both well?” Jiang Fengmian’s calm, soothing voice inquired.

“A-Die?!” Jiang Cheng asked, having not expected to hear from him again so soon.

“What?” Madam Yu wondered with a bitter hiss. “No greetings for your wife?”

“I… apologize, San-niang. How are you?”

“Fine,” she responded succinctly. “Nothing that was just revealed is especially urgent for you to know. We’re getting an explanation of how Yi City became the way it was, but haven't gotten to the most important parts yet.”

“I see. I’ll try to check in fairly regularly, so I would appreciate being updated if that changes,” Jiang Fengmian said.

“Of course,” Lan Qiren rushed to agree before Madam Yu could speak up. Honestly, things had been going relatively well for the couple before Jiang Fengmian had left; Lan Qiren could only hope that they would be able to get back to that point soon.

(But, given how annoyed Madam Yu had gotten at the response to her own reaction toward A-Qing’s thievery, quite a few people doubted the likelihood of that. Jiang Yanli resisted the urge to sigh.)

“Are the… future’s kids still doing well?” Jiang Fengmian asked. It was clear at once who he meant.

‘*A-Ling,*’ Jiang Yanli thought, her smile becoming even warmer.

Now that they had confirmation that Jin Ling's soul would be born, there was no real need to keep his existence a secret. However, Jiang Fengmian had felt it would be wrong to reveal something so important without his daughter's permission and presence, and so hadn't yet told anyone about it.

Jiang Yanli greatly appreciated the gesture.

"I believe they are safe, Sect Leader Jiang," Lan Xichen answered calmly. "They are waiting right now, but we have no reason to believe they are in any immediate danger. Hanguang-jun is protecting them. In addition, the slight roughhousing our narrators take part in imply a fairly happy ending after all this."

"If only they could hold themselves back for more than thirty seconds," Lan Qiren sighed.

"I — they're not… *that bad*," Jiang Cheng tried to protest, protective over his to-be nephew, but unwilling to directly disagree with a teacher like Lan Qiren.

Laughing heartily, Nie Mingjue corrected, "*Sizhui* isn't that bad. The rest are pretty awful."

"Hey!" Jin Zixuan protested. "Sect Leader Nie, just because *you* don't have one there-"

"No need to worry. I was including the future Huaisang in that group."

"What? Da-ge!"

"Now, now, no need to fight," Wei Wuxian said through his laughter, the unusually casual relationship between the sect leaders and the disciples drawing him in. "I can only keep this conversation going for so long. Focus, people!"

"Ah, sorry, Senior Wei," Jin Zixuan responded, deflating sheepishly.

There was a beat of silence. Then two. Slowly, the Jin heir's eyes widened in horror as he realized what he had just said. Then-

"'*Senior*' Wei?" the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian repeated. "Jin-gongzi… you do realize you're older than me, right?"

"I-I…" a bright flush covered his cheeks, nearly as dark as it had been when the simulation focused on him and Jiang Yanli. There was nothing he could say. The baby patriarch might know about the time travel, but Wen Ruohan's current expression made it very clear he was still unwilling to let other people know how much the simulation focused on Wei Wuxian. Therefore, the true explanation of 'Sorry, but I've been hearing the narrating juniors call you that for a while now, and the thirty-five-but-physically-twenty-four-but-technically-twenty-two version of you in the simulation seems like such a dad that I've started viewing you that way as well' was not an answer he could give. But then-

"A slip of the tongue, I'm sure," Wen Ruohan smiled, and no one dared to correct him.

Clearing his throat quickly, Jiang Fengmian nervously piped in, "Is there any other information you can give us about the simulation?"

“Of course,” Madam Yu hastily switched topic. “It appears Xue Yang is even worse than we expected him to be. A handful of people insulted him, so he massacered a village. He’s needlessly cruel and merciless towards those who have only the slightest relation towards those who offended him.”

She supposed she wasn’t really one to talk, but given the nature of the current situation, she still felt completely justified.

“I see. Thank you for telling me, San-niang.”

“...Who’s Xue Yang?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“He’s a man from the future,” Lan Qiren explained. “He’s wiped out several clans on his own using demonic cultivation. Unfortunately, he managed to escape from the future's Chief Cultivator's attempts at finishing him off, and has nearly completely recovered. Right now, he's posing a danger to several juniors from the Lan, Jin, Ouyang, and several other clans.”

“Can he be dealt with?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Based on how you and Mo Xuanyu have described it, it seems to be an art with very different uses than normal application, especially in its applicability to traps and ambushes. Is there another demonic cultivator nearby who can help?”

“There is,” Jin Guangshan reported with a grin. “W-Mo Xuanyu is there, in fact. And he is by far the better cultivator. If the spiritual cultivators can’t handle Xue Yang for some reason, he’ll take care of it.”

“What about for you?” Yu Ziyuan asked. “Is there anything of note happening outside?”

“Not especially,” Jiang Fengmian replied. “Though, I do feel a need to mention that Wen Chao has gained a new hobby of training dogs in the Qishan dungeons.”

All the light seemed to leave Wen Ruohan’s eyes at once, and an icy aura of annoyance filled the room.

“I see,” he said simply. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Ah… A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli spoke up. “Now that A-Die is back, you don’t need to go to Qishan yourself, right? It’s… fine for you to stay in Yunmeng?”

“No can do, I’m afraid, Shijie,” Wei Wuxian sighed, giving a laugh that the watchers couldn’t help but read as fake. “Young Master Wen has apparently heard of my charming personality and has personally invited yours truly to Qishan to-”

“You don’t need to go,” Jiang Fengmian interrupted at once. “I-you should have told me about this. I’ll go in your place.”

“Huh?”

It would be quite odd for someone other than the invited party to arrive, even if they were a sect leader. However, as Wen Ruohan continued to make no objection to Jiang Fengmian’s

suggestion, Wei Wuxian gradually felt his fear of what lurked beneath Qishan overtake his hesitance.

“...Thank you?” he said at last. “I… okay?”

“Great!” Jiang Yanli beamed.

“Good luck!” Nie Mingjue all-but ordered, feeling his fighting spirit arise at the report of Wen Chao’s actions.

“Have fun,” Madam Jin requested easily.

“Goodbye,” Wen Qing nodded once.

‘*Stay safe,*’ Lan Wangji thought.

“...Right.”

Chapter End Notes

We’ve gotten to 500,000 words! This is my longest fic ever, and I’m so thankful for all the kudos, comments and bookmarks you’ve all given me. My story is part of so many collections now too! Thank you everyone for all your support!

My Heart Being Stolen by A-Qing — Part 2

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Tintin for being my beta reader once again! You're the best! (ノ◕ヮ◕)ノ*:･ﾟ✧

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Jiang Fengmian's great relief, as soon as he informed the Wen Sect that 'Wei Wuxian is unfortunately recovering and too busy to journey to Qishan right now, but, in honor of the relations between the sects, Sect Leader Jiang would be happy to come in his stead' they retracted their offer. No one from Yunmeng had been forced to go to Qishan, and Wen Xu had managed to tame Wen Chao for the time being. Part of Jiang Fengmian had been worried that Wen Chao would be taking a more subtle approach to revenge, but, upon remembering that it was *Wen Chao*, he quickly discarded that idea.

(Which made it all the more humiliating that Wen Chao had managed to take over Lotus Pier, Wen Ruohan's guidance or not.)

"Uncle Jiang?" Wei Wuxian asks from behind him, the voice nearly making Jiang Fengmian jump at its unexpectedness. "Are you alright?"

"Ah, yes. Thank you, A-Xian. I'm fine," he responded, pleased to see how much more rested his ward looked. "I was just thinking."

"You've been doing that a lot lately," Wei Wuxian observed with a laugh, not putting any suspicion or inflection into his tone despite the fact that it was certainly hidden underneath.

"Ah… the simulation just gave me quite a bit to think about," Jiang Fengmian responded.

"Hmm…" Wei Wuxian leaned closer, a mischievous grin on his face. "Like what?"

"I-I…" Jiang Fengmian trailed off. "Like I said, the Sect Leaders agreed to not speak about that until we were all together. So that we would be able to give a full story-"

"Then what's on your mind? Surely it wouldn't bother you so much if you were content waiting."

How had Jiang Fengmian forgotten how terrifying it was to be on the opposing side of Wei Wuxian? He had seen first hand how his best friend's son could dig into anyone's argument and tear it apart, all while smiling like a naive child. If Jiang Fengmian didn't already know how sharp Wei Wuxian could be, he would have thought it was genuinely just childish curiosity driving Wei Wuxian's questions forward.

He had to think of an answer. Fast.

So he said the first thing that popped into his mind:

“Have you considered going to Gusu to see Lan-er-gongzi?” he asked.

The befuddlement that covered Wei Wuxian’s face at that was, at least, genuine.

“To Gusu? Why would I do that? Is there something wrong with the Second Jade?”

Ah, right. This Wei Wuxian barely knew Lan Wangji’s name.

(And that was so wrong on so many levels, even though it was the version of Wei Wuxian Jiang Fengmian had always known.)

“There’s nothing wrong with him, as far as I know,” Jiang Fengmian acknowledged. “I just feel that inner-sect relations are especially important during a confusing time such as this. I understand if you don’t want to see him while he’s still asleep, but perhaps keep that option in mind for when everything begins returning to normal.”

“Second young master Lan, huh?” Wei Wuxian muttered halfheartedly. Although he wouldn’t say it to his Sect Leader’s face, it was pretty clear Wei Wuxian was thinking ‘isn’t he supposed to be the most prim and proper of all? Why would I want to go see someone like that? Sounds annoying.’

Jiang Fengmian worked hard to swallow down his instinctive response of ‘Because he gladly accepted an even harsher punishment when the two of you left the Cloud Recesses after curfew — something that I now see would have never happened in Lotus Pier. It’s because he worked hard to protect you after you came back to life, not taking advantage of your teasing offers. It’s because you find him to be hilarious, and just speaking with him is enough to bring a huge smile onto your face. It’s because, as you mention time and time again, you apparently find him to be really, *really* pretty.’

If Wei Wuxian didn’t think he was insane before, he would undoubtedly feel so after hearing Jiang Fengmian say something like *that*. The Sect Leader was quite grateful that he had managed to hold that comment in.

He cleared his throat.

Then, by a stroke of pure luck, before Jiang Fengmian was forced to find a way to smoothly change the subject, little A-Lu and A-Yue came running over.

“Sect Leader! Da-shixiong! Mo Xuanyu’s trying to contact us again!” the boy shouted.

“Really?” Wei Wuxian excitedly asked, immediately spinning on his heel and sprinting toward the room the siblings had come from. As the sect leader followed behind his ward (at a slightly more relaxed pace), he wondered to himself at the budding friendship apparently sprouting between the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian and “Mo Xuanyu” — the twenty-two year old version. Would they be considered siblings? Twins, except different ages? Except their souls were also the same, and even twins didn’t have that.

After a bit more thought, Jiang Fengmian decided that they would need a new word to describe the pair. However, considering that Wei Wuxian was able to come up with names like “Chenqing” while *he* picked “Suibian,” he probably shouldn’t be the one to decide on it.

Finally, Jiang Fengmian caught up with Wei Wuxian, who was practically bouncing on his toes as he examined every inch of the glowing, crimson array which had appeared in the air.

“Any issues?” Jiang Fengmian asked.

“I don’t think so. It’s the same as last time, meaning we’ll be able to speak back and forth,” Wei Wuxian reported. “Are you going to join me? It could be helpful to introduce you to each other.”

“If you don’t mind,” Jiang Fengmian agreed with a nod, before glancing back at his avidly-watching fourth disciple and instructing, “If we are not out in an hour, summon Wen Ning-gongzi and ask him to force us out.”

“Understood, Sect Leader,” she responded immediately, looking pensive but unsurprised by his orders. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, clearly couldn’t wait to get started.

(For all the mistrust the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian had for “Mo Xuanyu,” it was undeniable that they had clicked in a way only two identical souls could.)

Breathing in once more to calm himself, Jiang Fengmian smiled at Wei Wuxian and nodded once. Simultaneously, they both reached a hand forward to make contact with the floating array of resentful energy.

Then, everything went black.

”Ah! They just appeared out of thin air!” a terrified voice exclaimed.

Jiang Fengmian blinked a few times to adjust to the change in lighting, then a few more times right afterward to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating what he saw in front of him.

Right next to the illusion of Mo Xuanyu was the future’s Sect Leader Nie Huaisang, who stared at them in awe and fear.

It took a few more moments for Jiang Fengmian to recover, but, as soon as he did, he quickly managed to right himself and bow slightly in greeting: “Sect Leader Nie…. *Mo*-gongzi.”

“Ah, hello! Sect Leader Jiang!” the Nie Sect Leader stuttered out, saluting him in return. To the man’s left, the future’s Wei Wuxian stood completely still, staring at Jiang Fengmian in abject shock.

The fifteen year old Wei Wuxian didn’t look much better.

“...Nie-xiong?” he asked. “Nie Huaisang?”

Ah, even if Wei Wuxian had seen the future version of Jiang Cheng, Jiang Fengmian supposed it would be hard to accept that this was a gateway to a world twenty years in the future. Everyone Wei Wuxian knew would be twenty years older there (for all that cultivators didn't age much), and it was a reminder that, according to 'Mo Xuanyu,' Wei Wuxian's future self was already dead.

(Well, he *had* died, so it wasn't strictly a lie.)

"Ah, Wei-xiong!" Nie Huaisang lit up. "My, you look so tiny. How cute!"

He zoomed forward, making the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian jump back slightly at the suddenness of the action.

"How precious!" Nie Huaisang sang out again. "Oh, this brings me right back to our days as students! Sneaking out to catch fish and drink alcohol and look at porn-"

The younger Wei Wuxian gave a dramatic gasp, quickly getting over his initial surprise, and countered, "Nie-xiong, alcohol and porn in the *Cloud Recesses?* Surely you jest."

Despite his best efforts, he couldn't keep himself from grinning as he said those words. Neither could Nie Huaisang, whose somewhat softer gaze spoke of a strange, sorrowful nostalgia.

"Well, I would, of course, never be one to advocate for breaking the rules," Nie Huaisang assured him. "Though, just between you and me, your older-self definitely recommends Gusu's 'Emperor's Smile.' If you have a chance…."

"Of course, of course," fifteen year-old Wei Wuxian laughed, then allowed himself to show some of the bewilderment he was experiencing. "Wow, this is… so weird. I feel like I'm in a warped fever dream."

"I appear in your dreams?" Nie Huaisang asked, delighted. "I hope it's all good things you see. What was your last dream about?"

After pretending to think it over for a moment, Wei Wuxian recalled that he actually *did* remember his dream from the previous night. There were bright green bowls containing soup floating in the lake and fish, much like the kite Jiang Fengmian had made for him, soaring through the sky. It was pretty obvious what it meant.

Nonetheless, he responded, "Well, no, *you* unfortunately weren't included, but I do recall dreaming about giant, flying goldfish last night."

Nie Huaisang gave a dramatic gasp: "Oh no! Wei-xiong, I got a dream-book a few months ago. It's meant to tell you what your dreams represent! I-I think that goldfish appearing in your dreams foretell that you will be cursed with just missing out on all the best sales for the next two weeks!"

He looked genuinely terrified.

(Some part of Jiang Fengmian wondered what the 'real' Nie Mingjue would do if he found out his younger-but-now-technically-older brother was wasting his time memorizing fortunes from random books. He resolved to avoid mentioning it to the man.)

"Oh, dear. You think so?" Wei Wuxian asked, excitement filling his body as he quickly began to accept that the Nie Huaisang in front of him was genuinely the person he knew. "There were also bowls of soup floating in the lake in my dream. What does that mean?"

After thinking it over for a moment, Nie Huaisang revealed, "Ah! If I'm remembering correctly, that means that your paints will spill into each other and mix when you don't want them to, turning into an ugly brown mush instead of the individual colors. Ah, how unfortunate…. Say — the bowls the soup was in weren't *green*, were they?"

Wei Wuxian blinked, started: "Wait, how did you know-"

Nie Huaisang gave the greatest gasp of all and continued, "The book said that if the bowls in the lake were green, your destined true love was going to spend the whole day sneezing! Oh, your poor soulmate."

Although Wei Wuxian was clearly disregarding the 'soulmate' comment, the apparently-accurate guess of "green bowls" was still mystifying him. The nonsensical 'dream book,' suddenly appeared a lot more credible.

Regardless of how curious he was as well, Jiang Fengmian knew he had far more important things to worry about. Moving slowly, so as to not attract too much attention while his Wei Wuxian spoke with the future's Nie Huaisang, he approached the twenty two year old Wei Wuxian.

"Hello, A-Xian," he whispered, too quietly for the past version to hear.

The boy flinched.

While some movement was good — Jiang Fengmian hadn't seen Wei Wuxian be still for so long in years — the flurry of emotions flashing across Wei Wuxian's face twisted the blade deeper into Jiang Fengmian's heart.

'A-Cheng, be well,' he had said.

And then-

'A-Xian, A-Cheng… you must look after him.'

He didn't specifically disagree with the words, but, after seeing everything that ended up happening, he wished he had asked Wei Wuxian to keep *himself* safe as well — especially since those words had been right after Madam Yu's.

Luckily, Wei Wuxian had never been one to stay chained by the past.

"Hi… Uncle Jiang," he finally managed to say.

Then, as though quickly shaking himself out of whatever he was thinking, he took a deep breath. When his eyes opened again, he managed to send Jiang Fengmian a far more genuine smile than his previous attempts.

"I didn't realize you had left the simulation," he said. "It's good to see you again."

"You as well," Jiang Fengmian said. Then-

"I'm sorry."

Everything paused for a moment.

Yes, those were the right words. When Jiang Fengmian imagined this conversation in his head, that was exactly the next thing to say.

They were just being said by the wrong person.

"...What?" he asked.

"I heard from the juniors about some of the moments they included. I'm sorry about Shijie. You asked me to defend her and Jiang Cheng, and I wasn't able to. I'm sorry you had to see that."

While that was true — and brought up many questions, as "wasn't able to protect" was very different from "intentionally killed" — it wasn't at all how Jiang Fengmian wanted this conversation to go.

"No. No, A-Xian, I-"

He paused, terrified he would say the wrong thing and make the conversation worse.

'*Really? After all that talk earlier, you're going to back down* now*?!*' Madam Yu's voice asked. '*You know full well that your hesitation has been exactly the problem all this time. Just say something. Anything!*'

"We-we've realized by now that the circumstances were complicated," Jiang Fengmian coughed. "You at least… regret it, right?"

That was perhaps the least convincing way he could have possibly said those words. And Wei Wuxian clearly caught onto that hesitation, interpreting it as a lack of belief in his regret.

But then, to Jiang Fengmian's surprise, Wei Wuxian replied "...I don't regret any of the conscious decisions I made that led me to that point, but I am nonetheless sorry that it happened."

That also opened up far more questions than it answered. Jiang Fengmian wondered how rude it would be to inquire further about this during their first meeting after around fifteen years.

‘*Oh, hesitating again? What was even the point of you leaving the simulation then! You might as well stay in that self-imposed coma for all the difference you make!*’

“A-Xian, that wasn’t what I was trying to say.”

He tilted his head curiously, waiting for Jiang Fengmian to continue.

“You… ah, well, I acknowledge that you wish it hadn’t happened. That’s enough.”

‘*Be honest and straightforward and get to the point!*”

“I didn’t mean to imply otherwise. Some of the memories we were shown were a little upsetting to A-Cheng, A-Li, and San-niang, so I just… I was hesitating because of that, so-”

“Ah, of course. I apologize; *that*, on the other hand, is something I *do* regret,” Wei Wuxian bowed once. “I am sorry for not keeping track of the Píngxíng Gateway and wrapping you all up in this. Thank you for your understanding on the matter.”

‘*Heavens, would you look at that?*’ Jiang Fengmian’s inner Yu Ziyuan scoffed. ‘*We’ve just made him accustomed to always being at fault. It's just like Lan Qiren said, isn't it? Some apology this is turning out to be!*’

“That also wasn’t what I meant to say.”

“Uncle Jiang?”

“I just… you-”

‘*It’s all going wrong — you’re just making it worse — get to the point already-*’

“I’m sorry!”

It was in the sudden silence that followed that Jiang Fengmian realized his initial plan of staying quiet so that he could speak to the future Wei Wuxian privately was going up in flames. The surprised stares the future Nie Huaisang and the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian were giving him were back-breaking in their intensity.

‘*So, what? You’re going to hesitate again?*’

“Uncle Jiang?”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “I… regret the last thing I — my other self — said to you. I apologize for having left you and A-Cheng alone like that. I should have… done more. To stop San-niang. I... before you…”

Before Wei Wuxian had started thinking that he would be blamed for everything without getting a chance to defend himself.

By this point, both versions of Wei Wuxian were staring at him blankly, not fully believing what they were seeing. The fifteen year old version was quite clearly trying to

determine what they were talking about, but the older one surely understood just fine.

"I see," Wei Wuxian smiled. "Thank you, Sect Leader Jiang. Apology accepted."

Or maybe not.

"Pardon?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

Accepted? Just like that?

No, that was far, far too easy. If it only took this much to earn Wei Wuxian's forgiveness, then his forgiveness was by no means an accurate representation of whether Jiang Fengmian had done enough.

But now-

The future Wei Wuxian cleared his throat: "If you don't mind, Sect Leader Jiang, could you update us on what the simulation is focusing on right now? Sect Leader Nie and I have something to speak to you about, and it'll be easier to do that if we understand how much context you have."

'*No*,' Jiang Fengmian wanted to say. '*I can't; not now. Not when you so clearly don't understand what I'm trying to say.*'

But at this point, what could he do that would help Wei Wuxian understand? He had already apologized in as clear terms as he could; if he wanted to genuinely show both Wei Wuxians what he meant, he would need to do that through his actions.

"...Alright," he accepted at last, and began to explain.

Suddenly, Lan Wangji sneezed.

Several people jumped in surprise, and quite a few sent confused glances in his direction. They were in a simulation; there was literally no dust or air. How could Lan Wangji have sneezed?

Strange.

However, right as Lan Xichen was about to ask (the equally-bewildered) Lan Wangji if anything was wrong, a voice cut in.

"One night, the winter winds howled outside," Lan Jingyi explained, lowering his voice dramatically and following the words up with a comically spooky "Ooooooooooo."

Lan Qiren just sighed.

Xiao Xingchen, Xue Yang, and A-Qing were crammed inside a small room, warming themselves with the old furnace. As Xiao Xingchen mended a basket with a broken strip of bamboo, A-Qing leaned on his shoulder, wrapped up in a blanket like a zongzi snack.

Xue Yang slouched with his chin in his hand, quickly getting annoyed as he listened to A-Qing continuously pester Xiao Xingchen.

“Daozhang, Daozhang-”

“Stop being so noisy! I’ll tie your tongue into a knot if you keep yapping,” he snapped.

Those words weren’t too different from the ones close siblings would exchange with each other, but, in this context, they left many of the watchers glaring hatefully.

After all, the ghostly form of A-Qing had been noticeably *lacking* that specific body part.

However, A-Qing wasn’t deterred whatsoever.

“Daozhang, I wanna hear a story!” she continued unflinchingly.

Laughing at the request, Xiao Xingchen pointed out, “When I was young, no one told me any stories. How would I know how to tell a good one?”

In response, A-Qing’s tantrum reached new heights.

Most of the watchers laughed at that, but Lan Wangji merely sat up slightly straighter, sealing Xiao Xingchen’s words into his mind.

It had been mentioned several times throughout the simulation that Wei Wuxian’s knowledge on his parents was pitifully lacking. Yu Ziyuan’s senseless grudge meant even Jiang Fengmian had been unwilling to speak about them to Wei Wuxian. In the Cold Springs Pond, the simulated Wei Wuxian had revealed to Lan Wangji that he didn’t even remember what they looked like.

Well, if that was the case, then Lan Wangji would do everything he could to correct that — starting with gaining information on the mountain Cangse Sanren had come from.

Seeing that A-Qing wasn’t going to give up anytime soon (and was, in fact, about to start rolling on the ground as an outburst of emotions), Xiao Xingchen caved in.

“All right. I’ll tell you a story that happened on a mountain,” he said.

Lan Wangji’s determination surged anew (though it was offset slightly by the sudden, unexpected sneeze that inexplicably wracked his body).

Excited, A-Qing suggested, “Once upon a time there was a mountain and on that mountain there was a temple?”

“No. Once upon a time, there was a celestial mountain that nobody knew the location of.”

‘*Nobody except Wei Wuxian,*’ Jiang Cheng thought with a grin.

“On the mountain, there was an immortal who had reached enlightenment. The immortal accepted many disciples, but she didn’t allow any of them to leave the mountain.”

‘*Baoshan Sanren,*’ the blue illusion of Wei Wuxian thought, his form flickering visibly as A-Qing (and Xue Yang) leaned forward in interest.

“Why didn’t she let them leave?” A-Qing asked.

With a sad smile, Xiao Xingchen answered, “The immortal had only hidden in the mountain because she couldn’t understand the world outside it. She told her disciples, ‘if you leave this mountain, then there’s no need for you to come back. Don’t bring the disputes of the outside world onto this mountain.’”

“Huh?” A-Qing straightened up indignantly, letting the watchers see the contemplative shadow of Wei Wuxian for a brief moment before he was pulled along. “How would the people on that mountain be able to withstand the boredom? There’d definitely be disciples who’d want to go outside and play!”

“You’re right,” Xiao Xingcheng acknowledged. “The first disciple who left was quite outstanding. Due to his mastery of cultivation, after leaving the mountain he received praise and admiration from everyone, becoming a famous cultivator on the righteous path. Afterwards, however, no one knows why, but his personality changed drastically, and he suddenly became a villain who killed people without blinking twice. In the end, he died under thousands of swords,” Xiao Xingchen concluded.

Giving a minute sigh, Wei Wuxian added on, ‘*The first disciple of Baoshan Sanren who ‘didn’t die a peaceful death’: Yanling Daoren. Even to this day, no one knows what caused his personality to change so much. It’s likely no one will ever find out.*’

A mocking laugh.

“Well, that sure sounds a lot like what people say about Wei Wuxian, doesn’t it,” Nie Mingjue asked. No one could deny the connection, many pursing their lips together and looking away from the storyteller.

Once Xiao Xingcheng finished mending the basket, he set it down and continued the story: “The second disciple was a girl, and also very outstanding.”

The blue shadow of Wei Wuxian straightened up at once, and the smile on his face was warm enough to single-handedly melt the arctic.

(Lan Wangji sneezed.)

“Is she pretty?” A-Qing asked.

‘*Absolutely,*’ Jin Guangshan recalled, then added, ‘*She and Wei Changze both — really, it’s no wonder Wei Wuxian looks the way he does.*’

“I wouldn’t know,” Xiao Xingchen admitted. “She was rumored to have been very pretty.”

“Ah, I know!” A-Qing suddenly lit up. “There must have been a lot of people who liked her and wanted to marry her after she left the mountain. She must have married a high ranking official or the leader of a big sect! Hee hee.”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you?” Madam Jin muttered.

“You guessed wrong,” Xiao Xingchen laughed. “She married the *servant* of the leader of a big sect. And the two lived happily ever after.”

But A-Qing frowned: “I don’t like this. How could an outstanding and beautiful cultivator settle on a servant? This story’s so cliche. It was probably made up by some poor scholar.”

Madam Yu flinched at those words, hearing her own voice hurl accusations at Jiang Fengmian in the back of her mind. After all, Cangse Sanren had been desired by the head of one of the great sects. Why *wouldn’t* she have had an affair with him?

‘*But, right at the end, in that pivotal moment, Fengmian chose your A-Cheng over A-Xian, didn’t he?*’ Cangse’s voice whispered in her mind.

“And then what happened?” A-Qing asked. “What were their lives like after they ‘lived happily ever after?’”

Smile fading, Xiao Xingchen concluded, “The two of them lost their lives in a night hunt.”

A-Qing did a double take.

“What kind of a story is this?” she demanded. “She not only married a servant, but they died together! I’m not listening anymore!”

Laughing, Wei Wuxian mentally added, ‘*It’s a good thing Xiao Xingchen didn’t tell her that the two of them gave birth to another big villain that everyone wanted to beat up. She’d probably be spitting mad about me if he had.*’

“...I wish he wouldn’t accept the hate everyone has for him so easily,” Jiang Yanli muttered, leaning closer to the equally-dejected Jin Zixuan as she did.

“That story was horrible!” A-Qing shouted.

“This is why I told you at the beginning that I didn’t know how to tell stories,” Xiao Xingchen pointed out, not bothering to object to her criticism.

“Then, Daozhang, you must remember the night hunts you’ve been on, right? I wanna hear those! Tell me, what sorta monsters have you fought?”

Xue Yang had been lost in thought during the previous story, listening with his eyes shut. Now, though, his expression grew a bit more serious and attentive. His pupils shrunk, and he glanced at Xiao Xingchen.

Shaking his head, Xiao Xingchen objected, "There are too many for me to remember."

"Oh?" Xue Yang tilted his head. "Then, Daozhang, have you always night hunted alone?"

"Wha-"

"That — how *dare* he?!" Nie Mingjue stood up. "When he's the one responsible for everything that happened. Pretending like he doesn't know what those words mean…. And now-"

'It's too bad Da-ge isn't still alive,' Nie Huaisang piped up. 'The only reason Xue Yang wasn't executed to begin with is because of that, right?'

After a pause, Xiao Xingchen softly answered, "No."

Curious, A-Qing piped in, "Who else was with you?"

An even longer pause followed.

'*Wei Wuxian was right; the naive inquiries of a child truly can hurt the most,*' Jin Zixuan sighed. '*Ah, I don't like this. I don't like this at all.*'

At long last, Xiao Xingchen responded, "...A very good friend of mine."

"He tried to avoid the topic of the third of Baoshan Sanren's students to leave the mountain, but it seems as though he'll have to tell this story regardless," Lan Qiren frowned, directing a fierce glare towards the grinning delinquent.

An eerie light flashed inside Xue Yang's eyes.

'*It seems that peeling off Xiao Xingchen's scabs gives him quite a bit of pleasure,*' Wei Wuxian observed, tone colder than ice.

A-Qing, on the other hand, was genuinely curious: "Daozhang, who's this friend of yours? What sort of person are they?"

"A sincere man of noble nature," Xiao Xingchen answered.

Xue Yang rolled his eyes in contempt, mouthing out curses, but, a moment later, spoke in a neutrally-curious tone as he asked, "Then, Daozhang, where's this friend of yours now? Why hasn't he come to find you when you're already like this?"

"You just don't know when to stop, do you?!" Jiang Cheng snapped. "Xiao Xingchen even saved your life. You would be dead without him — how can you say this after that? A street rat will never amount to anything more, huh?"

Nodding, Lan Qiren scathingly observed, "No sense of honor in that man."

The silence stretched on. Although A-Qing didn't know the context, she looked as though she had sensed that something was going on. Holding her breath, she clenched her teeth and, as though wanting to take a bite out of his flesh, glared at Xue Yang. Xiao Xingchen continued spacing out.

Finally, he said, "As for where he is right now… I don't know. But, I hope that…."

He never finished that sentence. After a while, he merely patted A-Qing's head.

"I think that's enough from me," he said. "I… I truly don't know anything about how to tell such stories."

If he had still had eyes, the watchers had no doubt they would look as vacant and haunted as his voice sounded. Wen Qing clenched her fists together, glaring down at Xue Yang with a level of disdain she had previously reserved for just Wen Chao.

And then, unable to see her glare, Xue Yang carelessly spoke up again.

"Then, how about I tell one?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!" A-Qing bounced excitedly. "You tell one."

Unhurried, Xue Yang cleared his throat and began: "Once upon a time, there was a child. The child really liked eating sweets, but because he had no parents or money, he could rarely eat them."

At once, an image of the starving eight year old Wei Ying flashed into Lan Wangji's mind, and he clenched his hands into fists.

(Then, just as unexpectedly as before, he sneezed once again.)

"...One day, the same as any other day, the child was sitting zoned-out on a flight of stairs," Xue Yang continued. "Opposite to those stairs was a liquor shop. A man sat on a table inside that shop."

Although this story wasn't great, it was much better than Xiao Xingchen's. As he spoke, A-Qing leaned forward, listening intently to the anecdote.

"When the older man saw the child, he gestured for him to come over."

'*What on earth is the point in showing us this?*' Nie Mingjue wondered, his growing hatred of Xue Yang leaving him without much patience for the man.

But, undeterred, Xue Yang continued, "Being naive and puzzled, the child, who had nothing to do anyways, immediately ran over. As he did, he saw the plate full of fresh pastries on the man's plate. The man pointed at them and asked, 'do you want this?' Of course the child wanted it."

A sad smile crossed Jiang Yanli's face as she was once again reminded of Wei Ying's first few days at Lotus Pier, as well as his quite memorable reactions to all the food he got to try.

"The boy nodded as fast as he could to the man. Seeing that, the man gave the child a piece of paper and said, 'if you want them, take this paper to a certain room in a certain place. I'll give these to you after that."

A strange foreboding sensation overcame Nie Huaisang, and he silently moved closer to his brother as a result.

"The child didn't know how to read, so he just took the paper and went to the specified place. After he opened the door, a huge, brawny man came out. He took the paper, looked at it, then slapped the child so hard his nose started bleeding. The man pulled the child's hair and asked 'Who told you to take this over?'"

'*I see,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*'The child' in the story must have been Xue Yang himself.*'

"Huh?" Jin Zixuan asked, swerving to look at Xue Yang again. "But that… *what*?"

'*I never would have thought someone as crafty as Xue Yang could have been so honest and dim witted as a child,*' Wei Wuxian continued. '*Whatever was written on that piece of paper couldn't have been nice. The man at the liquor shop must have had some sort of conflict with this man, but didn't dare curse the latter to his face, and so sent a child to carry the message. How perverse.*'

"The child felt scared and gave the man directions to the liquor store," Xue Yang continued, "The man went there at once, pulling the child along by his hair. But, when they arrived, the other man was long gone. The leftover pastries had been taken away by the waiters as well."

Jiang Yanli tensed at those words, feeling something within her squirm in dismay, despite the true identity of 'the child' having been revealed.

"The man was furious — kicking over a few tables before storming out. Similarly, the child was frustrated. He ran an errand for someone, got beaten up, and was held by his hair on the way back. His scalp was almost pulled off; of course he wouldn't be able to accept not having gotten any pastries. So, tears in his eyes, he asked the waiter, 'Where are my pastries? Where are the pastries he said would be mine?'"

Jin Guangshan rolled his eyes at the boy's naivete.

Similarly, Xue Yang gave a sharp grin as he concluded, "The store was in a mess and the waiter was feeling quite cross, so he slapped the child a few times hard enough to make the kid's ears burn."

The simulation was only showing them Xue Yang telling the story rather than the actual event, and yet Lan Xichen couldn't help but look away regardless.

“The kid was chased out the door. He crawled up and forced himself to his feet, walking for a while. And guess what? Coincidentally, he ran into the man that told him to take the letter again!”

He paused here, and A-Qing, engrossed in the story, spurred him on: “And then? What happened next?”

“What do you think happened? Just a few more slaps and a few more kicks.”

The words were followed by a mocking laugh.

‘When I was young, I really liked candy, but I couldn’t get any no matter what,’ Xue Yang said, explaining his possession of it to A-Qing. ‘...I always told myself that if I became wealthier one day, I would always carry an infinite amount of candy with me to eat.’

The older Xue Yang had done so many inexcusable things. In fact, the candy being referred to there had been used to lure A-Qing over so he could point a sword at her chest. Lan Qiren, by all rights, *shouldn’t* feel even slightly glad that Xue Yang did indeed manage to have access to some.

‘Shouldn’t’ wasn’t doing much to change how he did feel, though.

Having remembered the same moment, A-Qing cut off Xue Yang’s laugh with a giggle of her own: “That boy you’re telling us about was you, right? He liked sweets — it was definitely you! Why were you like this when you were young? If I were you, I would have been like ptew, ptew, and spat in his food! And then I’d hit him! I’d hit him and I’d hit him-”

How could this have possibly been the girl who, as a ghost, felt a need to steer all travelers away from the city where Xue Yang resided?

(What was Xue Yang going to do that they hadn’t seen yet?)

But the A-Qing before them didn’t know any of that. She just kept dancing around the room, singing out a constant repeat of ‘I’d hit him!’ and nearly smacking Xiao Xingchen in the process.

“Alright, alright. You’ve finished listening to his story. It’s time to sleep.”

‘*Wow. He’s such a dad,*’ Nie Huaisang thought with a laugh.

Further proven when Xiao Xingchen tucked the still-fuming A-Qing in, laughing softly at her continued complaints. Once he had ensured that she was all set up, he silently exited the room, returning to where Xue Yang was.

“What happened after that?” Xiao Xingchen asked.

“There is no ‘afterward,’” Xue Yang responded. “You didn’t continue telling your story either, did you?”

After considering that for a moment, Xiao Xingchen spoke again: "No matter what happened afterward, your life is fairly adequate right now. You don't need to dwell on the past."

Although that was certainly the right advice to give Xue Yang, Lan Wangji couldn't help but think there was such a thing as too much of that. After all, all four of the great sects had rallied against Wei Wuxian, and yet the man himself hadn't shown even the slightest bit of animosity towards them after coming back to life.

Then again, the second jade had to admit that Wei Wuxian's ability to move on was something he certainly admired about the man. If Wei Ying could be happy without looking for revenge, then Lan Wangji would do everything he could to support that.

Unfortunately, although he would deny it, Xue Yang was far from the same.

"I'm not dwelling on the past," he told the white-robed cultivator. "It's just that Little Blind keeps stealing my candy and finishing it all. I can't help but remember the days in which I had none."

From the other room, A-Qing kicked her coffin a few times, protesting, "Daozhong, don't listen to him! I didn't eat that much!"

Xiao Xingchen laughed softly, suggesting, "Let's all rest."

The sky darkened, and Xiao Xingchen went out to Night Hunt again. When he returned in the early morning light, he silently passed by his two seemingly-sleeping companions, placing something next to them. Once Xiao Xingchen had left, A-Qing allowed her eyes to creep open, and she turned to see what Xiao Xingchen had dropped inside her casket.

A small piece of candy lay waiting for her at the edge.

'*Foolish man,*' Madam Yu thought, looking on with an expression that, for once, couldn't actually be described as scorn. '*You end up dead because of this. You and Wei Wuxian both! You help people who just cause trouble for you later, and then-*'

Wen Qing gave a small sigh, and Madam Yu froze.

She had shouted at Wei Wuxian for hours over him saving Luo Qingyang and 'making the Wens attack.' The earlier attack on the Lan Sect had made it clear (even to her) that there was very little truth in that, but she had said it all anyways.

And then, after the attack, the only reason her son had managed to survive ended up being the Wen boy who Wei Wuxian had offered his help to during the archery competition. Not even she was blind enough to say that offering kindness without any other goal in mind was stupid.

(The voice whispering at her that just a few days ago she would probably have said it anyways was easily ignored.)

Meanwhile, A-Qing had gone to investigate. She had silently crept out of her coffin and was now watching as Xue Yang stood frozen. On the table before him, another piece of

candy laid still.

The near-countless emotions on his face were impossible to distinguish.

But they quite clearly weren't scorn or maliciousness either.

Nie Mingjue stood still, watching just as silently as A-Qing was. On one hand, this was the man who had destroyed Song Lan's eyes and had tricked Xiao Xingchen into murdering innocents just a short time ago. If Xiao Xingchen knew who he was, he would never have considered giving him anything.

On the other hand, to the kid who had grown up deprived of even the slightest treats, a gesture like this would mean the world.

'*It's too bad Da-ge isn't still alive. The only reason Xue Yang wasn't executed to begin with is because of that, right?*'

No matter what the circumstances were, this clearly *meant something* to Xue Yang. Why couldn't he simply leave it at that? Why did he have to kill A-Qing — *cut out her tongue* — and leave Xiao Xingchen's corpse in this coffin house they spent years inside?

(If Nie Mingjue had been alive, these events, which were looking closer and closer to a tragedy on all fronts, might not have happened.)

"After that day, Xiao Xingchen would give the two of them a piece of candy every night," Jin Ling revealed, sounding fairly lost in regards to how a line like that could be important. "...Anyways, A-Qing was quite pleased, but Xue Yang expressed neither gratitude nor rejection towards this act, which made A-Qing angry for some time."

Said scene played out before their eyes.

"Xiao Xingchen was responsible for their meals. However, since he was blind, he wouldn't be able to measure the quality of the vegetables the vendors were trying to sell him. If the vendor was nice, then it would all work out, but for the ones who wanted to take advantage of his blindness — dirty, money grubbing vultures that they are-"

"*Jin Ling,*" Sizhui said warningly, perhaps feeling that it was a bit tone-deaf for the leader of the *Jin* sect to complain about it, even if he didn't disagree.

Understanding, Jin Ling hurriedly cleared his throat and continued: "The vegetables Xiao Xingchen brought back were often of lacking quality or quantity. Xiao Xingchen himself didn't care much, but A-Qing was often infuriated. Seething, she had demanded to join him when he shopped for ingredients, but given that she was still pretending to be blind, there wasn't much she could do. That's when the rat-"

"Call him Xue Yang, Jin Ling," Sizhui cut in. "We'll confuse them if we don't use names."

Ouyang Zizhen made a hum of agreement and added, "Besides, that's pretty offensive to rats! You don't need to compare them to *him*."

Jiang Cheng snorted and had to cough a few times in a vain attempt to cover it up before his mother noticed. Luckily, occupied in her own thoughts, Madam Yu didn't bother to scold him right then.

"Anyways," Jin Ling continued, "in those situations, *Xue Yang* was useful."

Madam Jin couldn't help but notice how well her grandson could make even just the man's name sound like a curse. The boy must have inherited that from her and Yu Ziyuan.

"With keen eyes and a sharp tongue that came with his delinquent self, he'd be able to bargain anything down — or, if that failed, glare at the vendor until they caved in. A-Qing even praised him a few times, and with the daily candies on top of that, a delicate peace was established between her and Xue Yang."

In the background, Ouyang Zizhen made an annoyed 'hmph' sound.

Some part of Lan Qiren deeply dreaded the day those four would wind up in his classroom. He made a mental note to never ask them to read a text aloud once that day came.

(Lan Wangji, once again, sneezed.)

"Luckily, even through all this, A-Qing never let her guard down around Xue Yang," Jin Ling concluded, and the simulation displayed said girl playing in the streets. She was once again pretending to be blind, knocking her bamboo pole against the ground.

No matter how long he thought about it, Nie Mingjue couldn't help but be amazed. He still disliked cowardly, cheap tactics — still valued honorable victories above all else — but for this girl to manage to fool Xue Yang into thinking she was genuinely blind for *years*?

It went beyond his wildest imagination.

And could he truly say she was wrong to do so? No, of course not. As a young, blind girl, this was the best option she had.

Another fake-stumble tripped A-Qing up as she pretended to not have seen a large rock on the ground. The amusing act didn't generate even the slightest smile on the girl's face; she had been playing this game her whole life, and wouldn't crack now. Suddenly, a cold voice came from behind:

"Young maiden, if you can't see, it would be best for you to not run so fast."

Everyone's eyes turned towards the man who had just spoken, and they widened a moment later.

'*Song Lan,*' Wei Wuxian realized, his blue, wispy form jerking at the revelation.

A-Qing tilted her head at him, but Song Lan had already walked over. Putting his whisk over A-Qing's shoulder, he gently led her to the side of the road.

"There are less people over here," he explained.

Despite the cold tone of voice he used, there was a genuine kindness to his actions. Smiling at the scene, Lan Xichen couldn't help but compare the man's eyes to those of the future Hanguang-jun. Xiao Xingchen's eyes in Song Lan's body — not an especially large jump, all things considered.

Having gotten a similar impression, Wei Wuxian smiled: '*Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan really are good friends, aren't they? Good friends have to be similar in character.*'

There was a quiet giggle from a corner of the room, and Nie Huaisang leaned closer to his brother to whisper, "No wonder Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong get along so well. They're just destined to be!"

Having been brought to safety, A-Qing tittered, "A-Qing is very thankful of Daozhang!"

Nodding once in acceptance, Song Lan retracted his whisk and added, "Don't play around too much. The dark energy here is quite strong. In the future, be careful to not linger outside too long."

"Okay~"

Having received her agreement, Song Lan continued walking. Under A-Qing's watchful eye, he approached another passerby and stopped him.

"Excuse me, have you seen a blind cultivator who wears a sword in this area?"

All at once, the tension in the room tripled. They knew they couldn't change anything, and they knew some of what was going to happen, but Song Lan's arrival was a trail of gunpowder being lit on one end. It wouldn't be long before the spark reached the fireworks on the other end and the world lit up in a destructive glow.

Under A-Qing's deceptively clear gaze, the passerby responded, "I'm… not sure. Daozhang, you can try asking the people over there."

"Thank you."

At once, A-Qing tapped her way over, asking, "Daozhang, why are you searching for the other Daozhang?"

"Have you seen him?!" Song Lan demanded at once, turning to face her.

"Say 'yes!' Say yes!" Jiang Cheng encouraged.

"Maybe I have, maybe I haven't," she responded.

Madam Jin quickly moved to cover up her snort with an elegant cough.

Undeterred by the non-answer, Song Lan straightforwardly asked, "How can I make it so that you've seen him?"

“If you answer a few questions for me, then maybe I’ll remember I have,” A-Qing responded. “Are you Daozhang’s friend?”

‘*Clever, protective, brilliant girl,’* Wen Qing thought, feeling her hands clench together in anticipation. ‘*But… it won’t be enough.’*.

Luckily, the question she had asked was one with a clear answer.

However, to the surprise of many of the watchers, Song Lan hesitated. He frowned deeply, and it him took several additional moments to respond:

“...Yes.”

‘*Why did he hesitate?*’ Wei Wuxian wondered.

Most of the watchers tilted their heads, wondering the same.

Sensing the hesitation as well, A-Qing demanded, “Do you really know him? How tall is he? Is he pretty or ugly? What’s his sword like?”

“His height is similar to mine. His appearance is rather fine. His sword is carved with a pattern of frost,” Song Lan answered without pause. At those correct answers, A-Qing fell silent once more, analyzing him closely.

“Please believe him,” Jiang Yanli whispered. “Please believe him. Please believe him.”

Luckily, A-Qing had always had a good intuition when it came to other peoples’ characters. She had trusted Xiao Xingchen instantly and had known to be wary of Xue Yang just as fast. After staring at Song Lan for a few more seconds, recalling the help she had been so unhesitantly offered, she made her decision.

“I know where he is. Daozhang, follow me!”

A grin broke out across Jin Zixuan’s face, and he and Jiang Yanli turned to each other, equally delighted. Madam Yu simply sighed, quite certain that their hope wouldn’t last much longer.

A-Qing led him to the coffin home, but, once the door was in sight, Song Lan stopped in his tracks. Like an early frost had engulfed his face, all the blood rushed out, leaving him white as a sheet.

“What’s wrong?” A-Qing asked. “Aren’t you gonna go over?”

Far too many things could be seen in Song Lan’s expression. It was obvious that, more than anything, he wanted to rush over, but a steadily-increasing fear held him back. The aloof look he had before was completely gone.

Upon seeing that, Lan Xichen (who had connected the man’s general demeanor to Wangji some time ago) and Nie Mingjue (for obvious reasons) had to fight the urge to surge forward

and push him along. They understood his hesitation — the transfer of *eyes* was a debt that could never be repaid — but if he didn't move *now* everything would be-

Right as it looked like Song Lan might have made up his mind to go in, another figure strolled inside, lackadaisical and casual as can be. Seeing that, Song Lan's face immediately went from pale to ashen.

It was Xue Yang.

"*Damn it!*" Nie Mingjue growled, nearly breaking his chair with the force of his rage. They had been so, so close, but now-

A series of laughter came from inside the coffin home, and A-Qing snorted: "The annoying one is back."

"Who is he?" Song Lan asked at once. "Why is he here?"

"He's a bastard. He never told us his name, so who knows who he is? He was saved by Daozhang, so now he sticks to Daozhang all the time! He's such a pain!"

A tumble of emotions passed through Song Lan's face, but he only responded, "Be quiet."

Startled by his expression, A-Qing obeyed.

The two of them approached the coffin home, and soon got close enough to hear Xiao Xingchen's voice ask, "Whose turn is it today?"

As soon as he heard Xiao Xingchen speak, Song Lan's hands began to tremble.

Just as Hanguang-jun's hands had when he first heard 'Mo Xuanyu' play his song on Dafan Mountain, Lan Xichen noticed.

"What if, from now on, we don't take turns anymore?" Xue Yang suggested. "Let's change it up!"

"You're only saying that because it's your turn today, aren't you?" Xiao Xingchen laughed. "How do you want to change it?"

As the scene played out, Wen Ruohan couldn't help but think the damage caused by watching this would give Song Lan far more pain than even the most cruel of torture would. And it was unintentional on all sides.

Fascinating.

"Here, there are two sticks," Xue Yang continued, ignorant to the rapidly-deteriorating Song Lan waiting just outside. "If you pick the longer one, you don't have to go. If you pick the shorter one, then you'll have to go. What do you think?"

There was a beat of silence.

Then, Xue Yang laughed.

“You picked the short one! There, I win!”

‘I win,’ he had said. How would Song Lan, whose eyes had been gouged out by Xue Yang — who had gotten new ones from Xiao Xingchen, only for said friend to disappear — feel upon hearing those words?

“You’re going!” Xue Yang insisted.

With reluctance, Xiao Xingchen sighed in acknowledgement, “Alright. I’ll go.”

‘*Yes!*’ Wei Wuxian thought with a grin. ‘*This is perfect. Come outside, quick. If Song Lan grabs him and runs as soon as he’s out, everything will be fine.*’

And once again, Lan Xichen couldn’t help but see his future-brother, who had grabbed onto ‘Mo Xuanyu’ and had dragged him back to the Cloud Recesses, away from the future Jiang Wanyin, who would have tried to torture him without remorse if he had caught him. As more and more parallels formed before his eyes, he felt the tension in his body rise.

However, right before Xiao Xingchen reached the door, the other voice in the room laughed.

“Come back, I’ll go.”

“Why are you willing to go now?”

“Are you an idiot? I tricked you. I picked the shorter one; I just had the longer stick hidden behind me. Whichever one you picked, I would be able to take out a longer one. I’m just exploiting the fact that you can’t see.”

“...I can’t believe he came clean about that,” Jin Zixuan commented, then clicked his tongue angrily. “Of all times for him to tell the truth!”

As Xue Yang walked out, A-Qing turned to Song Lan. She saw him shake in barely-contained rage at the sight of the man, but, seeing him gesture to her to stay quiet, refrained from speaking until the other man was quite a distance away.

Finally:

“This man… when did Xing… when did that Daozhang of yours save him?” Song Lan asked.

Seeing how serious his face was, A-Qing wasted no time before answering, “It’s been a long time. A couple of years.”

“Daozhang never found out who he was?”

“No.”

“What a mess,” Lan Qiren muttered. After yet another sneeze wracked his illusionary body, Lan Wangji nodded in agreement.

“...What has he done during his stay with Daozhang?”

“Joke around, bully me, scare me… Oh, he also night hunts with Daozhang!”

A shudder went through Jiang Yanli’s body as she recalled the civilian villagers — a majority of whom were innocent — that ended up being the victims of Xue Yang’s twisted revenge.

Perhaps feeling a hint of the truth, Song Lan inquired further: “Night hunt? Night hunt what things? Do you know?”

“...They used to hunt walking corpses pretty regularly. Now it’s usually ghosts, animals that behave weirdly, and so on.”

“Hm. So he stopped,” Wen Ruohan observed.

“That doesn’t erase what he’s already done,” Nie Mingjue snapped back. “Especially so long as he doesn’t regret it.”

“I wasn’t saying it did.”

But to Nie Mingjue, whose stress was quickly reaching a breaking point, the easy acceptance was little help.

Although he couldn’t find anything strange about what had occurred with just A-Qing’s description, Song Lan’s suspicions remained potent.

“...Is the Daozhang close to him?”

“Idiot,” Madam Yu muttered. “Asking a question you don’t want the answer to is just going to mess you up later.”

“Still, I… don’t think he can help it, A-Niang,” Jiang Yanli spoke up. She tensed immediately after, having only been able to speak so openly against her mother due to the reassuring presence of her fiance, but, to her surprise, Madam Yu just gave a small sigh of agreement.

She knew her daughter was right, and was slowly learning better than to refuse the truth.

At long last, A-Qing reluctantly answered the question: “I think Daozhang is really unhappy when he’s alone…”

Song Lan flinched.

“...He finally got someone who cultivates as well,” she continued. “...I think he sorta likes listening to the bastard tell jokes.”

Now, the cultivator’s face was clouded by both rage and devastation. Amid the confusion, he could only be certain about one thing:

‘*I can’t tell Xingchen about this.*’

“Fool,” Wen Qing muttered, her hands clenched into tight fists. “Idiots, all of you. Always trying to shoulder everything alone.”

And now-

“Don’t tell Daozhang anything unnecessary,” he cautioned, before standing up and moving in the direction Xue Yang had just departed in.

“Daozhang, are you going to beat up that bastard?” A-Qing asked.

‘*Way more than beat up,*’ Wei Wuxian thought as Song Lan got farther and farther away. ‘*He’s going to chop Xue Yang into pieces!*’

“I wish he did,” Jiang Cheng muttered, remembering once again the danger Jin Ling had been put into.

Knowing which path Xue Yang had taken, A-Qing sped off as well. Taking a shortcut through the forest, she soon spotted Xue Yang’s figure before her. He had a basket filled with food in one hand and was yawning lazily.

A-Qing hid, and saw Song Lan approached the man.

“Xue Yang,” he said, voice colder than ever before. In an instant, the lackadaisical expression that had been on Xue Yang’s face vanished, replaced by a terrifying rage.

‘*Be careful, Daozhang,*’ Lan Wangji thought, wishing there was a way for him to offer his own assistance. A moment later, he sneezed once again.

Song Lan’s sword was already unsheathed, and held firmly in his hands. After a moment, a look of mock-surprise crossed Xue Yang’s face.

“Oh, isn’t this Song Daozhang? What a rare guest? You here to get a free meal-”

Before he could finish speaking, Song Lan was already a mere meter away, his sword approaching the flesh of Xue Yang’s neck. It didn’t reach — blocked by Jiangzai a half-second before impact.

Nie Mingjue cursed.

Xue Yang backed up at once and set his basket down, muttering, “You damn cultivator. For once, I actually offered to shop for food, and yet here you are, spoiling my mood.”

He probably would have continued even after that, but he had to stop and defend himself from the following barrage of lethal attacks Song Lan dished out.

Not hesitating for even a second, Song Lan continued to srike as he shouted, “Just what in the world are you scheming?! Why have you spent so long near Xiao Xingchen?!”

Xue Yang just laughed: "And I was wondering why Song Daozhang still had business with me! So you want to ask about thi-"

"Tell me! Why would a piece of scum like you be so nice as to help him night hunt?!"

Song Lan's sword just barely missed grazing Xue Yang's cheek, but the resulting wind pressure was sharp enough to make a small cut form. Despite that, Xue Yang's maniacal smirk never faltered.

"Tell me!" Song Lan shouted again, this time managing to pierce through Xue Yang's arm due to his superior abilities.

"You really want to hear it? I'm afraid you might go mad if you do!" Xue Yang cackled, expression unchanged despite his wounds. "Some things shouldn't be made known."

So Xue Yang said. And yet, despite all the terrible things they had been shown, every watcher was grateful for the knowledge the simulation had granted them.

"Xue Yang, my patience is running out!" Song Lan growled, voice colder than ever before.

With a *clang*, Xue Yang blocked a strike that was aimed at his eye, only to then reply, "Fine. If you're so keen on hearing it, I'll tell you. Do you know what that bestest friend of yours did? How he killed a lot of walking corpses? How he exorcised them for the greater good without asking for anything in return? It's quite touching, really. Although he dug his eyes out for you and became blind, Shuanghua points towards resentful energy, allowing him to keep fighting. Wanna know what's even better? I learned that if you cut off the tongues of people under corpse poisoning and render them incapable of speaking, Shuanghua, who can't distinguish between living and dead corpses-"

He had already said more than enough for Song Lan to understand.

"You monster… you vile monster…" Song Lan whispered, arm trembling.

No one could disagree. The sheer scale of the cruelty Xue Yang was capable of had impressed even Wen Ruohan. Jin Guangshan made a mental note to secure influence over the child Xue Yang in the real world.

Then, before ~~Xiao Xingchen's~~ Song Lan's horrified eyes, Xue Yang snorted in amusement.

"Ah, Song Daozhang, polite people like you really are at a disadvantage when it comes to cursing others. You always say the same words over and over again. There's absolutely no power or creativity at all. I haven't used 'vile' or 'monster' when insulting other people since I was seven."

Enraged, Song Lan's next attack was aimed towards Xue Yang's throat. It was dodged by a hair's breadth, which only increased the anger surging through the cultivator's body:

“You imposed upon his blindness and fooled him so terribly!”

The blade cut through Xue Yang’s shoulder, but the man himself didn’t react.

“Imposed on his blindness?” he repeated instead. “Song Daozhang, have you forgotten *who* he dug out his own eyes and became blind for?”

Nie Huaisang and Wen Qing flinched at the accusation, their eyes flashing towards Jiang Cheng. There was no reaction from the boy (after all, Jiang Cheng didn’t know), but-

‘He was thusly despised by the public, his home destroyed by his beloved shidi, and he died miserably.’

If they were right about Wei Wuxian’s core — and they couldn’t be right but as more and more information was revealed it began to seem like they *had to be* — then the accusations against Song Lan could be hurled even more harshly towards the simulated Jiang heir.

The two then turned to each other, making eye contact and having a wordless conversation as the simulation carried on. The only person who noticed their strange reactions was Lan Wangji, who frowned as he tried to decipher what had upset them so much.

(A moment later, he sneezed.)

Unlike those three, who were stuck on the previous words, the rest of the watchers managed to continue to focus on the simulation. A now-frozen Song Lan listened in horror as Xue Yang’s grin took on an even more malicious tint:

“Do you really think you’re in any sort of position to blame me? Do you think you’re still a friend of his? Are you really shameless enough to call yourself his ally? Song Daozhang, do I really need to remind you what you said to Xiao Xingchen after I wiped out Baixue Temple? When he ran towards you, worried and concerned, and tried to reach out to you, what sort of an expression did you have?”

“I-” Song Lan cut himself off, his mind deteriorating before their eyes. “At the time, I-”

“‘At the time,’ you were upset? Pained? Grieving? You didn’t know where to vent your anger? Is that why you took it out on him? To be fair, the reason I wiped out your temple was precisely because of him. It’s quite understandable that you took it out on him. In fact, that was exactly what I wanted.”

As he continued to speak, Xue Yang’s attacks became fiercer and cleaner, giving him an edge over the now-crumbling cultivator going against him. And yet, even as the tide of the battle began to obviously turn, Song Lan didn’t have the mental capacity to notice at all.

“Well, who was it that said ‘from now on, we won’t need to meet again?’ Wasn’t it you?” Xue Yang viciously continued, attacking deeper and deeper with every sign of weakness. “He listened to your request and disappeared after he dug his eyes out for you, and yet you’ve come to search for him now? Isn’t that a bit too *difficult for him?*”

This time, Nie Huaisang and Wen Qing weren't the only ones able to make the connection.

'*Why? Why? Just why?' Jiang Cheng shouted, staggering towards Wei Wuxian. 'Are you happy now? Are you satisfied? Why did you have to save Lan Wangji? Why did you do that? I don't care if Lan Wangji or Jin Zixuan dies! Just let them die! What's their deaths got to do with us? With our sect? Why did this have to happen?!'*

"But… I-" Jiang Cheng stuttered. "Back then, I was-"

'At the time, you were upset? Pained Grieving? You didn't know where to vent your anger?' Xue Yang had just asked.

And the truth to the poisonous words made them sting all the more.

Suddenly, creating an opening on the faltering Song Lan, Xue Yang smirked and released a cloud of corpse poisoning powder. It filled Song Lan's lungs, and he immediately began to cough-

In that half second, he ended up with Jiangzi poking straight through his mouth.

Jiang Yanli *screamed.*

Song Lan's tongue had been cut off.

The resulting sounds were terrifying.

With the tension that had already been in Nie Huaisang's body multiplied six-fold, and he quickly moved closer to his uncharacteristically-speechless brother.

Meanwhile, the watching A-Qing clenched her teeth together tightly, refusing to make even a single sound. She could only stare in horror as Song Lan staggered forward, mind corrupted by an unbearable agony, and tried to attack once again.

This time, Xue Yang didn't even bother trying to dodge. After all, before Song Lan's sloppy attack could make contact with him, Shuanghua's silver glare pierced through Song Lan's chest, killing him at once.

Wen Qing felt her blood freeze.

'*Second question then: who killed him?' Wei Wuxian had asked.*

After asking the question through inquiry, Lan Sizhui had to disbelievingly report, 'He said… Xiao Xingchen.'

Song Lan looked down at Shuanghua, which had pierced his heart, then slowly looked up again. At the other end of the blade, he saw Xiao Xingchen, who calmly held the sword.

"Are you okay?" Xiao Xingchen asked, completely ignorant of what had just occurred.

Song Lan moved his lips soundlessly.

A corpse — a sentient fierce corpse, so much like A-Ning — was being created right before her eyes. Had something like this happened to Wen Qing's brother? How had he died?

(If it had been even a hundredth as cruel as what happened to Song Lan, she had a feeling she would *snap*.)

Meanwhile, Nie Mingjue watched the horrors unfolding before him, and, with an anger spurred on by a righteous spirit even Wei Wuxian had acknowledged, felt one ~~untrue~~ phrase play on repeat in his mind.

'*My fault. My fault. My fault.*'

"I'm okay," Xue Yang said at last, grinning easily as Song Lan attempted to gasp out a word. "Why are you here, Daozhang?"

Casually as ever, Xiao Xingchen returned Shuanghua to its sheath.

"Shuanghua was behaving strangely," he explained. "I followed its guidance and came to see. There haven't been any walking corpses here in quite a while — much less a single one roaming alone. Did it come here from somewhere else?"

Song Lan fell to his knees, the life beginning to leave his eyes.

"Probably," Xue Yang said, gazing down disdainfully at Song Lan. "It's making awful noises."

A strangled laugh escaped Nie Mingjue's throat.

"'*Awful noises?*'" he repeated. "You… how can you have the *audacity* to watch this all happen and not feel even the slightest bit of — and you *dare* call yourself human?!"

He cut off for a moment, then began swearing harshly enough to make a thief cry. Normally, a young master such as himself would never have known those words, but Nie Mingjue accepted people of all walks of life into his sect; some of the lower-born people he had welcomed in had given him a few lessons.

Meanwhile, Lan Xichen watched from the sidelines, frozen where he stood. Nie Mingjue had half expected him to frown at the cursing, but nothing came. The first jade of Lan was too distracted to comment.

(Song Lan's story had many parallels to what they had seen so far. He had received help from Baoshan Sanren at the cost of someone he had blamed, just like Jiang Cheng. However, he had also looked desperately for Xiao Xingchen to make up and apologize for what he had done, just like Lan Wangji.)

(And now he was bleeding out, stabbed by Xiao Xingchen himself.)

Suddenly light-headed, Lan Xichen collapsed into his seat, unable to speak a word.

‘*I see,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*Right now, if Song Lan passed his sword to Xiao Xingchen, he’d be able to wordlessly prove his identity. Xiao Xingchen would recognize the sword, and would understand how dangerous Xue Yang was. How could he not recognize the sword of his closest friend with just a touch.*’

And yet Song Lan didn’t move.

“Oh,” Lan Qiren muttered, realization creeping in.

‘*He’s physically capable of doing that, but he can’t,*’ Wei Wuxian concluded. ‘*No matter the warning it would give Xiao Xingchen about Xue Yang, it’s impossible now. How could Song Lan possibly tell Xiao Xingchen who he’d just killed with his own hands?*’

And so-

“Let’s go,” Xue Yang suggested. “It’s time to cook dinner. I’m hungry already.”

And not a trace of guilt could be found in that cheerful tone.

“Monster,” Jiang Yanli whispered.

Madam Yu huffed once, “This is what you get for pitying a street rat, A-Li. It doesn’t matter how sad their pasts seem, they can’t deny their nature-”

“Ziyuan!” Madam Jin suddenly shouted, making her son flinch at the tone. Madam Yu fell silent at once.

And yet, after what they had just seen, it didn’t matter whether they disagreed with her classist words or not; no one wanted to defend Xue Yang.

Meanwhile, Xiao Xingchen and Xue Yang had continued talking cheerfully, the former asking if Xue Yang had finished buying all the necessary vegetables. They walked off into the distance, leaving behind the terrified A-Qing.

Slowly, carefully, she stood straighter, walking on shaky legs towards the corpse laying on the floor. ~~Xiao Xingchen’s~~ Song Lan’s now-dead eyes stared blankly at the sky.

With a trembling hand, A-Qing forced herself to close his eyes, setting him to rest.

“I’m going to kill him,” Jin Zixuan mumbled.

Although he didn’t necessarily disagree, Lan Wangji neutrally asked, “I thought we agreed to not punish people for things they had not done yet?”

“I — he-”

“He destroys everything he touches!” Jiang Cheng growled back. “So what if he ‘hasn’t done anything yet?’ A street rat like him could never be anything more than this! We should get rid of him as soon as possible.”

Lan Wangji frowned and looked about to protest once again, only for a sudden sneeze to come over him before he could.

Movement from the simulation attracted everyone else's attention a moment after.

"Daozhang, please don't blame me or other Daozhang," A-Qing whispered, pressing her palms together tightly. "If I came out, I'd die anyways; even if I tried, I wouldn't be able to help you. The other Daozhang was fooled by that bastard as well. He didn't do it on purpose. He didn't even realize you were the one he killed!"

Her voice trembled slightly, but she said every word without hesitation. A-Qing had always been tough as steel and cleverer than anyone else she came across. Her resolve shown through even now.

After letting out a faltering exhale, A-Qing sobbed and continued, "I'm going back! Please, let your deceased spirit bless me so that I can get Daozhang Xiao Xingchen out of there! Bless us so we can escape the demon's control. I must not let that monster Xue Yang die in peace! I must cut him into pieces so that he never reincarnates again!"

Following her speech, she kowtowed on the ground three times, then stood. She wiped her face harshly, features set in determination, and walked toward Yi City.

Anyone in her circumstances would have wanted to run. Xue Yang didn't know what she had seen; if she fled now she would be safe. However, despite being a young girl lacking any cultivation, she refused to abandon Xiao Xingchen.

And then she had ended up an eye-less, tongueless ghost. They knew she had ended up like that, and yet Wen Qing couldn't help but clench her fists and pray that she would be safe. Before Madam Yu's eyes, a large fraction of the watchers began to copy Wen Qing one after another. She might not have cultivation, but the spirit within A-Qing was a million times stronger than that of most cultivators.

'*San-niang, putting Xue Yang aside, A-Qing is a 'street rat' too, isn't she?*' a voice that sounded a lot like Jiang Fengmian's asked in Madam Yu's head. '*I've asked you not to speak about homeless children like that, especially around A-Xian.*'

'*Shut up,*' she thought back, gritting her teeth together. '*That's not what I meant. And A-Qing is-*'

'*Not someone who got the entirety of her own sect killed by picking a fight with the Wen Sect immediately after whipping A-Xian at their maid's request, right?*'

By now, the sky had darkened into a faded, foggy dark grey, and as A-Qing stepped inside the coffin home, the dim light just barely managed to illuminate Xue Yang. The scoundrel was peeling apples, cutting them into little rabbit-shaped pieces, and swaying to a song he heard in his head. He seemed to be in a good mood.

Jin Zixuan felt sick just looking at him.

Having heard her enter, Xiao Xingchen turned to face her and asked, "A-Qing, where did you go today? It's already so late."

Glancing at her, something dangerous flashed in Xue Yang's eyes: "What's wrong? Your eyes are so swollen."

Nie Huaisang eeped.

"What happened?" Xiao Xingchen asked. "Did someone bully you?"

Xue Yang laughed, "Bully her? Who would be able to bully her?"

Jiang Yanli's heart stopped-

Suddenly, A-Qing's bamboo pole fell to the ground and she started wailing.

"Am I ugly?" A-Qing cried out, throwing herself into Xiao Xingchen's arms. "Am I really ugly? Daozhang, you have to tell me: am I truly that ugly?!"

"Huh?" Nie Mingjue gaped.

"Clever, clever girl," Wen Ruohan acknowledged, raising an eyebrow somewhat disbelievingly.

"Of course not," Xiao Xingchen responded, stroking her hair. "A-Qing is such a pretty girl. Who said you're ugly?"

Xue Yang, on the other hand, offered no such comfort: "You are ugly. You're even uglier when you cry."

"Don't say that," Xiao Xingchen chided.

'*Even if she had been ugly, it would be nowhere near as unbearable as your corrupted soul is,*' Lan Qiren thought, scathingly.

At that moment, A-Qing began to cry even harder, stomping her foot and proclaiming, "Well, Daozhang, it's not like you can see! What good is it if you say I'm pretty?! He can see. He said I'm ugly, so I must be ugly! Both ugly and blind!"

'*Casually reminding him of her blindness,*' Wen Ruohan observed. '*Really, if she had any interest in being a cultivator, I might have considered making her a spy.*'

Truly unfortunate.

However, it seemed to have done its job. Xue Yang relaxed, clearly having believed the silly story A-Qing came up with, and allowed his suspicions to ease. Frustration took over instead:

"You came back here crying just because someone said you're ugly? Where did your usual unreasonable rudeness go?"

“I’m not rude!” A-Qing snapped back rudely. “Daozhang, do you have any money left?”

After pausing for an embarrassing moment, Xiao Xingchen responded, “Um… I think so?”

Rolling his eyes, Xue Yang interrupted, “I can lend you some.”

Lan Wangji sneezed.

Without wasting a second, A-Qing glared at him and spat, “You’ve been living and eating with us for so long, and yet you still call it ‘lending.’ What a miser! You have no shame! Daozhang, I want to buy pretty clothes and pretty jewelry! Can you come with me?”

‘*I see, she’s trying to lead Xiao Xingchen out of here,*’ Wei Wuxian realized. ‘*But, if Xue Yang insists on following, what else can she do?*’

“She’ll think of something, right, Da-ge?” Nie Huaisang found himself asking. He did a double take a moment later, unable to believe he had asked such a question when they already knew what was going to happen.

And, going by the broken look on his brother’s face, Nie Mingjue knew that as well.

“Of course I can go with you,” Xiao Xingchen agreed. “But I won’t be able to tell you if they’re pretty or not.”

“I could tell her,” Xue Yang volunteered again. But-

“I don’t care!” A-Qing jumped up and down, nearly banging her head into Xiao Xingchen’s. “I don’t care, I don’t care! I only want you! I don’t want him to come! All he says is that I’m ugly! And he’ll call me Little Blind!”

She was using her young age to the fullest, commencing a tantrum that Xue Yang, an adult, wouldn’t be able to match without raising suspicion. Though-

‘*Really, what on earth is that Xue Yang talking about?*’ Jin Guangshan wondered absent-mindedly. ‘*I may find her personality quite unattractive, but her face is more than pleasant. How could you call a cute doll like that ‘ugly?’*’

Finally, Xiao Xingchen nodded, “Alright. How about tomorrow?”

“Tonight!” she insisted.

“Good,” Wen Qing nodded once. “Run!”

“If you go now, all the market stalls will be closed already,” Xue Yang pointed out. “There won’t be anyone selling anything. Where would you even go?”

“Fine,” A-Qing at last gave in. “Tomorrow, then. It’s a promise!”

With the constant rise and fall of tension the simulation was giving them, even Madam Jin was starting to feel a little faint. She breathed out slowly, her gaze falling to her even more stressed son and to-be daughter in law.

(They were already exhausted by something focusing on people they had no connections to; if something happened to Jin Ling, Madam Jin had no doubt they would be far worse off.)

"They grouped around to have dinner, A-Qing disguising her fear as a fervent anger towards the non-existent person who had insulted her earlier that day," Ouyang Zizhen revealed, unable to keep the awe out of his voice as he did. "Looking at it from the outside, she truly did seem to be an infuriated, blind girl. For a time, it kept Xue Yang from discovering the truth."

Once dinner ended, A-Qing moved to scurry away, not wanting to spend any more time with Xue Yang. However, before she could leave, he suddenly called out to her:

"A-Qing."

Nie Huaisang eeped, and Lan Wangji sneezed.

And A-Qing's heart skipped a beat.

"Why did you suddenly call my name?" she demanded.

Xue Yang gave a malicious grin, "Aren't you the one who said you don't want to be called 'Little Blind?'"

A-Qing humphed, "People don't just suddenly act nice to others. Not unless they're hiding other intentions! Just what do you want?"

Lan Xichen frowned slightly at the girl's jaded outlook, wishing he could show her that wasn't always true. Just look at Jin Guangyao; Lan Xichen's to-be sworn brother was putting up supervisory offices to protect the civilians without expecting anything in return. Even as Chief Cultivator he hadn't allowed power to get to his head.

Sadly, there was no way for him to do that.

And even more unfortunately, the one who could continue to speak to her was Xue Yang.

"I don't particularly want anything. I just wanted to teach you what to do next time someone curses you like that."

"Huh. Tell me then: what should I do?"

An ugly grin broke out across Xue Yang's face as he answered, "If someone calls you ugly, then make them even uglier. Cut their face a few dozen times so that they'll never have the guts to go outside again. If someone calls you blind, then carve one end of your pole sharp. Stab both their eyes so that they'll also end up blind. See if they *dare* to bad-mouth you again."

“Stop scaring me!” A-Qing exclaimed.

All three Lans went pale.

“How can he say that?” Lan Xichen asked. “As a child, he experienced first-hand what it’s like for people to be cruel. How can he desire to — how can he go and massacre *villages* over the insults of three people?”

And then go on to gouge out A-Qing’s eyes, despite having spent years living side-by-side with her.

“The next day,” Lan Sizhui reported.

As a continuation of the day before, A-Qing was impatiently waiting for Xiao Xingchen so that she could go buy some pretty dresses and makeup. As her excited babbling continued, Xue Yang grew annoyed:

“If you two are gone, won’t I have to buy today’s food again?”

“Hmph. Why can’t you buy it? Just think about how many times Daozhang has gone out and bought us food without a word of complaint? You just bully and trick Daozhang all the time!”

Rolling his eyes, Xue Yang finally agreed: “Okay, okay, I’ll buy it. I’ll go right now.”

‘*Really, it’s quite a surprise she ended up dead,*’ Wen Ruohan thought, not for the first time. ‘*She’s doing everything as well as she possibly could. No mistakes at all.*’

And yet-

Xue Yang walked out, leaving the other two behind. Having just sent Xue Yang off, Xiao Xingchen at last glanced over at A-Qing, waiting for her to join him. However, when she continued to hesitate, he began to frown.

“A-Qing, are you still not ready yet? Can we go?”

A-Qing walked towards him, but, instead of leaving, paused for another moment, then closed the door.

“A-Qing?”

“Daozhang,” she responded back, her voice trembling. “...Do you happen to know someone named Xue Yang?”

Xiao Xingchen’s smile froze.

Jiang Yanli tensed at the name, and saw the simulated blue shadow of her shidi do the same. On her left, Lan Wangji looked as though he was preparing to attack in case Xue Yang somehow managed to re-enter through the now-closed door.

Finally-

"...Xue Yang?" Xiao Xingchen repeated, all the blood drained from his face. "A-Qing, how did you learn of that name?"

"Xue Yang is the person who's been living with us! He's that bastard!"

"The-the person with us?" Xiao Xingchen shook his head. "The person with us… how do you know?"

"I heard him kill someone!"

"You *saw* it happen," Nie Mingjue muttered. "Just tell him the full truth — he needs to know!"

"He killed someone? Who did he kill?"

Without hesitating for even a second, A-Qing answered, "A woman! She was very young! I think she had a sword with her!"

Complete and utter bafflement covered most of the watcher's faces for several seconds. Then, they heard Lan Wangji's voice ring out:

"She doesn't want to tell him who he killed," he observed. "She understands the delicacy of the current situation."

(Then, among the increasingly grim looks of the other watchers, Lan Wangji sneezed yet again.)

Meanwhile, A-Qing continued without rest: "Xue Yang… I think he had a sword with him too! I heard them fighting. They were really loud. The woman kept calling him 'Xue Yang,' and saying that he 'wiped out a temple' and 'killed countless people.' She demanded that he be 'rightly punished' — oh, heavens, he's out of his mind! He's been hiding beside us all along, and I don't even know what he's trying to do!"

And not once in any of that did she mention that the 'walking corpses' Xiao Xingchen had been killing were, in fact, living humans all along. Once again, Lan Qiren found himself awed by the seemingly-uncharacteristic tact and kindness A-Qing was showing (and realizing that, despite the girl's outward lack of formality, the generosity and maturity had been there the whole time).

However, Xiao Xingchen still had difficulty accepting such an unbelievable story, muttering, "But… his voice is different. And…"

Frustrated, A-Qing slammed her pole against the ground and shouted, "He purposefully changed his voice so you wouldn't notice that! He was afraid you'd recognize him!"

But Xiao Xingchen had spent years living with him. Even without knowing the worst Xue Yang had done, Xiao Xingchen wouldn't be able to believe such an accusation so easily, no

matter who it was from. But-

“Oh, right!” A-Qing straightened up. “He has nine fingers! Daozhang, do you know? Did Xue Yang also have nine fingers? You’ve definitely seen him before, right?”

But there was no arguing with that.

Realization crept in and Xiao Xingchen stumbled back, almost falling to the ground.

‘*See? You’re such an idiot. This is what happens when you try to play the hero,*’ Madam Yu thought, the words resounding in a broken, despairing manner completely at ends with the vicious, mocking way they had been used earlier. ‘*You shouldn't have helped him. If you had just walked away….*’

But that wasn’t quite right, was it? None of this was his fault, just like the Wens weren’t Wei Wuxian’s.

~~If anything, the massacre of Lotus Pier had been her-~~

“But… A-Qing,” he finally spoke up. “How… how did you know he has nine fingers? Have you touched his hand before? If he really is Xue Yang, would he have let you touch his hand and discover it?”

The tension in A-Qing’s body seemed seconds away from bursting out of her as she shouted, “...Daozhang! Let me tell you the truth! I’m not blind! I can see! I didn’t touch his hands, I saw them!”

“What did you say?” Xiao Xingchen gaped, even more speechless than before. “You… you can see?”

Although terror was completely filling her expression, A-Qing forced herself to answer, “I’m sorry, Daozhang! I didn’t lie to you on purpose! I was scared that if you knew I wasn’t blind, you’d chase me away! Please don’t blame me now! Let’s run away together. He’ll be back as soon as he finishes shopping for food!”

“Yes!” Jiang Yanli whispered. “Please… just run!”

Suddenly, A-Qing closed her mouth. The pure-white bandages that had always been wrapped around Xiao Xingchen’s eyes were being stained red. The blood became thicker and thicker, and soon began trickling down from the bandages where his eyes had once been.

The closest thing to tears he could make at the current time.

“Daozhang, you’re bleeding!” A-Qing pointed out, allowing Xiao Xingchen to realize that for himself. Going by the abject surprise on his face, it was clear that this hadn’t happened in a long time.

“But…” he continued to hold doubts. “But if he really is Xue Yang, why would it be like this? Why didn’t he kill me in the beginning? Why stay by my side for so many years?

Why would this be Xue Yang?!"

His world was collapsing around him, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"...I'm sorry," Nie Mingjue muttered, and Nie Huaisang flinched at the sheer *grief*. "I'm sorry, I should've… I'm sorry."

But A-Qing pressed on: "Of course he wanted to kill you in the beginning! I've seen his eyes. They were meaner than mean and scarier than scary! But since he was injured and couldn't move, he needed someone to take care of him! I didn't know who he was. If I had, I would have stabbed him to death when we found him in that bush! Daozhang, let's run! Alright?"

"Yes!" Wen Qing insisted, and Nie Mingjue's desperation said just the same. However-

'*It won't work,*' Wei Wuxian thought, frowning deeply. '*If A-Qing hadn't told him just now, Xiao Xingchen would have gone on believing that Xue Yang was someone else and continued living with him. Now that she's told Xiao Xingchen, he can't simply run away. He'll definitely feel he needs to ask Xue Yang directly. There's… no solution to this.*'

"And if *Wei Wuxian* is saying that…" Madam Jin mumbled, then cursed under her breath.

After thinking the situation over for a moment longer, Xiao Xingchen's expression set into a grim line and he instructed, "A-Qing, run away."

"Me?! Daozhang, let's run away together!" A-Qing shouted, her voice growing hoarse from the strain. However-

"I can't go," Xiao Xingchen disagreed, shaking his head. "I need to find out what he's trying to do. He definitely has a goal, and he's tried to reach that goal over the past few years by staying patiently by my side."

At that moment, a sudden image flashed into Nie Mingjue's mind: Xue Yang, staring down at the piece of candy he had been given with a look of wide-eyed wonder. A moment later, however, he shook that thought away.

Someone like Xue Yang indeed must have some sort of ulterior motive. Xiao Xingchen would need to prepare for that.

In agreement with Nie Mingjue's assessment, Xiao Xingchen continued, "If I leave him alone, I fear that the people of Yi City would fall to him. Xue Yang has always been this way. You need to go."

Suddenly, A-Qing's bamboo pole crashed onto the ground as she ran forward to clutch his leg, sobbing "Me? Daozhang, how can I go by myself? I wanna stay with you! If you're not leaving, then I'm not leaving either!"

Wen Qing swallowed, choking down a sob of her own.

“If worst comes to worst, we’ll just be murdered by him!” A-Qing continued, her cries not even remotely faked anymore. “I’ll be so lonely I’ll want to die if I try roaming around by myself! I know you don’t want that to happen to me, so let’s run away together!”

’I spend money really quickly,’ the past A-Qing had said. ‘If you refuse to take me with you, the money will be gone at once, and I’ll have to go steal from and trick people again! And- and if that happens, someone will slap me hard and I’ll fall down and I won’t be able to get up again so I’ll be lost, I won’t be able to find my way after that! Poor me!’

“If you leave me alone, I might as well just become a ghost now!”

And that strategy had worked so well before, but now….

Lan Xichen looked away.

“A-Qing, you just told me you aren’t actually blind,” Xiao Xingchen spoke softly. “You can see, and you’re quite clever. I trust that you’ll live a good life.”

“Her ghost-form begs to differ!” Jin Zixuan snapped. “This won’t work! You need to run-”

But Xiao Xingchen didn’t know it wouldn’t work and so continued, “You don’t know how scary Xue Yang is. You can’t stay. You mustn’t go near him again either.”

‘*I do know! I know how scary he is!*’ the still-crying A-Qing mentally wailed.

But before she couldn’t open her mouth and speak the truth, there was a creak from outside.

Xue Yang was back.

At that moment, Jiang Yanli went so pale she turned nearly translucent. Watching that, Madam Yu felt her own concern for the simulated A-Qing multiply a hundred fold.

‘*Street rat or not, you’re the smartest person in this whole city,*’ she mentally hissed. ‘*You’ll figure something out, right? Those things we saw in the future were meant to mislead us, right? You… you’re a brilliant girl. I made everything worse for Wei Wuxian, but surely you can-*’

She cut that thought process off at once, staring in horror as Xiao Xingchen quickly pushed A-Qing out of sight.

“When he comes in, I’ll handle him. Use this chance to escape,” he whispered. “Listen to me!”

Terrified, A-Qing could only nod through her tears.

Breathing heavily, Nie Mingjue clenched his fists even tighter and-

The door was kicked open.

“What are you guys doing?” Xue Yang asked. “I’m already back, and two still haven’t left? If you’re still in there then open the hatch and let me inside. I’m tired!”

The sheer scale to which Xue Yang could make himself sound innocent was truly staggering. Moving closer to his brother, Nie Huaisang reminded himself to not let his guard down around the real version of the delinquent before them, if they ever met.

A laugh abruptly cut through the silence.

“How are you already tired?” A-Qing asked, wiping her face and ignoring the ‘do-not-make-another-sound’ look Xiao Xingchen was sending her. “It’s only a small distance from here to the market, and yet you’re already exhausted? I’m just a bit slow because I’m trying to decide which of my outfits would be the best to wear. How does this concern you?”

Rolling his eyes, Xue Yang mocked, “How many outfits do you have? It doesn’t matter what you wear, you’ll keep looking the same. Come, come, open the door.”

Even now, A-Qing was managing to maintain her act. Although Madam Jin laughed at her own foolishness for it, even she couldn’t help but become the slightest bit hopeful. If they kept his guard down — if they made it out-

Suddenly, a rumble went through the house as the impatient Xue Yang kicked the door down, having finally decided that A-Qing was indeed not going to let him in. Calling out an apology to Xiao Xingchen, he stepped forward and took a bite out of an apple-

Then looked down to see Shuanghua sticking into his gut.

“*Yes!*” Jiang Cheng cheered.

The basket dropped to the ground, and the potatoes, carrots, apples, and steamed buns rolled onto the floor. Slowly, as disbelievingly as Song Lan just the day before, he looked up at Xiao Xingchen.

“A-Qing, run!” the cultivator shouted. Without wasting a second, A-Qing moved as fast as she could to barge through the door of the coffin home and raced out into the streets.

“Hey — *wait!*” Nie Mingjue shouted in protests as the watchers (viewing this through Wei Wuxian’s empathy) were dragged along with her rather than being allowed to watch the fight.

But then, to Nie Mingjue’s great surprise, the powerless, young, untrained A-Qing took a path that brought her back around so she could creep back in. She slipped into a hiding spot she was clearly quite familiar with and watched.

“Was it fun?” Xiao Xingchen asked coldly.

Slowly and meanderingly, Xue Yang took another bite of the fruit in his hand, seemingly ignoring the wound left in his stomach. He chewed and swallowed at an overly-casual pace before finally deciding to answer:

“Yes. Of course it was fun.”

He was no longer bothering to disguise his voice.

As he watched, Jin Guangshan had to admit he was once again impressed. Xue Yang’s ability to regain power in the conversation — making Xiao Xingchen wait for him, and allowing only glee into his tone — were shockingly effective, especially considering the disadvantageous situation the wound in his stomach left him in.

“Just what are you trying to do, having stayed with me all these years?”

“Who knows?” Xue Yang shrugged. “Maybe I’m bored?”

‘*I should have gutted him the second I saw him all those years ago, regardless of whether that would make me an enemy of the Jin,*’ Nie Mingjue swore, forgetting, for a moment, that it had been the simulated version of him who met Xue Yang, rather than the real one.

As Xiao Xingchen raised his sword again to attack, Xue Yang slipped into a much more talkative mood, asking, “Xiao Xingchen Daozhang, do you want to hear the second half of the story I started all that time ago?”

“No,” Xiao Xingchen responded easily.

However, he didn’t attack immediately after either.

“Ah, you idiot!” Nie Huaisang whined pitifully, the stress truly getting to him. “It’s gonna be some sort of trap! You shouldn't let a guy like that keep talking!”

“Well, I’m still gonna tell you anyways,” Xue Yang decided, as if determined to prove Nie Huaisang right. “After you hear it, if you still think this is all my fault, you can do whatever you want.”

“Liar!” Jin Zixuan hissed furiously.

“Later that day, the child happened to see the man who fooled him into taking the letter,” Xue Yang explained, casually putting pressure on his stomach wound to slow the bleeding. “Upon spotting him, he was both frustrated and happy. He threw himself at the man with tears in his eyes, crying ‘I brought the letter there, but the pastries are gone and I was beat up! Can you give me another plate?’”

Breathing shakily (fighting off another sneeze), Lan Wangji frowned, already guessing the basics of how this was going to end.

“The man’s face was all beaten up as well. He’d probably been caught by the brawny receiver of the letter. Seeing a dirty little child clinging to his leg, he couldn’t help but be annoyed and kicked him away at once.”

And with a *crack*, the simulation shifted to show that memory, and the body of the child skidded across the ground.

Jiang Yanli gasped and stood at once, unable to believe the sheer cruelty of that action.

“The man climbed up an ox cart and told the driver to leave at once. Unwilling to give up, the child picked himself off the ground and chased after the cart. He really wanted a plate of sugary pastries.

Having finally caught up to it, he waved his arms in front of the cart to get it to stop. The man grew irritated by his crying, so he snatched the driver’s whip and lashed at the boy’s head.”

The child Xue Yang was knocked to the ground.

Nie Mingjue faltered, his mind unable to comprehend the idea of righteous anger for Xue Yang’s sake, child or not.

“And then,” Xue Yang continued, emphasizing each word one at a time. “The wheels of the cart ground over the child’s hand, one finger at a time.”

A sickening *crunch* filled the air as that same scene played before their eyes.

With a disturbing clarity, Wen Qing found her earlier confusion at the strange injury on Xue Yang’s hand answered in far more detail than she would like it to be.

The young Xue Yang’s screams filled the air.

Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang both fell back into their seats, unable to stand before the horrifying imagery.

“The child was seven at the time,” Xue Yang confessed. “The bones of his left hand were crushed, while one finger was ground into battered flesh on the spot! This man was Chang Ping’s father.”

And yet, once again, the reminder that he had wiped out a clan for the sin of an already-dead *father* — that dozens of lives were what he considered an equal trade for his hand — turned the sympathy they had felt into a sour acid.

‘*And on the other hand, we have Wei Wuxian,*’ Wen Qing thought. ‘*I still can’t believe he would have willingly let Madam Yu cut off his hand if it meant protecting the sect for just a few days longer.*’

“Xiao Xingchen Daozhang, you were just so stern when you brought me to Koi Tower! You condemned me and asked why I wiped out the entire sect just because of some suspicion! Is it that, since the fingers weren't yours, you were incapable of feeling the pain?! You guys don’t know how those horrifying screams feel coming out of your own mouths?! Why didn’t you ask him why he decided to amuse himself with me for no reason? The current Xue Yang was bestowed upon you by the past Chang CiAn! The Yueyang Chang *clan* was only reaping what it had sown!”

But Xiao Xingchen stared in bafflement, disbelievingly responding, “CiAn Chang broke one of your fingers in the past. If you sought revenge, you could have simply broken one

of his fingers as well. If it truly had scared you, you could have broken two of his fingers, or even all ten! Even if you had cut off an entire arm of his…. Why did you have to kill his entire clan?! Don't tell me that a single finger of yours was equal to more than fifty human lives!"

Nie Mingjue nodded in fierce agreement, hearing a little voice in his head wondering what had happened to make the simulated Wei Wuxian kill Jin Zixuan.

Meanwhile, Xue Yang appeared to be genuinely thinking Xiao Xingchen's question over, hesitating for quite a while before responding, "Of course they were equal. The finger was my own, but those lives were other peoples'."

Jiang Yanli froze for a moment, not comprehending those words.

"...What?"

"Why, they're not even equal. They wouldn't be equal no matter how many of them I killed. It was only around fifty. How could that be equal to one of my fingers?"

Paler than ivory, Lan Xichen turned to his uncle and asked, "He's not… *serious*, right?"

Rather than answer, Lan Qiren was simply openly gaping.

"Then what about the others?!" the equally pale Xiao Xingchen demanded. "Why did you wipe out Baixue temple?! Why did you blind Song Zichen Daozhang's eyes?!"

"Why did you stop me?" Xue Yang fired back. "Why did you try to prevent me from doing what I wanted to do? Why did you stand up for those dregs of the Chang Clan? You wanted to help Chang CiAn? Chang Ping?"

A sudden uneasiness came over Madam Yu, and she suddenly realized who Xue Yang was sounding like right at that moment.

A mocking laugh left Xue Yang's throat: "Didn't Chang Ping first cry tears of gratitude? And yet, didn't he later beg you not to help him? Xiao Xingchen Daozhang, this matter has been your fault since the beginning. You shouldn't have meddled in the business of other people. Who was right, and who was wrong; how would an outsider be able to understand that?"

'Wei Ying, he really can't go a day without stirring up some trouble, can he?' Madam Yu had asked. 'Would Wen Chao really have dared to do anything?'

But-

'Even if he did, that'd just mean they ran out of luck! Since when was it his turn to play hero?!'

But that wasn't it. That wasn't what she meant. She was nothing like this disgusting, dishonorable street rat ~~in that *she'd* never been treated so cruelly as a child~~. Unlike him, she had at least raised her children to be better-

'Why did you save Lan Wangji?! Why did you have to speak up?!' Jiang Cheng had shouted. 'How many times have I told you to not stir up trouble? To not strike? Did you really want to play the hero that badly? Well, have you seen the results of you playing the hero? Are you happy now?!'

(Going by the expression on her son's face, Madam Yu had no doubt he was hearing the same words as her.)

And Xue Yang was far from finished:

"Maybe you shouldn't have left that mountain in the first place! Your teacher, Baoshan Sanren, was indeed smart. Why didn't you listen to her and obediently cultivate in the mountains?! If you couldn't understand this world, then you shouldn't have come!"

Those words were too much for anyone to bear.

"...Xue Yang," Xiao Xingchen whispered. "You really are… too disgusting."

And at that, killing intent flashed into Xue Yang's eyes yet again.

Before he had even realized what he was doing, Lan Wangji found himself standing between Xue Yang and Xiao Xingchen. It occurred to him in the next moment that he was ~~as always~~ powerless to change the situation. Powerless to stop Wei Wuxian's fall; powerless to catch him before he crashed; powerless to help Xiao Xingchen in his time of need.

Powerless to tell the real Wei Wuxian the words he most wanted to say.

However, the following laugh that left Xue Yang was bitter, rather than maniacal.

"Xiao Xingchen, this is why I hate you," he revealed. "The people I hate the most are ones like you: people who say they're righteous, who think they're virtuous… precisely naive, dumb idiots like you who think the world's better just because you did something good!"

"What?"

Lan Qiren couldn't stand this any longer, standing up and declaring, "He's insane-"

"You think I'm disgusting?! Very well! Why would I care if anyone thinks I'm disgusting? But, on the other hand, are you in any position to be disgusted by me?"

"Oh, no," Nie Huaisang whispered, and, upon hearing that, the dread in Nie Mingjue's chest multiplied a hundred-fold.

"What do you mean?" Xiao Xingchen asked.

Nie Huaisang's face fell, and, just a moment after, Wen Ruohan realized the same thing he had.

"Ah," he muttered. "No wonder things ended up this way."

Xue Yang knew just the words to say:

“We haven’t been night hunting walking corpses recently, have we?” Xue Yang mused affectionately. “But, a few years ago, didn’t we go out and kill a bunch every couple of days.”

One by one, other people were beginning to catch on as well.

“...Why are you bringing this up now?”

“It’s nothing, really. I just feel it’s truly unfortunate that you’re blind. You dug out both your eyes, so you couldn’t see those ‘walking corpses’ you killed. They were so scared, so pained as you pierced them through their hearts. Some kneeled down and cried — *kowtowing*, even, as they begged you to spare the children and elderly in their families. If not for the fact that I’d cut out their tongues, I bet they would have been wailing, ‘Daozhang, spare us!’”

Xiao Xingchen began to tremble.

“It’s not your fault!” Wen Qing insisted. “Don’t lose focus. Xiao Xingchen!”

“You deceived me,” he whispered. “You-”

“Yes, I deceived you,” Xue Yang admitted freely. “I’ve been deceiving you all along. Who would have known that you’d believe me so easily while I was deceiving you, but refuse to accept it when it’s the truth?”

“Be quiet!” Xiao Xingchen shouted, staggering and raising his sword in Xue Yang’s general direction, but unable to muster up a genuine attack.

Xue Yang’s poisonous words had struck true, just like they had for Song Lan.

Pressing even harder on his abdominal wound, Xue Yang slowly backed away, a monstrous glint in his eyes: “Alright! I’ll be quiet! If you still don’t believe me, then exchange a few blows with the one standing behind you!”

The watchers spun almost as one to face the direction he indicated.

“Have him tell you whether or not I’m deceiving you!”

And the indicated ‘him’ stood in plain sight before them.

“Oh, no,” Nie Huaisang breathed.

The battle began, Xiao Xingchen and the corpse exchanging blows one by one. As this cycle continued, the former gradually realized whose sword he was making contact with. Only one person felt like this.

“...Is that you, Zichen?”

There was no answer to give. Xue Yang wasn't Wei Wuxian (a fact that had never been more obvious than now); his corpses couldn't talk. And yet, the connection brought back everything Wen Qing could remember feeling when she first found out that 'the Yiling Patriarch' had turned her brother into the Ghost General. The hate she had felt; the fear.

And what she now saw before her was a million times more cruel than a scenario she had concocted in her wildest nightmares.

"...Zichen… Song Daozhang… is that you?"

Song Lan looked at him, but did not make a sound.

The red that had bled through Xiao Xingchen's bandages began all over again, two parallel streams of blood flowing down his cheeks and trickling onto the cold floor. Both he and A-Qing felt their breaths stutter, the pain in their chests making it hard to breathe.

"...What's wrong?" Xiao Xingchen asked, voice cracking on the second word. "Say something."

Still nothing.

"I wonder, do I still need to tell you who exactly that walking corpse you killed yesterday was?"

"He…" Nie Mingjue shook his head. "He can't *do* that. He-"

A *clang* resounded as Shuanghua fell to the ground, and Xue Yang burst into laughter.

"Shut up," Madam Yu whispered, an unperceivable voice amid the fierce roars of protest given off by the other watchers. "It wasn't… shut up. He was just trying to…."

She wasn't the kind of weak woman who would get emotional over the suffering of strangers. She was better than this — or so she told herself. It didn't matter how many connections she could make to the day her son was made an orphan — the day he had watched as her body was ridiculed by that disgusting maid — it *didn't matter.* But-

'*Xiao Xingchen didn't deserve this,*' her mind asserted nonetheless. '*He hadn't… done anything wrong.*'

Unfortunately, none of that would change what happened next.

"What's wrong?!" Xue Yang's laughter shook the town, and the dark clouds gathering above filled the district with shadow. "How sweet! You're so touched to see your old friend again that you're even crying! Do you want to give him a hug?!"

A-Qing covered her mouth, trying desperately to avoid letting out even a whimper.

"Saving the world! What a joke — you can't even save yourself!"

The blue shade of Wei Wuxian twitched at those words, and his hands came up to clutch his head as though pained. The movement attracted everyone's attention to him, and they watched out of the corners of their eyes even as Xiao Xingchen fell to his knees before Song Lan.

"You couldn't do anything! You've failed miserably! You're the only one to blame — you asked for all of this!"

'*Are you happy now?!' Jiang Cheng had demanded.*

And then, at that moment, the image shifted. Right where Xiao Xingchen knelt on the ground, they saw another person overlaid on top of him. It was the Yiling Patriarch as they'd never seen him before.

"A failure, drenched in blood," Lan Sizhui's voice narrated out loud to them. "One who couldn't do anything except silently accept the criticism and scorn of others. Someone wholly beyond hope, who could only cry in despair."

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji whispered.

'*I knew it,*' a vicious voice in Wen Ruohan's mind said. '*I knew the other clans couldn't be trusted with a talent like his. I'd already seen enough evidence in just the Jiang Clan, but now…. If this is what they drive him to, I can't let him stay with them.*'

A bit of bloodlust began to slip out of his control, and those unfortunate enough to be standing next to him felt shivers run down their spines.

Rain began to pour, obscuring their view of the chaotic scene even more. Xiao Xingchen's white bandages had been entirely stained red, and, with no eyes to cry with, he could only bleed tears.

"Please. Let me go," he whispered, barely able to be heard over the pouring rain.

Then suddenly, before anyone could react, Xiao Xingchen reached out and snatched Shuanghua, bringing the blade to his own neck. With a quick slice, he cut clear through his own throat, and red gushed out in droves.

"No!" Wen Qing shouted, and Nie Mingjue stood up beside her, a haunted, terrified, *stunned* expression on his face.

And Xue Yang's movement and laughter halted. After a while of silence, he walked toward the new corpse which laid on the ground. He looked down with bloodshot eyes, the rims of which contained a reddish tint. Then-

"You forced me to do this!" Xue Yang shouted, then laughed. "A dead one is better. Only dead people listen!"

"Forced you?" Nie Mingjue repeated disbelievingly. "No you… you-"

Following that, Xue Yang moved swiftly. He cleaned Xiao Xingchen's face, then painted an array on the ground, finally placing Xiao Xingchen's body inside. It was only after he had done all of that that he remembered to take care of his own abdominal wound. That done, he sat and waited for Xiao Xingchen to get up again.

And waited. And waited.

But nothing happened.

"Did… he do it wrong?"

"No… no, remember?" Lan Qiren asked. "Even Wei Wuxian couldn't help. In his grief. Xiao Xingchen Daozhang...."

Had shattered his own soul.

The rain continued to pour, and even though Xue Yang's protections kept the array he had drawn safe, the water began soaking into Xiao Xingchen's bandages and robes as time went on. Frustrated, Xue Yang inspected and re-inspected the array he drew, and, even after finding nothing wrong with it, impatiently redrew it.

Yet still nothing happened.

With an annoyed crackle of resentful energy, he reached forward and tried to force the soul back in. There was a light turquoise glow as a soul was gathered together-

And a moment later, it dissipated, already too shattered to form.

"Huh?" Xue Yang asked.

The blood spilling out of Xiao Xingchen's neck stained the floor.

"No," Xue Yang muttered. "No, no-"

He reached forward, wrapping his hands around the neck as if trying to choke the cultivator, but the blood continued to spill out. A short while later, all the blood that had been in Xiao Xingchen's head was drained, and the flow stopped.

"...Huh?" Xue Yang asked again, looking every bit the child that had appeared in his own story.

And Xiao Xingchen's corpse lay on the ground before him, as dead as it possibly could be.

Lan Wangji lowered his eyes, sending a prayer towards the heroic cultivator who had faced such a pitiful end.

The simulation cut away, and the watchers were racing through the woods, getting as far from the coffin home as possible. When it finally stopped, they were in the presence

of a coughing, gasping A-Qing. Yi City was far behind her, only a small speck in the distance, and she was finally allowing herself a moment to breathe.

She had run away as fast as possible.

'*But that won't be enough,*' Wen Qing recalled. '*She'll still end up….*'

Now that A-Qing had finally managed to get a moment to breathe, the despair she had kept locked down for a time finally rose up. She collapsed to her knees, finally letting out the cries she had buried within herself.

"Daozhang! Daozhang!" she sobbed against the dry ground. "Daozhang!"

Tears fell on the ground, her white eyes shining like stars through the sorrow she was experiencing. However, even as she cried out in pain, she knew she was not safe.

Slowly, trembling in grief, she picked herself off the ground.

"Several days later!" Lan Jingyi proclaimed.

By now her tears had faded, but her determination was just as strong as ever. She walked with her bamboo pole, stumbling slightly every few steps to keep up the act of blindness.

"Excuse me, are there any big sects around here?" she asked as a couple approached her. "Are there any really powerful people in this area? People who can cultivate?"

"She hasn't given up," Madam Jin observed. "Really, the way she's handled this… there isn't a single thing she's done wrong."

A-Qing was doing everything in her power to solve this issue. Even if they had wanted to, there was no way for the watchers to blame what had happened on any foolishness on her part.

Which meant the biggest issue was-

"We need to find out how Xue Yang escaped his execution," Lan Xichen declared, making eye contact with an equally determined Nie Mingjue. "Whoever betrayed A-Yao will need to be watched carefully."

Nie Mingjue nodded in agreement.

"I… don't think so," the man she had asked said, and with another awkward glance at his wife, nodded once to A-Qing and took off. It seemed that no one was willing to take her question seriously, walking away after just a few sentences. However, A-Qing wasn't discouraged. Exhausted and trembling, she took a quick break by a nearby brook so that she could continue her attempts. She cupped her hands in the water to take a drink, then, seeing the wooden hairpin in her hair, reached up to it.

‘*Adjusting her hairpin by a river… this is almost exactly like the first time we saw her,*’ Wen Qing recalled, then, feeling her mouth dip into a frown, added, ‘*Though now… the context is very different.*’

Reaching into her lapel, she pulled out a small, white money pouch. It was the first thing she had stolen from Xiao Xingchen. Upon laying her eyes on it, tears began welling up again.

With shaking fingers, she reached inside and pulled out a small piece of candy. She licked it carefully, smiling brokenly at the now-familiar sweetness, and put it away again. Then, she noticed another person’s reflection in the water.

Xue Yang was looming over her.

“Ah!” Jin Zixuan yelped as he and the other watchers who hadn’t noticed Xue Yang felt their heart rates multiply at once.

The smile on Xue Yang’s face was the furthest thing from reassuring.

“Oh,”Jiang Yanli breathed out, the last of her hope vanishing before her eyes. “Oh.”

With Shuanghua in hand, Xue Yang opened his arms in a warped imitation of a hug, asking, “A-Qing, why are you running away? We haven’t seen each other in such a long time. Didn’t you miss m-”

“Help me!” A-Qing shrieked, “Help! Is anyone here?!”

But she was too far away; no help came.

‘*I’m sorry,*’ Lan Wangji thought, watching the scene with gritted teeth. ‘*I’m sorry, I wish I could help, but I can’t. I always, always-*’

“After I finished my business in Yueyang, I decided to go walking around the city. I just happened to run into you while you were asking around. What a wonderful turn of fate! Speaking of which, your acting is superb. You even fooled me for such a long time. Well done.”

“Oh, spare your compliments,” Nie Mingjue growled. “You don’t deserve to *look at her* much less-”

But A-Qing didn’t need anyone else’s help when it came to spitting out insults:

“You animal!” she shouted. “Thankless wretch! Lower than low bastard! Your parents must have made love in a pigpen for a son of a bitch like you to come out! You’re just a germ polluting anything you touch with your filth!”

As Xue Yang listened to her insults grow more and more colorful, he gave an amused smirk: “You’re quite good at this, aren’t you? Why haven’t I seen you act so rude in front of Xiao Xingchen? You got more coming?”

“Die in a ditch you shameless flee! And you still dare to mention Daozhang and hold Daozhang’s sword? Do you deserve to hold it? You’re dirtying his belonging!”

“Oh, you mean this?” Xue Yang asked, holding the sword up. “It’s mine now. Do you really think your Daozhang is any cleaner? After this, he’ll also be my-”

“You bastard! Dream on! You don’t deserve to call Daozhang unclean! You’re just a piece of rot! Daozhang must be the unluckiest man in the world to have met you!”

No one could disagree.

But, at those words, the sliver of light that had been left in Xue Yang’s eyes darkened completely. Realizing she had finally pushed him over the edge, A-Qing relaxed; if there was no changing what was going to happen to her, at least she didn’t have to wait any longer.

But then-

“If you like pretending to be blind so much, why don’t you go all the way?” Xue Yang asked, then, with a wave of his hand, sent a tsunami of powder into her eyes. Everything turned red for a moment, then went black.

Shouts resounded.

However, although the darkness came, the figures of the other watchers were just as bright as ever. Nie Huaisang nearly wept in gratitude for that, moving closer to his brother at once for even the slightest bit of reassurance.

Then, A-Qing let out a blood-curdling scream.

Several people flinched at the agonized noise, while others, such as Wen Qing, merely felt their anger grow.

“You’re too loud,” Xue Yang continued. “I don’t think you need that tongue of yours anymore either.”

“*No-*”

The crisp ringing of a silver bell resounded, and the simulated Wei Wuxian was suddenly pulled in two directions at once, the agony A-Qing was experiencing battling against the calming effects of the Jiang Clan’s silver bell.

The juniors were trying to wake Wei Wuxian up. However, before the watchers could see the situation outside of the world within empathy, the simulation faded away.

The watchers sat in silence for a while, a heavy cloud of hopelessness looming over them. What exactly could be said after something like that? Xiao Xingchen was now dead, and A-Qing would follow soon after.

“How could he?” Jiang Yanli whispered at last. “Even-even Wen-er-gongzi had never spent *years* living with any of the people he-”

Madam Yu tensed at once, her eyes flashing to Wen Ruohan, ready to defend her daughter if need-be. Luckily, it seemed that Wen Chao had already embarrassed him so much throughout the simulation that he no longer cared about such a minor insult.

(She tried to ignore the part of her brain wondering if the ‘army of dogs’ Jiang Fengmian had reported played any part in Wen Ruohan’s new disdain for his own son.)

Finally-

“What a monster,” Jin Zixuan muttered. “How could he do that to her? And to think, I actually felt a little sorry for him when I heard about his past!”

“I-I don’t understand,” Lan Xichen admitted. “What he experienced as a child… it was just needless, senseless cruelty. How does he think it’s okay for him *give out* that same needless, senseless cruelty now that he’s grown up?”

“Perhaps he simply views that as the way the world works,” Wen Ruohan suggested, making all other conversation halt at once. “His short speech on ‘his fingers’ versus ‘other people’s lives’ carried quite a few childish elements to it. I wouldn’t be surprised if he viewed that as the way of the world.”

‘*Do you really think* you *have any room to talk when it comes to childish mindsets?*’ Wen Qing thought, but knew better than to say. Her position in the Wen Sect was tenuous at best right now, given her simulated-self’s betrayal and the real Wen Ning’s current position under Wen Xu’s direct influence. While she wouldn’t stand for injustice, she wouldn’t forget that either.

On the other hand, Nie Mingjue was left in disagreement.

“What? You think he views *everyone* as the same?” the Nie Sect Leader demanded. “He lived with Xiao Xingchen for years! Is anyone further than him from that sort of mindset?! And A-Qing had never even done anything against him!”

“That sort of a childhood can warp a person quite heavily.”

“I know that! I *saw* what happened to him as a kid. It was horrible and cruel — the scream he let out was hard to forget,” Nie Mingjue acknowledged, flashing back through that memory before shaking his head. “What happened to him was wrong, but that doesn’t make his actions *okay!*”

“It doesn’t have to,” Lan Wangji said calmly.

Every head turned toward him, but Lan Wangji merely made steady eye contact with Nie Mingjue, his golden eyes layered with sincerity. Even without raising his voice, he projected it through the room.

“Nothing Xue Yang did can be excused,” Lan Wangji acknowledged. “We should still know about this and take it into account. Now is not the time to decide what to do with the real Xue Yang, but, when that time comes, we should consider everything.”

“...Going by the relative ages, I believe the story of how he lost his finger has already happened in our world,” Lan Qiren revealed. “But he hasn’t yet massacred the Chang Clan.”

“It’s not as though he *regrets* what he did to the Chang Clan,” Wen Qing pointed out. “He hunted them down, rather than reacting to something they were doing in the moment. If we don’t change that mindset of his, he’ll simply do it again.”

“Do you think we will be able to alter his mind?” Nie Huaisang asked. “He’s what? Nine, now? Ten?”

“Something like that,” Wen Qing agreed but, after thinking over the first question for a while, could only shake her head. “I don’t know. I have no idea how deeply-ingrained that mindset of his is, at this time.”

No one knew; they didn’t have enough information yet.

“...Poor A-Qing,” Jiang Yanli whispered. “She-she did everything so well, and yet-”

Jin Zixuan rested his hand on hers. The two body parts phased through each other thanks to the ‘no-touch’ rule, but Jiang Yanli managed to feel the warmth he was trying to offer nonetheless.

“Well, regardless of what we end up doing to the child version of Xue Yang, I hope the adult one has a painful death,” Nie Mingjue growled, sighing heavily as he did.

(Then, for the last time that day, Lan Wangji gave one final sneeze.)

Chapter End Notes

I honestly thought we’d be finished with Yi City this chapter. It’s so much longer than I remember it being! I considered skipping certain parts, but, on the other hand, it’s not like I’m under any time constraints. If I can make it as long as I want, I might as well, right? Hope you enjoyed!
:)

My Heart Being Stolen by A-Qing — Part 3

Chapter Notes

> My copy of MDZS volume 1 came!!!! So happy! Though it sucks that volume 2 was taken down online. That's the section we're on right now, but my volume 2 hasn't come yet! 🤣🤣🤣

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nie Huaisang faded into the background as Wei Wuxian spoke with the past's Jiang Fengmian and the fifteen-year-old version of himself. At Wei Wuxian's request, Jiang Fengmian had updated them on what was happening inside the simulation, very noticeably neglecting to mention that the 'Mo Xuanyu' appearing in all these stories was, in actuality, Wei Wuxian. Although he didn't entirely agree with the decision, Nie Huaisang supposed he could understand the logic. People were undoubtedly already panicking about what the fifteen year old 'son of a servant' had accomplished. If they knew the true extent of Wei Wuxian's potential before the boy was ready to defend himself, it could very easily turn dangerous.

(Though the notable silence on the extent of the Wen Clan's crimes was obvious as well. Nie Huaisang wondered how delicate the political situation was in this alternate universe, to cause a reaction like that.)

Regardless: keeping secrets from the Baby Patriarch! How exciting! Really, Nie Huaisang hadn't had this much fun since he'd plotted the systemic downfall of the former Chief Cultivator.

"And what did the others think about Xue Yang's actions?" Wei Wuxian inquired, causing Sect Leader Nie to zone back into the conversation. "You said you had agreed to not punish anyone prematurely, right?"

"We did. As far as I can tell, no one intends to break that," Jiang Fengmian agreed.

"Eh? Are you sure about that?" Nie Huaisang asked, tilting his head as the embodiment of innocent curiosity. "You haven't seen anything these 'villains' have done yet, right? Maybe the sect leaders will change their minds after."

"I saw the Wen Clan's crimes," Jiang Fengmian informed him, voice colder than ice at the memories those words invoked. He opened his mouth again, about to add more, only to hesitate and glance back at the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian. After all, for all that it might help Wei Ying be wary of the Wen Clan, it would put everyone in colossal danger should Wen Ruohan hear that Jiang Fengmian voiced his honest thoughts about them.

Falling silent, Jiang Fengmian clenched his jaw until his teeth began to ache.

"...A-Xian, promise me you'll be careful of the Wens," he requested at last.

Having gotten the same request from him quite a number of times already, Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow as he answered "I know, Uncle Jiang. I will be."

Jiang Fengmian breathed a sigh of relief, and managed to relax completely when Wei Wuxian didn't inquire further, trusting Jiang Fengmian's judgment on the matter.

(If you asked Nie Huaisang, it seemed more likely that the teenage Wei Wuxian knew he wouldn't get an actual answer and thus was simply going to figure it out himself. Not at all the same thing, but Huaisang also saw no reason to correct Jiang Fengmian's understanding of the situation.)

"...Anyways," Jiang Fengmian cleared his throat, then straightened up calmly. "Due to the prerequisite set by our decision regarding the Wen family, it seems fairly unlikely the other clan leaders would be able to punish the child-forms of any future criminals. To do so without punishing the Wens would be blatantly hypocritical."

"...I see," the future Wei Wuxian said, barely bothering to hide the heavy layer of doubt in his tone.

"What if the Wen Clan wants to punish someone, Uncle Jiang?" the younger Wei Wuxian asked. "Would the other clans really be willing to stop them?"

"I think that isn't a problem," Jiang Fengmian explained. "If you remember, when we contacted San-niang and the others yesterday, we found out more about what they had seen. San-niang claimed that Xue Yang was 'even worse than we had expected him to be,' but they said nothing about any changes to the plan."

"They've seen more of Xue Yang?" Nie Huaisang asked. "And you're all still willing to let the child version go, Sect Leader Jiang?"

"I… I believe so," Jiang Fengmian answered.

"Hmm," Nie Huaisang hummed. Well, that might change things.

Initially, his plan had been to slowly convince the people present to side against Meng Yao. He might have promised Wei Wuxian to leave the boy alive, but that didn't mean he would roll over and allow the same things to happen again. If Nie Huaisang had to put pressure on the sects to prevent that, then he would, regardless of who became his enemy as a result. Unfortunately, as far as Jiang Fengmian knew, Jin Guangyao was an idyllic Chief Cultivator. It would be nearly impossible to convince the Jiang Sect to do anything against him if he brought it up now.

When Jiang Fengmian had first revealed what he had learned about Xue Yang, Nie Huaisang had decided to start with that. If they could set a precedent with the treatment of Xue Yang, then, once Meng Yao's crimes were revealed, it would be simple to push him into the same position. However, if the sects were truly determined to not do *anything* to them, then that would need to be changed at once. A devious light flashed in the Nie Sect Leader's eyes.

He glanced back at his Wei Wuxian for a moment, and saw the other already facing him, a knowing smile on his face. It appeared Nie Huaisang's plan was already obvious to the other man.

But, no objection had been made. The Yiling Patriarch was still on Huaisang's side.

"Is there something wrong?" Wei Wuxian asked, having noticed the long pause. "Ah, Mo-gongzi, you fought with Xue Yang, didn't you? Do you have anything to add?"

'*Ah, poor Wei-xiong!*' Nie Huaisang thought. '*Little-you is already suspicious of you even though he likes you! I'd hate to be on the receiving end of that!*'

But, without faltering, the future Wei Wuxian just grinned and explained, "We do indeed have things to add. Actually, a large part of the reason Sect Leader Nie and I are here is to help you figure out how to deal with people like Xue Yang. It works out quite well that you left after meeting him. We have some suggestions, if you don't mind hearing them."

"Ooooh, insight from the future," the past Wei Wuxian grinned. "Is this also going to be a product of the 'Dream Book' Nie-xiong found? Or is this from the demonic cultivator side of things?"

"From both of us actually," the future one stepped back. "Now then, drum roll please… ta da!"

Lights flashed behind them, and Nie Huaisang watched the list of pros and cons he and Wei Wuxian had made earlier fade into existence. Wei Wuxian had scanned it with resentful energy before they entered the simulation, allowing him to replicate his memory of it now.

(Like all of Wei Wuxian's inventions, the simulation was being improved at an alarming rate.)

"Please, direct your attention to the top of the page," the Yiling Patriarch instructed with a dramatic gesture. "This is the proposal our sects have put together: the best way to minimize both any danger and any unjust punishment is to save the criminals as soon as possible, sparing their childhoods, but refuse to teach them any cultivation."

"Restricting them from cultivation?" the younger Wei Wuxian asked. "I understand that cultivation is a weapon, but it's far from the only way to cause harm. Wouldn't it be better to let them join our sects so we can keep a close eye on them?"

'*Well, Xue Yang aside, the 'dangerous without cultivation' thing is certainly true for Jin Guangyao,*' Nie Huaisang supposed. '*Which is why* I *suggested we simply kill them. Don't look at me like that, little Wei-xiong! It's your older-self that said I wasn't allowed to do that! And er-ge, I suppose.*'

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to speak again, so Nie Huaisang acted fast:

"I hate to cut you off, Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang began (unapologetically). "But I'm afraid that's not an option. Indeed, there are other ways they could become dangerous, but, based on

the way things went in our world, this is one thing our sects cannot budge on."

After all, Nie Huaisang might not be allowed to kill Meng Yao, but that didn't mean he would give up entirely. After the foolish stories his mother had given him, Meng Yao had grown desperate to join a cultivation sect and earn his father's approval.

Squashing even the slightest chance of that was a paltry substitute for murder, but one Huaisang would accept nonetheless.

He took in a deep breath, and allowed his eyes to glisten with tears.

"I-I know it seems cruel to prevent them from joining any sect, but, Wei-xiong, it's not *my* idea!" Nie Huaisang called out. "I may have agreed to be the spokesperson, but this is something the Great Sect's Leaders from our time decided already. The other Great Sects, I mean. I… didn't really contribute much to the discussion…."

He trailed off, allowing his nervous tone to take on a more genuine atmosphere, and gave a mental cheer when the future Wei Wuxian didn't so much as twitch at the endless stream of improvised lies. Of course, no matter how old he was, Wei Wuxian was Wei Wuxian. Even with the older one's help, the teenage version wouldn't be easy to trick:

"The other sect leaders insisted on this? Then why didn't they come to discuss it? My other self has… he's been dead for years, you said. I doubt the fact that you're talking to me would have been much of a disincentive."

Nie Huaisang had somewhat hoped his Wei Wuxian would answer that, but it appeared that the reminder of his own death had stalled the Yiling Patriarch momentarily.

Which, unfortunately, meant Nie Huaisang would have to dig himself out of the hole he'd fallen into. Luckily, if there was one thing his brother had (unintentionally) taught him how to do, it was that.

"*Dis*-incentive?! Wei-xiong, it's not like that at all!" he protested. "I wanted to come! I wanted to see you again! Ugh, this is why I hate popular kids! You know, just because you have endless friends, doesn't mean everyone does! Does it really surprise you that I missed you?!"

"Well… no, I just-"

"And besides, what's the big deal about being forbidden from joining sects anyways?! All cultivating means is long hours of awful work so that you get the 'privilege' of risking your life fighting big, scary monsters! Who would pick that?! I'd choose to be a civilian over this any day!"

Jiang Fengmian blinked and stepped forward, beginning, "Sect Leader Nie-"

"Ah! You're all crazy! Especially you!" Nie Huaisang cried out, turning to glare at 'Mo Xuanyu.'

"Me?" the other man asked.

“Yes, you! I mean really, what were you thinking, going to fight Xue Yang like that?! He had both normal cultivation and demonic cultivation, while you just had the latter. If Hanguang-jun hadn’t been with you, who knows what would have happened!”

(Everyone in the future knew what would have happened: Xue Yang would have died, just like what had actually occurred. Luckily, the past Wei Wuxian didn’t yet know that.)

“Ah, you’re right Wei-xiong. I shouldn’t have been the one to explain all this to you!” Nie Huaisang sobbed. “I really don’t know anything about it! I’m sorry! I just — I wanted to see you again!”

“...Sect Leader Nie,” the future Wei Wuxian finally cut in. “Would you like me to take over?”

“Ah, thank you, thank you,” Nie Huaisang sniffed. “Please, just… give me a moment to compose myself.”

(Sure, Nie Huaisang *could* try to argue the past Wei Wuxian into this, but when it came to dealing with a Wei Wuxian, the best option was to use your own! So long as Wei Wuxian didn’t deviate from Nie Huaisang’s plan, it would be perfect. Why would Huaisang bother to waste energy when he could just use his trump card?)

“Well?” the past Wei Wuxian asks, giving his older self a taunting grin.

Said older-Wei Wuxian sent an identical one back.

“You have to understand how difficult it was to come to a consensus,” the Yiling Patriarch began, gesturing toward some of the notes on the pros and cons chart behind him. “The Lan Clan was more in favor of trying to focus our energy on reforming these criminals. Your Jiang Clan was more in favor of removing the threats before they became an issue. Sect Leader Nie… received quite a bit of pressure from his head disciple to lead towards the removal of the threats. This was already a compromise.”

“And what about the Jin Clan?” Jiang Fengmian asked. “What did the Chief Cultivator say about this? Jin Guangyao seemed to be a fair and just man.”

It was only years of practice that kept Nie Huaisang from bursting into laughter at that.

Wei Wuxian cleared his throat: “Ah, Jin Guangyao is-”

“A more complicated issue that we’ll get into later,” Nie Huaisang interrupted, not wanting to get to the important one until he’d successfully dealt with the fodder. “S-sorry, it’s just that there’s a lot that happened with him and the Sect Leaders wanted to not give the wrong impression so they’re waiting for the watchers to see it in the simulation and it probably doesn’t matter but I really wouldn’t know about something like this!”

“Ah… right,” Jiang Fengmian said, looking as though he was vividly recalling why Nie Huaisang was not-so-affectionately referred to as ‘the Headshaker.’

“...Anyways,” the future Wei Wuxian continued. “Quite a few people advocated for giving Xue Yang a harsher punishment than this. We agree that keeping surveillance on him would

be preferable however, so the main suggestion ended up being the creation of an entirely new organization!"

With a dramatic flourish, Wei Wuxian added in a memory of a visual diagram he had created of this proposal. His younger self 'Oooh'-ed and 'Ahhhh'-ed in delight as it formed.

"See, we were thinking that your ability to keep track of them might be a problem, so we brainstormed this as a solution. You create an organization working toward just about anything — the specifics don't really matter — and use that as an excuse to come into contact with them. Let's say the Jiang Sect sponsors a group working on the documentation of famous poems-"

"That was my suggestion, by the way!" Nie Huaisang piped in.

"Right. So we have a goal in place. If the sponsored group happens to search for unknown talent in the form of civilian children, who would really be able to object?"

"And how do you expect us to find the specific children you're looking for?" the younger Wei Wuxian asked. "Putting aside the money and manpower this would require, the whole project seems-"

"You'll just have to scan through the files on the applicants," the future one answered. "No one else has to know what your goal is. So long as you document them accurately-"

"There's still a matter of numbers, especially if we use the obvious incentive-"

"Thin them out."

"On?"

"Obviously-"

"Ah, merit…. Demonic?"

"Only for Xue Yang."

"True, true."

Seeing the blank expression on Jiang Fengmian's face, Nie Huaisang quickly realized that it would be his job to remind the two that not everyone present was a soul identical to theirs.

"Mo-gongzi~" Nie Huaisang whined. "I-I don't understand! What are you talking about?!"

"....Could you explain, A-Xian?" Jiang Fengmian requested.

"Ah, sorry, Uncle Jiang," Wei Wuxian laughed. "Basically, the only way to find a street kid like Xue Yang is to widely offer admission to our program. However, if we use an incentive as appealing as money or food, we'll be swarmed by more applicants than we can really handle. Mo-gongzi thinks we should use a test to thin the applicants out

before accepting them so that I'll have fewer files to go through when looking for Xue Yang. I suggested using a beginning lesson into demonic cultivation as the test, but Mo-gongzi pointed out that not everyone we're looking for will be skilled in that. So, obviously, we'll need to make a more standard intelligence test."

"...Ah," Jiang Fengmian said at last.

"Still a issue of manpower, though," Wei Wuxian admitted. "If you want to find Xue Yang and the other targets, you'll need to recruit over a lot of land. Even with the Jiang Sect's support, I don't think you have the wealth or the manpower to do that over *every* town."

"So we start small and wait for the other sect leaders to come out before going beyond the Jiang Clan's territory?" Jiang Fengmian asked.

He got two nods in exchange.

After thinking it over for a moment, Jiang Fengmian nodded once and added, "Given what Xue Yang became capable of as an adult, I agree with not allowing him to have cultivation. In addition, keeping him nearby will allow us to respond at once should he start to show signs of becoming the same."

"Not punishment, but not enabling them either," Wei Wuxian mumbled to himself. "Alright then. Seems like we have a plan. We'll just have to speak with the other sect leaders about this first."

"Of course, Wei-xiong!" Nie Huaisang agreed instantly. "Thank you for being so understanding! Really…. I don't know what I would have done if I had to report back to the others that I'd failed! You're a life-saver!"

"Anything for you, Nie-xiong!"

The future Wei Wuxian laughed at the interaction, but found his attention pulled away a moment later as Jiang Fengmian stepped forward.

"Sect Leader Jiang?" he asked.

Jiang Fengmian had to suppress a flinch at the distant use of his title, even if he understood the reason why. However, it also made what he was able to say that much harder to get out.

Before coming in, asking 'Mo Xuanyu' for parenting advise seemed like the obvious next step. Now, with the past Wei Wuxian watching intently, it was impossible to ask the future Wei Wuxian how he was supposed to parent the boy's past self. Putting aside the awkwardness and strangeness of the request, Jiang Fengmian now knew exactly what it would do. Asking would simply be pushing everything on *him* again. It would seem like *Wei Wuxian's* responsibility to fix Jiang Fengmian's mistakes. It would make the future one responsible for something he had been a *victim* of, and-

'A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him.'

And so Wei Wuxian had. And, as a result, he was thrown into the Burial Mounds half-alive.

"...Sect Leader?" Wei Wuxian asked again.

"Ah, I…" Jiang Fengmian paused, then cleared his throat. "Thank you for… everything you have done. The Jiang Clan… can never repay you."

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened.

"I mean it," Jiang Fengmian insisted, shaking his head to stop the protest he knew would leave his former ward's throat.

How many times since being brought back to life had Wei Wuxian saved Jin Ling? How many times had he helped Jiang Cheng, even after being choked and blamed for the Wens? How many times had he given everything for them, and all after Jiang Fengmian done the *bare minimum* to stop Madam Yu's unjust punishments?

How much would be different, if he had listened to Wei Wuxian's warnings about the Wens?

"Ah… right," Wei Wuxian smiled. "Thank you for saying so."

"Thank *you*," Jiang Fengmian said back at once, bowing respectfully.

A sigh came from the distance.

"This is just sad, Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang observed. "It's weird how such a competent Sect Leader can turn into *this* in Mo Xuanyu's presence. No wonder you and Jiang-xiong ended up the way you did."

"On the other hand, I'm sure your brother has no idea how you ended up like *this*," Wei Wuxian mercilessly pointed out, miming reading the 'dream book' Nie Huaisang had bought, a devious grin on his face.

"Hey, now. No need to say that!" Nie Huaisang protested. "We may have had our differences, but I can assure you my brother was very proud of me!"

"Huaisang, if you do not stop right this instant, I will *flay you alive!*" Nie Mingjue shouted across the room.

"But *Da-ge,* they look so cute together!"

"I don't care how you think they look! Trying to play matchmaker between Lan-er-gongzi and Wei Wuxian is *unacceptable.* Especially if they haven't asked you for help!"

Trying (and failing) to suppress a laugh, Lan Xichen commented, "Now, now, Da-ge. Huaisang is only trying to help. No need to be so harsh."

"*Xiongzhang?!*"

"You too, Xichen?!" Nie Mingjue gaped. He had been trying to speak up in defense of the obviously-embarrassed Lan Wangji. However, for an attack to come from the boy's own *brother-*

Luckily, before this could become too big of an issue, the world darkened into an ebony void. In the distance, they heard the ringing of a bell get louder and louder.

Two eyes blinked open.

"Ah!" Wei Wuxian gasped, and A-Qing's soul exited his body.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji breathed out in relief, glad to see that the other hadn't been lost in empathy (and maybe, possibly, trying to distract himself from the lies and slander his traitorous brother had engaged in).

"Ah, he's awake!" Jin Ling realized, his eyes lighting up in relief. A moment later, he cleared his throat and put on a not-very-convincing act of never having been worried.

Madam Jin chuckled softly, feeling it had been far too long since she had last gotten to see her grandson.

"He seems fine," one junior observed. "It's good that he hasn't become an idiot."

"Hasn't he always been an idiot?"

With a groan, Wei Wuxian requested, "Please stop arguing, my head hurts."

"Perhaps you and Wei-xiong should have thought it through a bit more before adopting so many children," Nie Huaisang mumbled, leaning close to Lan Wangji. The second jade nodded, accepting those words of advise without a second thought. A few seconds passed, and they finally began to sink in.

He did a double-take.

"I see. A-Qing, all these years, you've been scaring and warning away the living from this town, haven't you?" Wei Wuxian realized, turning to the young ghost girl with a sorrowful smile. "Thank you for all your hard work."

She bowed back silently.

'*Sacrificing herself to help the random passer-bys who might want to enter the town? What foolish levels of dedication,*' Madam Yu huffed. '*Though it does show she knows how to be serious, despite her ridiculous behavior.*'

It also showed that she was worth far more than the fate Madam Yu had initially condemned her to on account of her being a 'thieving street rat,' but that thought was quickly suppressed before it could be acknowledged.

Then, A-Qing stood up and began swinging her bamboo pole around wildly. 'Kill, kill, kill!' she acted out, the charades getting the message across easily enough.

"We'll handle it," Wei Wuxian promised.

"Wait," Sizhui called out. "What exactly did you see during empathy?"

"What *didn't* we see?" Jiang Cheng responded, still stunned by how long the memories were.

Unfortunately for the juniors, Wei Wuxian was in agreement: "I'll tell you later. There's too much to say at the moment."

"Huh? Can't you just summarize it quickly?" Jin Ling whined. "You can't just leave us hanging like that."

"That's easy: in short, Xue Yang needs to die," Wei Wuxian declared, his narrowed eyes flashing red.

Suddenly, a tremendous rumble shook the thin walls of the building they were inside, and the juniors nervously pulled out their swords.

"Senior Mo!" Sizhui called out. "Xue Yang is-"

Before he could finish, the protective talismans Wei Wuxian had put up fizzled away and the juniors eeped, turning their attention towards the threat. On the contrary, calm as can be, Wei Wuxian stepped outside.

"I see," Wen Ruohan muttered to himself as he gazed out at the enormous emerald array floating above the house. He had been wondering how Xue Yang could be a threat to the juniors while also engaging in combat with Hanguang-jun, but that was the wrong way to think about it. Although spiritual cultivation would typically require your opponent to be in front of you for them to pose a danger, demonic cultivation was capable of setting up many delayed attacks or long distance traps. It didn't matter how strong Hanguang-jun was; demonic cultivation allowed Xue Yang to fight on multiple fronts regardless.

A stream of resentful energy surged forward from Wei Wuxian's hand, and quickly spread around the building's perimeter. A half second before the green array struck down with lightning-fast attacks, a burning red barrier was set up above the building. The energy slammed into it, dissipating immediately after.

Jiang Yanli breathed out a sigh of relief.

Jin Ling moved toward the door, trying to see outside as well, only to be violently shoved aside by Wei Wuxian.

A second later, the roof collapsed in where Jin Ling had been just a moment ago.

It was Song Zichen. He had been fighting Wen Ning, but, with the appearance of the emerald array up top, had gotten new orders to go after the juniors instead.

‘*Xue Yang does indeed need to die,*’ Madam Jin thought, a fierce irritation brewing within her. Jin Guangshan, who was still hoping to obtain the boy for himself, nervously took a few steps back.

Luckily, a moment later, another fierce corpse appeared.

Wen Ning had chased after his opponent, maintaining a level of sentience no other corpse had, and thus being capable of making his own judgements in battle. However, Song Zichen was not so single-minded as to ignore the dangerous opponent. The corpse turned towards Wen Ning.

Wen Qing tensed in worry.

Then Wen Ning kicked Song Lan through the building.

‘*Ah, right,*’ Wen Qing thought. ‘*He’s the Ghost General now. I may not be happy about that, but….*’

Truly, it was a much less big deal than she had thought it was upon seeing her brother as a corpse for the first time. Wei Wuxian had outdone himself in this.

“Hold him down!” Wei Wuxian ordered, and the command rang out with a surge of resentment. Before he had even finished speaking, Wen Ning complied. With a vice-like grip on Song Lan’s neck, he slammed the other man against the ground.

The watchers shivered as Wei Wuxian’s orders sank into their brains, and felt a subsequent burst of energy as Wei Wuxian’s power congratulated Wen Ning on a job well done.

“Hey, look!” one of the juniors gasped. When the watchers glanced over, they saw brief flashes of light flickering in the fog. It was too far away to see clearly, but the *clangs* that accompanied each light identified the luminescence as products of the collisions between Xue Yang and his adversary.

“Hanguang-jun!”

“Hanguang-jun!”

“Hanguang-jun!” the juniors cried out.

Nie Huaisang made a large, sweeping motion at them, making eye contact with Lan Wangji as if to say ‘*See? Adopted!*’

“Don’t wander too far!” Wei Wuxian called out to them, only proving Nie Huaisang’s point further. “Now then….”

With a unusually solemn expression of his face, Wei Wuxian walked over to the two struggling fierce corpses on the ground. Despite Song Zichen’s attempts to escape, the grip Wen Ning had on his neck remained unfaltering. The other corpse was continuously crushed against the ground.

"...Is that seriously Wen Ning?" Jin Zixuan asked. He had seen the Ghost General's prowess before, but this was the first time he had seen him use such intentional, brutal violence after having regained his own consciousness. It was still that nervous, stuttering boy within the body, but now, more than just becoming physically capable of fighting, Wen Ning was-

'*Seriously, what happened after the war?*' Jin Zixuan wondered, not for the first time.

The thrashing Song Lan tried to escape again, so Wen Ning slammed him against the ground harder than ever before, creating cracks that extended from one end of the street to the other.

Watching this display of power, Wen Ruohan couldn't help but smile.

It had served its purpose. Following that attack, Song Lan's thrashing lowered to a more manageable level, and Wei Wuxian was able to truly investigate. The Yiling Patriarch reached forward, resting his fingers on Song Zichen's head and combing through until he found what he was looking for.

'*The two nails used here are much thinner than the ones Wen Ning had,*' Wei Wuxian observed. '*It shouldn't be too hard for Song Lan to regain his consciousness afterward.*'

A vicious grin appeared on Nie Mingjue's face as he considered what would happen if it was Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, Wen Ning, *and* Song Zichen against Xue Yang. Just one of them would probably be more than enough, but now-

(He would help the kid version. He would try to save him — Nie Mingjue *would* give him a chance. But the adult one had to die.)

The simulated Wei Wuxian gently pulled out the two nails that had been embedded into Song Lan, extracting them with a subtle beckoning of resentment. In the background, they could hear something resembling a flute.

Wei Wuxian was manipulating resentful energy, and it was responding accordingly.

They flashed over to where Xue Yang and Hanguang-jun were fighting. The difference in skill was clear; where Xue Yang dodged narrowly and fought frantically, Lan Wangji stood straight, keeping one hand resting calmly on his back as they dueled. It was the complete opposite of the emotions in place when Xue Yang had fought Song Lan, but there was nothing Xue Yang could say to falter Hanguang-jun's composure.

Golden sparks flew into the air.

"Okay, now you're just showing off," Nie Huaisang complained. With the years of practice under his disposal, the real Lan Wangji luckily managed to refrain from responding to that.

Even though it was taking nearly all his mental focus to survive against Hanguang-jun, Xue Yang was still aware of what was happening to Song Lan through their connection. He gritted his teeth together as Wen Ning slammed Song Lan against the ground — not out of pain, but from anger.

“I hate things are too loyal. What a pain,” he muttered. It was a repeated rendition of a phrase he had uttered not too long before.

But the anger it filled Wen Qing with more than equalled that of the first time she had heard him say that. Although Jiang Yanli sent her a concerned, compassionate look, that wasn’t enough to stop Wen Qing cursing Xue Yang with the most scathing words she could muster.

(Even Nie Mingjue was impressed.)

In the blink of an eye, they had flashed back to where Wei Wuxian was. An enormous tidal wave of resentful energy exploded out as the last nail was removed, making Song Lan jerk up for a moment of awareness before he collapsed back onto the ground.

But he would be fine, now.

As Wen Qing stared at the man, so similar to her brother in so many horrible ways, she couldn’t help the relief that filled her chest.

‘*Lan Zhan is fighting Xue Yang throughout all this fog in unfamiliar territory,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*He’s at a disadvantage. I need to figure out a way for him to locate Xue Yang more easily.*’

Of course, for Hanguang-jun, ‘at a disadvantage’ just meant ‘wasn’t able to instantly deal with him.’ Nonetheless, if they didn’t want Xue Yang to escape, it would indeed be best to find a solution to this.

As Lan Xichen saw a small, light blush overtake Lan Wangji’s ears at Wei Wuxian’s concern, he gave a short, mental cheer.

Then-

Tap, tap, tap.

“A-Qing!” Jiang Yanli lit up, Jin Zixuan’s expression changing into a grin just as fast.

‘*The sound of A-Qing’s bamboo? Ah!*’

He spun on his heel.

“Lan Zhan! Aim toward the sound of the bamboo stick’s tapping!”

“Oh!” Madam Jin gasped.

At this, Lan Qiren finally relaxed. Although he had complete faith in his nephew, this help was greatly appreciated. After all, both Xiao Xingchen and Song Zichen had been superior to Xue Yang in cultivation, and yet they had still….

But now, he was certain Wangji would be okay.

And the simulation seemed determined to prove that to him. The watchers were pulled along to Xue Yang again, and observed as he retreated into the trees. A determined A-Qing followed after, and taps of her pole were accompanied by the gleam of Bichen's attacks.

Tap.

A slice through Xue Yang's sleeve.

Tap.

A nick on his shoulder.

Tap.

A slice down his chest that left the scoundrel gasping out in pain.

"Yes! Get him!" Jiang Cheng shouted. Recently, things had gotten slightly awkward between him and Lan Wangji, the relationship they had formed throughout the situation fracturing oddly. After all, although he appreciated the support Lan Wangji offered Wei Wuxian, he still couldn't simply tolerate what was happening. Hanguang-jun's disgusting interest in Wei Wuxian, coupled with the way he was taking Wei Wuxian farther and farther from the future Jiang Cheng instead of trying to figure out how to *fix* what had gone wrong between them, couldn't be considered acceptable to the Jiang heir.

But Xue Yang had tried to kill Jin Ling over and over again, and now Hanguang-jun was solving the problem. Jiang Cheng could set aside his feelings for now.

Tap.

~🎵~

This time, it was Wei Wuxian that attacked. As he played a single note on his flute, an arrow of resentful energy shot forward. Xue Yang dodged, but the resentment followed, circling around a tree after him and bouncing back each time he tried to throw it off. At first his defense was solid, but, with the quickly-approaching Hanguang-jun on his tail, he began to rush.

Eventually, he messed up.

Tap.

A bit of the resentment had gotten past his sword, cutting across his chest and tearing open his robe. He slammed into a tree behind him, the pain rendering him unable to keep two items from slipping out of his clothes. Lingering resentment wrapped around them and brought the two objects to its waiting master, Wei Wuxian.

There was a beat of silence. Xue Yang was struggling to catch his breath, while Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were staring at the items in Wei Wuxian's hand.

And now that Wei Wuxian was relaxing his control on the surrounding resentful energy, the watchers' minds were beginning to clear up. This allowed them to focus on the items as well.

It was a spirit trapping pouch and a sword, both once upon a time having belonged to Xiao Xingchen.

"It's his soul," Lan Qiren pointed out, remembering the body Xue Yang had demanded Wei Wuxian revive. That was quite a valuable thing to obtain.

And Xue Yang realized the same a moment after. He reached down, feeling at the empty pocket on his chest, before his irises shrunk into a bloodshot desperation.

"Give it back!" he demanded.

The attack he launched forward was easily countered by Hanguang-jun, who flashed before Wei Wuxian and continued his battle with Xue Yang at once. The Lan cultivator remained in complete control, barely moving from his spot as Xue Yang jumped around ferociously and attacked from as many angles as possible. The adult form of the second jade was a true embodiment of the Lan technique.

Tap.

Lan Wangji parried Xue Yang's attack, then kicked him back into another tree.

Heedless of the proud smiles Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen directed his way, Lan Wangji focused on the technique being shown. This was far from the first time it had been displayed, but every time the younger second jade watched his older self fight, he couldn't help but be awestruck by the excellence before him.

This was the ideal he would strive to match. Although his face remained impassive to any outside viewer, a powerful motivation began swirling within him.

On the other hand, Xue Yang became more frantic than ever.

"Give it back to me!" he shouted again, his attacks becoming increasingly sporadic. "Give it back!"

"Which?" Wei Wuxian asked from where he watched on the side, protecting the juniors from any wayward attacks. "Xiao Xingchen's sword? Or his *soul?*"

The Yiling Patriarch gazed down at Xue Yang, his expression turning colder and colder as time went on.

"You don't deserve either one."

'*Nice job, Wei-xiong,*' Nie Huaisang thought, watching the growing triumph on his brother's face. '*I'm pretty sure, with this, you've gotten Da-ge completely on your side.*'

He had felt a little regretful for having blamed Xue Yang's actions on Nie Mingjue's death, but, with this, Huaisang couldn't help but think it had all worked out.

‘*Nice job, me. Barely any work, but great rewards!*’

As Nie Huaisang was congratulating himself, Xue Yang glared at Wei Wuxian, the panting combined with his deranged hate making him more closely resemble a wild beast than a human. Even as he continued to fight Hanguang-jun (the helpful taps of A-Qing aiding in his defeat), the rage he was directing at the Yiling Patriarch was undeniable.

An amused smirk crossed Wen Ruohan’s face, and he tilted his head, wondering what Xue Yang would do next.

With Hanguang-jun fighting him, Xue Yang’s options were quite limited.

Tap,* A-Qing’s sounds repeated. *Tap!

Xue Yang just barely dodged out of the way, his injured arm hindering him significantly.

Tap, tap!

A thoughtful expression crossed Wei Wuxian’s face, and he observed Xue Yang’s impeccable dodging ability with amusement. Then-

“Why bother, Xue Yang?” he taunted. “So what if you get the spirit trapping pouch back? You can’t bring back someone who no longer has the will to live!”

“Ooh,” Jin Zixuan winced reflexively at the harsh words, forgetting for a moment who they were directed at.

“You don’t get to decide that!” Xue Yang hissed back. However, at that moment, an ironic reversal of his fight with Song Lan occurred. This time, *he* was the one who had gotten distracted by the words.

Lan Wangji, who hadn’t needed Wei Wuxian’s help to begin with, became all the more dangerous.

Now Xue Yang was scrambling to survive, struggling and only escaping by a hair’s breadth.

Tap.

Tap tap.

“Come on Xue Yang. Why are you so desperate to bring Xiao Xingchen back to life?” Wei Wuxian asked as Xue Yang ducked around a tree. The only advantage he had over Hanguang-jun was his understanding of the terrain, and he would use that to his full advantage.

Tap.

“Xiao Xingchen despises you.”

Enraged, Xue Yang growled, “Who wants to go back to the past? I want to turn him into a fierce corpse. An evil spirit! He wanted to be someone virtuous, didn’t he? Then I’ll make it so that he never stops killing! So that he can never be at peace!”

A growl escaped Nie Mingjue’s throat.

“Eh? Do you really hate him that much?” Wei Wuxian wondered, tapping his own shoulder with his flute. “Then why did you kill Chang Ping?”

“They took my finger,” Xue Yang responded. “So I wiped out the entire Chang Clan! Every single one of them!”

“Oh, I see. For revenge, huh?”

Tap, tap.

“But then, why did you use Shuanghua instead of your Jiangzai?” Wei Wuxian wondered with faux-casualness, then laughed. “Xue Yang, you did get revenge. But for whose sake was it for?”

“What?” Lan Xichen asked.

“If you really wanted to avenge Xiao Xingchen, the one you should have executed… was yourself.”

And just like that, the fleeing Xue Yang froze.

At that moment, a new memory filled the simulation. One they had already seen:

With a crackle of resentful energy, Xue Yang reached forward. Xiao Xingchen’s corpse was beneath him, but the blue glow of said cultivator’s soul floated on top. Xue Yang was trying to forcefully gather the soul and shove it back in.

A moment later, the soul dissipated.

‘Huh?’ Xue Yang asked.

The blood spilling out of Xiao Xingchen’s neck stained the floor.

‘No,’ Xue Yang muttered. ‘No, no-’

Just as they had seen before, the emotions Xue Yang felt for Xiao Xingchen were far more complicated than just hate.

“Ah, no wonder Xue Yang froze,” Nie Huaisang muttered, noticing his brother’s complicated expression.

‘*Wei Wuxian really has a way with words,*’ Jin Guangshan supposed, quite grateful that Wei Wuxian had been born the son of a servant, rather than a sect heir. He would have been much more trouble, otherwise.

But, just because Xue Yang had stopped, didn’t mean everyone else did.

***Tap, tap,* came A-Qing’s call, as she tried desperately to guide Lan Wangji to where the fleeing Xue Yang had paused. Mad laughter broke out of the man, and he turned his glare on A-Qing.**

“Little blind brat!” he cursed. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll tear your soul into pieces?!”

Tap, tap, tap-

A yellow light flashed into the air, and the tapping stopped. Xue Yang had thrown a talisman at her, and it had met its mark.

Her mouth opened in a soundless scream.

“A-Qing!” Jiang Yanli shouted, running forward.

But it was too late.

With a sad smile on her face, A-Qing dissipated before their eyes.

“A-Qing!” Jiang Yanli screamed again.

And Madam Yu froze.

‘*She’s gone?*’ the Jiang Matriarch gaped. ‘*No. No, she-’*

“A-Qing!” Wei Wuxian cried out as well, snapping open a spirit trapping pouch and gathering the leftover fragments before they could all disappear for good. Then, while Xue Yang’s gaze was still directed toward where A-Qing had just been, Lan Wangji attacked.

An enormous gash appeared across Xue Yang’s chest.

“With that… he won’t make it long,” Wen Qing muttered, coldly cynical as ever. “But now….”

Now, with no real chance of survival, Xue Yang became more erratic than ever. He jumped toward Wei Wuxian, reaching for the spirit trapping pouch-

A half-second later, blood splurted from his arm.

Lan Wangji had cut his hand off.

A cheer erupted from a good portion of the watchers, only matched by that given off by the simulated juniors. With no shortage of delight, they observed as Xue Yang fell to his knees.

Shivering, the young man reached into his robes again, grabbing something.

The watchers tensed.

But, before anything could happen, a bright light appeared beneath him.

"A teleportation array?" Wei Wuxian realized. Lan Wangji raised his hand at once, sending Bichen flying forward toward the near-blinding light.

A silhouette appeared. It was the grave digger.

The array activated beneath them and both he and Xue Yang disappeared, Bichen uselessly hitting the trees behind them instead. The object Xue Yang had grabbed fell to the ground.

The real Lan Wangji stepped forward to take a look at it, and found not a handful of corpse poisoning powder, but rather a single, old piece of candy.

The frown on the second jade's face deepened and he looked away.

"The grave digger was wounded, yet he still returned to take Xue Yang away," Wei Wuxian commented. "That would have taken a great amount of his spiritual power."

"The Stygian Tiger Seal," Hanguang-jun pointed out. "Relying on that would have been the only way Xue Yang could have controlled so many corpses."

"I see. So that was a glimpse of its power," Jin Guangshan mumbled, turning a contemplative look on the simulated Wei Wuxian.

"The gravedigger taking away his body is the same as taking away the seal," Wei Wuxian agreed thoughtfully.

"Wait, so… it's over?" Jiang Yanli wondered.

"For now," Wen Qing agreed. "There's no way Xue Yang could survive that. We still don't know who the gravedigger is, but this part, at least, has come to an end."

"Heavens," Madam Jin muttered to herself. "We didn't even do anything, and yet I'm still exhausted from just watching."

There were quite a few nods of agreement.

Wen Ning, who had been staying back to watch over Song Lan and the juniors, stood up and began walking over to the pair. At that moment, Lan Wangji tossed Wei Wuxian a light blue pouch.

"What's this?" he asked, catching it easily. "Our dear friend's right hand?"

"Mn."

“Hanguang-jun!” Wei Wuxian lit up, his eyes shining with joy. “Only you would find the time to find our dear friend’s right hand despite everything that was going on! You never fail to impress!”

As an identical blush overtook the ears of both the real and virtual Lan Wangji, Lan Xichen fought to hold in an excited squeal.

“What a shame it’s not the head,” Wei Wuxian continued. “I wanted to see who he looks like. Soon, we’ll be able to — wait, where’s Song Lan?”

Wen Ning glanced back to where he had left the other corpse, and jolted in surprise when he found it empty.

“How is a *corpse* so expressive?” Lan Qiren muttered disbelievingly, expertly ignoring the glare Wen Qing sent him by turning up his nose and focusing even closer on the simulation before him.

Panicked, the juniors scattered in search of the wayward former cultivator, all unable to believe he had slipped away without them noticing. On the other hand, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji didn’t seem anywhere near as panicked. They turned calmly, and walked in a straight line toward where they knew he would be.

He was at the mausoleum, staring down at Xiao Xingchen’s corpse.

“Oh,” Nie Huaisang wilted. It wasn’t as though he was a stranger to death — unwilling though he may be, no cultivator could avoid encountering the concept for long — but the *meaning* grief had for him had completely changed after hearing about his brother’s foretold death.

(Had he looked down on Nie Mingjue’s corpse in the same way? What had he felt when it was buried in the saber tomb?)

He prayed it would be a long time before he had to find out.

If asked to guess, however, Huaisang imagined it would have been something like how Song Lan looked now. The Nie heir was obviously a much more expressive person, but, even with Song Zichen’s general blankness, the sheer *grief* in his low hanging head was unspeakably heavy.

The juniors disagreed.

“It’s that fierce corpse!” Jin Ling shouted, grabbing his blade.

Jin Zixuan balked at the use of his sword, shouting “No, *wait* you stupid kid-”

“Everyone get ready!”

Lan Qiren frowned.

“Now-”

“You don’t need to worry,” Wei Wuxian interrupted. “He’s regained his consciousness.”

And just like that, the juniors relaxed at once.

“Huh…” Jiang Cheng blinked. “Does anyone else think they have a little *too much* faith in Wei Wuxian?”

After thinking it over for a moment, Lan Wangji pointed out, “He is their senior, and has saved their lives several times.”

“Still! This is a corpse that was trying to kill them just a few minutes ago. But no, Wei Wuxian said it’s okay, so it must be,” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes. “And this is *after* he pulled the whole ‘come look at this pretty ghost out here. Don’t worry, it’s not scary at all.’”

No one had a response for that, though quite a few had to admit they had the same amount of trust in Wei Wuxian as the juniors did — if not more.

“This is Song Lan, Song Zichen Daozhang,” Wei Wuxian explained, gesturing toward the man for Lan Wangji. A silence overtook Hanguang-jun, and he watched the corpse carefully. Despite the limited facial expressions allowed in a dead body, the pained grimace on the former cultivator was still clear as day.

Lan Wangji nodded his head once in a short bow.

The movement, having attracted Song Lan’s attention, caused the other to glance back at last. He bowed as well, just as outwardly-unreadable as Hanguang-jun had been.

Seeing that, Lan Xichen couldn’t help but wonder if that future Wangji had also noticed the many similarities between him and Song Zichen. The realizations Lan Xichen had come to became more and more apparent with each new piece of evidence he found.

He could only hope that things did not end as tragically for his brother as it had for these two.

Then, Wei Wuxian reached into his robes and pulled out two pouches, holding them out to the corpse: “These are the souls of Xiao Xingchen Daozhang and A-Qing. They’re both very weak. I did what I could.”

Slowly, Song Zichen reached forward and took them.

“Song Daozhang, what do you plan to do with Xiao Xingchen Daozhang’s body?”

In response, the man grabbed a nearby bamboo pole off the ground and scribbled out an answer:

“...Cremate the corpse, so the soul may rest in peace,” Lan Qiren read aloud, before nodding in approval at the man’s choice. Wei Wuxian agreed:

“That’s good. If you keep the soul pure and slowly nurse it, then maybe one day it will be whole again.”

‘*And yet he claimed that there was ‘nothing he could do’ to help a soul that damaged,*’ Wen Ruohan thought, unsurprised by the lie, but amused nonetheless. ‘*I really will have to keep careful watch over the things he says. Ah, well; that will just make it all the more interesting.*’

Next, Lan Wangji stepped forward, holding a sword out to him.

“Xiao Xingchen was your closest friend,” he said. “You should be the one to take care of Shuanghua.”

If he hadn’t been a corpse, Song Lan’s eyes would have surely widened. He reached forward tentatively to take the blade, slowly unsheathing it and staring at his own reflection in the metal. There were several more seconds of quiet contemplation. Then, closing his eyes solemnly, he allowed the sword to slide back into the sheath.

Xiao Xingchen’s blade was slipped onto his back, joining Song Zichen’s own, and the man bowed lowly to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji in thanks.

“And now?” Wei Wuxian asked. “What will you do?”

What could be done? Jiang Cheng recalled his own helplessness after the Massacre of Lotus Pier. Even then, he’d still had Jiang Yanli and Wei Wuxian ~~for a few more years~~. Song Zichen was *dead* — he truly had *nothing* now.

But the man did not succumb to despair.

He bowed once more to the living cultivators, before turning away and beginning the walk out of Yi City.

“From then on, Song Zichen Daozhang roamed the world with Shuanghua, exorcizing evil alongside Xiao Xingchen,” Ouyang Zizhen explained. “He will continue until the day comes that Xiao Xingchen wakes up, and Song Zichen can tell him ‘It wasn’t your fault. I’m sorry.’”

Jiang Cheng gritted his teeth together. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't stop certain memories from resurfacing at those words:

‘*Why did you have to save Lan Wangji?... Why did you have to speak up? How many times have I told you not to stir up trouble? Not to strike?... Are you happy now?!’*

‘You really have the audacity to tell me to ‘watch my language?!” Jiang Cheng — Sect Leader Jiang Wanyin — had snarled. ‘Back on Dafan Mountain, which one of us didn’t watch what they said while talking to Jin Ling? ‘I suppose you didn’t have a mother to teach you?’ Hitting where it hurts the most, huh? Have you forgotten who’s the reason Jin Ling had to face so many whispers behind his back? You’re quite the forgetful old man. You’ve forgotten the things you’ve said, the promise you made… but don’t you dare forget how his parents died!’

And on the other side-

‘It wasn’t your fault. I’m sorry.’

But that was *different.* The deaths of Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli *were* Wei Wuxian's fault — his response of 'I haven't forgotten' proved that well enough. Unlike Xiao Xingchen, Wei Wuxian wasn't just a victim in all this. Wei Wuxian was-

Wei Wuxian was…

(Remembering the way the future Jiang Wanyin's disciples had blocked the inn's exits without needing orders, how they'd refrained from coming up no matter how loudly he and Wei Wuxian screamed, how *Jin Ling* had been the one to save Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng decided to not finish that thought.)

"The process required to repair a soul is a slow one," Sizhui continued. "However, it is not without hope. Although far from fully complete, I'm pleased to report that both A-Qing and Xiao Xingchen's souls have recovered enough to supply some of the memories you have been shown so far. Song Zichen came by and offered his help at our request, which was greatly appreciated."

A little round of applause broke out among the simulated-future juniors, and Ouyang Zizhen even gave a loud cheer.

And bright smiles broke across many of the watcher's faces as the implications sank in.

Excitedly, Nie Huaisang turned to his brother and bounced: "He did it! He's really doing it! Xiao Xingchen Daozhang and A-Qing might be okay, in the end. Not alive, but still-"

"Their souls can be saved," Nie Mingjue whispered, disbelieving and unspeakably hopeful all in one. "They… they're okay."

Jin Zixuan gave a loud cheer, and Nie Huaisang and Jiang Yanli joined him a second later. Although they didn't join in, the pleased smiles on Wen Qing's and Lan Xichen's faces (and the exuberant grin on Nie Mingjue's) showed that they felt the same.

"Xiao Xingchen the bright moon; Song Zichen, the bitter snow and frost."

For one final time, Lan Wangji bowed at the future's cultivators, making a mental reminder to get to know them in his world. The injuries on his other self's back had apparently kep his future-self from meeting them.

That would have to be corrected.

"Several… hours? Minutes? A short while later!" Lan Jingyi declared.

Fog rose up and vanished, transitioning the scene to a port town some ways away. This was made all the more obvious by the large number of people in the shopping district, as well as the abundance of noise in the area (a far cry from Yi City's eerie silence split by the mangled groans of corpses). The female sellers called out to passing travelers, and the male ones advertised with abundant enthusiasm. Meanwhile, the Yiling Patriarch stood with a far more morose atmosphere.

"Such honorable and virtuous men," he commented. "What a pity… what a shame."

Below the swaying red lanterns, Lan Wangji stepped forward and reassured him: "No matter how long it takes, they will meet again."

At those words, Wei Wuxian's eyes widened, and his grim expression shifted into a soft smile a moment after.

And once again, Lan Xichen couldn't help but wonder how much Hanguang-jun had connected his own story with that of the 'bright moon' and the 'bitter snow.' After the Yiling Patriarch's death, the simulated Lan Wangji would have had no way of knowing he'd see Wei Wuxian again, but…

The parallels were easy to see.

"Lan Zhan," the Yiling Patriarch spoke up. "I-"

Before he could say more, he suddenly broke off into heavy coughs. Smoke was rising from below, filling Wei Wuxian's lungs.

Having spent the last hour or so sneezing nearly non-stop, Lan Wangji offered Wei Wuxian his sympathies.

The source of the fire was revealed soon enough: as the simulation brought them down to the street below the platform Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were on, the figures of the future's juniors became clear. They were tending to a roaring fire, dejection clear across their faces. The one at the center of the mess was Lan Jingyi, whose attempt at maintaining a strong face lasted a total of two seconds before he began bawling.

"How could such a terrible thing happen?!" he cried out, wiping his eyes. Tears were streaming down his face, and showed no signs of stopping anytime soon.

A long, drawn out sigh left Lan Qiren, but, having steadily grown used to this, he (for once) refrained from commenting.

Meanwhile, Jin Ling was furious:

"Xue Yang! That trash! Scum! Death was too good for him! If Fairy was here I'd let it loose to maul him to death!"

Watching the stomping, shouting Jin Ling, Wei Wuxian muttered, "Just calm down and say what you want to. There's no need to unleash Fairy."

Below, walking slowly in an attempt to maintain some degree of poise, the 'romantic' Ouyang Zizhen dropped a candle in the river, watching it drift away solemnly. That mask of grace could only last so long however.

"Miss A-Qing… Miss A-Qing!"

Now, he and many of the other juniors were crying out openly, and Ouyang Zizhen was banging his hand on the ground in protest as he sobbed into his sleeve. If the bun

holding his hair back hadn't been tied so tightly, it would surely have come loose ages ago with all the dramatic crying he was doing.

"She was such a nice girl," one Lan baby pointed out.

Another agreed, "What a pity… such a cruel fate for such a good person."

"Hopefully she get reborn into a good family!" Ouyang Zizhen continued, by this point crying even more than Lan Jingyi was. The incense he was burning for her wasn't something the watchers could smell, but, judging by the grimace on Wei Wuxian's face, they had a feeling he may have gone a bit overboard with the amount.

'*Well, it's a good thing everyone's too caught up in this to remember the Ghost General's presence,*' Wei Wuxian supposed. '*After Xue Yang's death, I lightly whistled, and Wen Ning quietly retreated. Despite seeing it all, Lan Zhan had no objections to the matter.*'

Wen Qing breathed out a sigh of relief. She hadn't been overly worried — if nothing else, Yi City had made it quite clear that both Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning were likely to be fine no matter who their opponents were — but it was reassuring nonetheless.

On the other hand, her sect leader had other thoughts: '*Given that Wen Ning's consciousness has been returned, I doubt that whistle was a command so much as instructions. A light whistle is enough for a resentful being to receive such a specific message… perhaps it could be used as some form of a secret code, so long as no other demonic cultivators were in the area.*'

Unfortunately, that would require a conscious corpse, and killing Wen Ning to get that would simply put the Yiling Patriarch, the Ghost General, and Wen Ruohan's own doctor against him.

He sighed, shelving the idea for the time being.

As the smoke from the juniors' fire continued to rise into the air, images began to appear. The dark ash warped into grey figures — Wei Wuxian's current thoughts given visual form through his memories.

'*When we were preparing to leave, I saw something sad and lonely.*'

The simulation's smoke-based memory of Wei Wuxian turned around, staring at the spot where Xue Yang's body had been just a few minutes before and mouthing out a silent 'wait' to Lan Wangji.

'*A decapitated left hand: Xue Yang's hand,*' Wei Wuxian mentally continued. '*It had been clenched into a tight fist, but what he'd been holding had fallen out.*'

Having already seen what that object was, Lan Wangji lowered his eyes in a solemn silence.

'*The thing that had fallen out was a small piece of candy. It was blackened even before it had fallen, and couldn't be consumed anymore. It had been held in a too-tight grip, and had cracked as a result.*'

Nie Mingjue pursed his lips together unhappily.

“On one hand, he disgusted Xiao Xingchen so much the man committed suicide,” Wei Wuxian muttered. “On the other, he cherished the candy Xiao Xingchen gave him and even asked for help in repairing his soul.”

The armrests on Nie Mingjue’s chair trembled as his hands began to unconsciously clench into fists on them. However, even through all that, he remained silent, listening to Wei Wuxian’s words.

“Xue Yang, he’s… lonely. And pathetic.”

Another silence followed that, and Hanguang-jun allowed it to continue.

‘*Wrong,*’ Nie Mingjue thought to himself. ‘*It was all wrong. Everything about what happened in Yi City was wrong. There was no victor. I can’t even say that evil won —* everyone *lost! What kind of a mess is that?*’

Deflating at once, Nie Mingjue buried his face in one hand, his previous emotions returning full-force. Upon seeing that, the watching Lan Wangji finally spoke up:

“What will we do about Sect Leader Chang?”

All at once, every previously-downcast eye swung in his direction, equally mystified by the sudden change in subject.

Withholding a sigh, Lan Wangji elaborated: “We agreed to not punish for events that have not yet occurred, but the Chang Clan leader has *already* acted against Xue Yang. So?”

“I… I don’t-”

What sort of a punishment would be suitable for this?

~~Especially since they had already been pressured into not punishing the Wen for their transgressions.~~

Before anyone could come up with an answer to that, the simulated juniors spoke up once more:

“Wait, Senior Mo, what did you mean about Xue Yang using Shuanghua against the Chang?” Ouyang Zizhen asked, continuing to wipe away his own tears. “It really upset Xue Yang, but I didn’t really….”

“But then, why did you use Shuanghua instead of your Jiangzai?” Wei Wuxian wondered. “Xue Yang, you did get revenge. But for whose sake was it for?”

“It’s Xue Yang!” another one of the juniors popped in. “I bet he took Xiao Xingchen’s Shuanghua to kill Chang Ping’s family as part of his revenge!”

“He’s worst than a beast!” another piped up. “He wouldn’t even let a dead person rest in peace.”

Lan Qiren nodded in agreement, then paused, wondering how Wei Wuxian, the *inventor* of demonic cultivation, felt about disturbing the dead.

“But… but-”

Not understanding the objection, Jiang Cheng tilted his head in confusion.

“Why did he kill them with lingchi?” Sizhui asked. “And why did he wait so long to do it?”

“Why use Shuanghua and not his Jiangzai?” another asked.

“Why did he bother to dig out Chang Ping’s eyes?”

Giving a short ‘humph,’ Lan Qiren supposed that although the children seemed world apart in terms of maturity from Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji at eighteen, they were still able to ask appropriate questions when the situation called for it. He couldn’t necessarily say their education had been *ruined.*

(And besides, maybe it was a good thing that they hadn’t had to grow up preparing for a war started by their forefathers.)

As part of ensuring that transition, there was ‘Senior Mo’ — someone who, as always, had all the answers.

“It happened many years after because he only did it after Xiao Xingchen had died. The brutal lingchi punishment was used because Chang Ping had been indirectly involved in Xiao Xingchen’s tragedy. By using Shuanghua, he was executing the sentence in Xiao Xingchen’s place. He dug out his eyes so that Chang Ping would become just like Xiao Xingchen.”

’If you really wanted to avenge Xiao Xingchen, the one you should have executed… was yourself.’

The juniors felt much the same:

“Huh? Then he’s the one who should have experienced the lingchi!”

“How laughable,” Jin Ling agreed.

“That’s right. Xue Yang was simply unleashing his regret,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “That’s why he’s lonely and pathetic. That’s why he had to die.”

And *this* was the sort of person the clan leaders had promised to try to change. Putting aside what they would do to the Chang Sect Leader, leading Xue Yang towards a more righteous future would require completely restructuring the boy’s mindset, worldviews, and goals.

Were they even capable of such a thing?

Luckily, as though aware they needed some time to think about this, the simulation paused on that scene. They were shown filler background images of the town Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were in, the sounds dulled to give them a chance to think.

For a while, no one spoke.

But then-

"Revenge," Nie Huaisang muttered, then turned to his brother, eyes shining. "What if we let the child Xue Yang get revenge on the Chang Clan while he was young?"

"The revenge he wanted was the annihilation of everyone in the Chang Sect," Wen Ruohan calmly pointed out. Where normally the mere gaze of the Chief Cultivator would have been enough to wilt Nie Huaisang, his current enthusiasm carried him forward.

"No, no — that's what he wanted as an adult. That's what he wanted after getting years and years to let his resentment grow and fester. I'd have to check on the child version of him to be sure, but given how naive he was in those flashbacks, that might be the key to shaping him as an adult."

"Especially if he knows the Great Sects support this," Lan Xichen added on, growing in enthusiasm as he listened. "That would help him feel as though such an act won't go unpunished in the world."

"So long as we keep to that philosophy even on situations which do not involve Xue Yang," Lan Wangji calmly pointed out. His half-warning did nothing to disturb most of the watchers' enthusiasm, however.

"Surely you can't be serious," Madam Yu protested. "No matter what he did, Chang CiAn is a Sect Leader. If this happens once, it could happen again. People won't simply accept any sort of punishment being given out for a crime against-"

'A street rat' she would have continued, but, before the words could leave her mouth, A-Qing flashed into her mind, and she found the insult impossible to continue.

"But… A-Niang, we have to do something," Jiang Yanli pointed out, growing in confidence with every word. "This strategy Nie-gongzi suggested might actually work!"

"Will it?" Wen Ruohan voiced calmly, making the girl flinch back and wilt slightly (only refraining from paling completely due to Jin Zixuan's protective presence in front of her).

All other conversation paused.

Then, glancing over at the (annoyingly clever) Nie heir, Wen Ruohan asked, "And how much chance do *you* think this plan of yours has of working?"

(From what Wen Ruohan had seen throughout the simulation, there was a bit more to Nie Huaisang than there seemed to be on first glance. This was not a terrible idea; he was curious

to see what the sixteen year old would have to say when pressed. It might provide further insight into what he was capable of.)

"Hmm," Nie Huaisang hummed, gaining confidence as Nie Mingjue stepped between him and Wen Ruohan, glaring at the Chief Cultivator with all his might. "W-well… to put it in generous terms, if we don't have significantly more safeguards in this plan, then I'd put it at about a seventy percent chance it causes a worse Xue Yang than there was in the simulation."

"*Huh?!*" a dozen voices asked at once, having not seen any problems with it.

"That said, if we do figure out ways to keep it under control, then it might work!" Nie Huasiang beamed, then deflated. "Or maybe not. Providing him revenge and resources could raise a lot of problems. It honestly depends on a bunch of things… I don't really know."

The boundless confidence many of the watchers had previously had in Nie Huaisang's idea evaporated like mist under a blinding desert sun. There was an increasingly awkward silence as the watchers made eye contact with each other, many wondering why they had been so excited about an idea from *that* Nie Huaisang in the first place.

(Wen Ruohan watched it all with a calculating eye.)

After a bit more time had passed, the simulation began anew. Considering it was starting right where they left off, it was easy for the watchers to be pulled back in. Ouyang Zizhen was crying out for 'poor Lady A-Qing' while a handful of Lans comforted him. Lan Jingyi was sobbing uncontrollably, Jin Ling was ranting and raving at the sky, and Lan Sizhui was trying desperately to keep them all together.

Then as more paper was burned, the fire became even bigger, and Wei Wuxian began to grow concerned.

"Hey, Hanguang-jun, aren't you going to stop them?"

Rather than raising his voice at the kids, Hanguang-jun simply offered, "You do it."

"Ah, Wangji-xiong, you're too indulgent!" Nie Huaisang whined.

Rolling her eyes, Wen Qing muttered, "I can't believe the *Lan* is the easy parent between the two of them."

Jolting at the mention of the word 'parent,' Lan Wangji didn't notice the bitter look that crossed Jiang Cheng's face at those words. Jiang Yanli, on the other hand, did, and her heart ached for her brother at that. After all, if Wei Wuxian got together with Lan Wangji, then it wouldn't matter whether or not he was cast out by the cultivation world; the planned future of Wei Wuxian being Jiang Cheng's second in command would not come to be.

'*But A-Xian might be happier then,*' she couldn't help but mentally add.

And, as if to prove her right, Wei Wuxian decided to play along with Hanguang-jun's request.

“Alright,” he accepted after a bit of thought. “Sure, I’ll help you teach them a lesson. Hey, kids! You’re disciples from cultivation clans! What’s the use in burning joss paper? They’re dead. They won’t be able to receive them. There are people living nearby. You’ll bother them if you keep-”

“It’s not like you’ve ever been dead! How would you know if the dead were able to receive joss paper or not!” Lan Jingyi demanded, tears still running down his face at a breakneck pace.

Lan Qiren, once again, withheld a sigh.

“Wha-I — how would I know?” Wei Wuxian repeated. “Well, I….”

“I suppose he can’t exactly say that he *has* died, now can he?” Madam Jin commend, and Madam Yu gave a ~~disgustingly~~ fond sigh.

Then, Jin Ling gave a proud humph: “If a dead soul doesn’t receive any joss paper, it must be because no one bothered to send them anyway.”

Wei Wuxian jerked back as if wounded.

“No way. Was I such a failure in life that no one bothered to send me any joss paper?” he whimpered.

“Wei Wuxian, you were almost universally hated by everyone who knew your name,” Wen Qing pointed out. “How is this a surprise? And even if it is, how is *that* your biggest concern?!”

But Wei Wuxian appeared genuinely distraught.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, at least you must have…” he trailed off as Hanguang-jun stopped smoothing out his sleeve to turn to Wei Wuxian, gazing calmly. That was answer enough, it seemed.

Wei Wuxian took a staggering step back.

“No way… we were classmates for at least three months…. We even shared a near-death encounter in the Xuanwu cave.”

“You were a lot more than *that,*” Lan Xichen desperately pointed out, giving Lan Wangji a very telling look.

“How did Wei Wuxian perceive time while he were dead, anyways?” Jin Zixuan wondered. “He certainly weren’t a ghost like A-Qing.”

But no answer came, for Wei Wuxian was preoccupied with far more important matters:

“You never once thought of me? No joss paper either?”

Lan Wangji gave an amused smile at his dramatic act — one of the most obvious shows of emotion most of the watchers had ever seen on him. The sheer, simple delight he got from seeing Wei Wuxian act casually was incomparable.

(And, considering the frequent arguments between them that had occurred in the last two flashbacks to the past, the watchers couldn't blame him.)

'*No, no, that can't be it!*' Wei Wuxian declared in his thoughts. '*It must have been the strange way that I'd died. That must have thrown my joss-paper-sensor off! After all, at that time, everything was so chaotic and confusing-*'

The watchers straightened up, listening in closely.

'*I wasn't quite conscious, but I wasn't unable to feel anything either.*'

Then, so quietly that the thought was most likely just subconscious:

'*It was like being stuck in an unending nightmare.*'

The silence that followed those words was deadly in its intensity.

"...What?" Jiang Yanli asked, her voice breaking as the last syllable cut off unexpectedly.

"That's what it felt like to him?" Wen Qing asked. "He… when he found out what had happened to the corpse they're collecting, all he said was 'at least my soul wasn't destroyed.' If this is what it felt like to him… how could he *say that?!*"

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji whispered, before looking down, unable to stare any longer at the peaceful smile on Wei Wuxian's face. The Yiling Patriarch hadn't even consciously registered that thought, remaining just as outwardly chipper as ever.

That didn't make it any less true.

Feeling a sudden dizziness overtake him, the second jade swiftly moved to sit down again.

With a rush of wind, flower petals swooped through the air and fluttered before the watchers, blocking off Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji momentarily. When the obstructions cleared, they had changed locations. Now, the watchers were standing in a busy market square, the river they had seen earlier now nowhere in sight. Birds tweeted merrily, and the sun was shining brightly up ahead — a far cry from the fog of Yi City. Then-

A frantic neigh broke through the tranquility.

Startled, Jin Zixuan burst out of his seat, demanding, "What the-"

Pausing mid-bite through an apple, Wei Wuxian glanced back at the source of the noise. The simulation revealed it to the watchers piece by piece. First, the dust being thrown into the air. Then, an illusion of hooves slamming against the ground. Finally, a full image of the culprit was revealed:

“Little Apple!” Wei Wuxian beamed.

Madam Yu sighed ~~with unusual fondness~~, once again unable to believe Wei Wuxian had named his donkey something so ridiculous.

“I thought you’d be harder to find! Guess the juniors did a good job with you!” Wei Wuxian beamed, hearts in his eyes, as Little Apple ran close, the donkey nearly crying in joy. “I missed you so much! You missed me too, huh?”

He stretched his arms wide, ready to give the donkey a hug.

Little Apple blew past him, snatching the apple out of his hand on the way.

Not entirely sure what had just happened, the watchers blinked blankly several times, then turned to stare at the now-distant donkey.

“Eh? Huh?” Wei Wuxian asked, looking down at his now-empty hand. “Wha — you heartless donkey!”

But Little Apple paid the complaint no mind, happily devouring the apple in what looked to be a single bite.

Nie Huaisang snorted:

“Of course! Wei-xiong’s one of the most capable humans out there, but even *he* pales in comparison to the might of *the* Little Apple!” the boy exclaimed, nearly rolling on the floor in laughter. “Ah, if only the Wen Clan had known that the Yiling Patriarch’s weakness was a donkey. Well, a donkey and-”

Before that sentence could be finished, the simulation filled in the answer for him.

A growl. Two barks.

Wei Wuxian paled.

A dog came running up.

“Wah — ah! Ah! Lan Zhan, save me!” he cried out, running as fast as he could to get behind the protective wall that was Hanguang-jun. Meanwhile, Jin Ling ran forward, excitedly meeting the newcomer.

“Fairy!” he called out.

However, before he could reach his dog, a challenge was issued, and a duel came into being. Fairy (formerly ‘Little Fairy’) stood opposite the newly-titled Little Apple, growling in challenge. The donkey responded in kind, lowering its head to loom meanicingly — using its superior height to its advantage — while kicking up dust in preparation. The two challengers approached each other, slowly getting into combat distance.

As Nie Huaisang's hysteria reached its peak, Jiang Cheng just gave a heavy~~, dejected~~ roll of his eyes.

(Once upon a time, it had been him who protected Wei Wuxian from dogs. Now, his older self was using them against him, and Lan Wangji was the defender.)

Whimpering in fright, Wei Wuxian clenched tightly onto Hanguang-jun, bringing himself closer to Lan Wangji's back.

"Oh, Wangji," Lan Xichen moved closer, a deceptively-kind smile on his face. "How nice. When scared, you're the one he trusts the most. Don't just stand there; you should offer him some comfort. Your older self looks quite-"

"Xiongzhang!"

Then, however, Hanguang-jun did as Lan Xichen suggested. He reached a hand up and patted Wei Wuxian's arms several times. It was reassurance, and nothing more.

'*Foolish boy,*' Jin Guangshan thought. '*You had a prime opportunity. If you keep restraining yourself to such an extent, you'll never get what you truly want.*'

(Not once did it occur to him that perhaps Hanguang-jun valued Wei Wuxian's happiness and comfort more than his body.)

Although the presence of Hanguang-jun did help Wei Wuxian somewhat, it was far from enough. Every time Fairy's growls grew in volume, Wei Wuxian clenched his eyes shut and hid further behind the second jade.

After several seconds of that, Lan Wangji acknowledged the situation with a small sigh. He cleared his throat once, then narrowed his eyes. The two animals both flinched and backed up guiltily under Lan Wangji's stern stare.

"How are you even *doing* that?" Wen Qing asked, raising her eyebrows in disbelief. Glancing back momentarily, Lan Wangji just shook his head, not having an answer to give her.

Watching this transpire, Wen Ruohan finally felt the tension in his body ease. It was truly concerning how completely Wei Wuxian changed whenever he was in the presence of a dog. Gone were his quick quips, his inventive solutions, and his unmatched charisma; all of the power, potential, and use Wei Wuxian had completely vanished. It would be child's play for even a *non-cultivator* to kill him if they had a dog.

'I do feel a need to mention that Wen Chao has gained a new hobby of training dogs in the Qishan dungeons,' Jiang Fengmian had mentioned.

(And just like that, the tension in Wen Ruohan's body returned full-force.)

Due to Hanguang-jun having resolved the situation without words, it took Wei Wuxian a while to realize what had happened. Slowly, however, as Fairy got quieter and quieter, it became obvious that the dog was moving farther away. Wei Wuxian's eyes blinked open — shock obvious in those silver orbs.

He breathed out a sigh of relief.

And Lan Wangji relaxed as well, grateful that his other-self had managed to help, even if in just a small way.

Now that the danger was gone, Wei Wuxian's mind was returning to him. With an awkward laugh, he got off Lan Wangji, smoothing down the other's robes in silent apology.

After a single nod of acknowledgement towards Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji glanced back at the juniors and instructed, "Tie it up. And then we'll eat."

"Sorry, dad," came a sarcastic reply.

It was only when the real Lan Wangji and Lan Qiren turned towards him that Jin Zixuan realized he had spoken out loud. He flinched, blushing from his head to his toes (and only growing reder as Jiang Yanli gave a few light chuckles). But it wasn't his fault! Everyone was saying these sorts of things. He couldn't help it. He was loyal to his own dad, but anyone would make an observation like that. He might have spoken out somewhat against his dad a short while ago, but he certainly wasn't trying to replace Jin Guangshan with Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian. It was just that watching them take care of Jin Ling had sparked-

It was just that-

Jin Zixuan *was* loyal to his sect. Nothing would change that. It had its flaws, but Jin Zixuan loved his home.

It was just….

"Please head inside, esteemed guests," an elderly innkeeper said, gesturing for Hanguang-jun and the others to come in. Although there was no flaw in his welcome, the nearby presence of Fairy kept Wei Wuxian clutching tightly around Hanguang-jun's waist, burying his face into the other's back.

The juniors moved to follow their seniors up the stairs, but Lan Wangji slowly turned toward them, his golden eyes conveying a message to his main ally.

'*Understood!*' Lan Sizhui thought, nodding at Hanguang-jun and beaming brightly enough to blind any unsuspecting passer-bys. Then he turned to the confused Jin Ling and Lan Jinyi:

"The juniors and seniors should split up now. Why don't we stay on the first floor?" he suggested persuasively. He got a pair of synchronous nods from Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi, and Ouyang Zizhen gave a happy smile as well.

'*Ah, I see. Well played Hanguang-jun,*' Jin Guangshan thought, nodding in approval. '*Using the most responsible junior to convince the others to stay behind was wise; there is very little chance of anyone suspecting anything. Though I really don't understand why you insisted my*

grandson keep his dog down there. Taking proper care of Wei Wuxian would be much easier if Fairy was in the same room.'

Shrugging to himself, Jin Guangshan supposed that Hanguang-jun's inexperience with such pleasures was the most likely reason behind his lack of foresight.

As the pair climbed up the stairs, they got farther and farther from the dog below. Eventually Wei Wuxian was, at last, able to detach himself slightly from Lan Wangji. He glanced down at the juniors (a majority of whom were watching their departing seniors with wide-eyed curiosity). Unable to help himself, Wei Wuxian grinned:

"The adults are going now. There are some things that would be best left unseen by children like you."

"Who would want to see?!" Jin Ling responded, blushing heavily and not at all doubting the largely-faked implication Wei Wuxian's words had.

With a deep frown, Madam Jin couldn't help but respond to her grandson with, '*My husband might, for one.*'

She shook herself out of that thought a moment later. After all, for all of Wei Wuxian's good looks and charisma, he was still a man; Jin Guangshan had only ever shown interest in women. And besides, Wei Wuxian was currently in Mo Xuanyu's body — Jin Guangshan's *son's*.

'*But,*' a little voice inside her whispered, '*None of the women Jin Guangshan has ever slept with have been anywhere near as valuable as Wei Wuxian. If there's anything he lusts after more than women, it's power.*'

She shuddered in disgust.

In the time Madam Jin had been thinking, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had already entered the room and ordered. Now, the innkeeper was setting down plates full of delicious looking food.

(Very bright red food, at that.)

Lan Qiren paled slightly at the sight.

"Esteemed guests, all your dishes have arrived," the innkeeper announced, setting down the last one. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, we're fine," Wei Wuxian said. However, his gaze was directed elsewhere. Staring intently at the burning red plates, Wei Wuxian recalled what Sizhui had said after trying Wei Wuxian's spicy congee.

'*Not at all, senior. Hanguang-jun never has spicy food.*'

The memory faded, and Wei Wuxian's confused face took its place.

‘*If what Lan Sizhui said is true…*’ Wei Wuxian continued. ‘*Then why did he order so many spicy dishes?*’

“Three guesses as to why! Er-ge, go!” Nie Huaisang ordered, privately relishing in getting to use the new title.

“Hm, I don’t know,” Lan Xichen smiled, a little too wide for Lan Wangji’s comfort. “Any suggestions? I don’t suppose you have an idea, Jiang-guniang?”

“No, certainly not,” Jiang Yanli responded, unable to keep a similar grin off her face. “I can’t think of a single reason why Lan-er-gongzi would want to eat spicy food while with A-Xian. It’s hard to say. Any thoughts, Madam Jin?”

Before the Jin matriarch could even speak a word, Lan Wangji cleared his throat rather sharply, gesturing towards the simulation in a (vain) attempt to distract people from the current discussion.

Then, tranquil as ever, the simulated Lan Wangji picked up a piece of cucumber which had spent the last hour or so bathing in chili powder. Under Wei Wuxian’s watchful gaze, he lifted it up, then took a bite.

The Yiling Patriarch continued to gaze intently.

Finally noticing the concentration Wei Wuxian was directing towards him, Lan Wangji asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Ah, nothing,” Wei Wuxian denied, smoothly turning his gaze towards his own food. “It’s been so long since I had authentic Yunmeng cuisine. I miss drinking with people.”

The soft, nostalgic smile he gave matched perfectly with the atmosphere created by the dim candlelight. A sense of longing enveloped the room.

‘*I miss drinking with you too, Wei-xiong!*’ Nie Huaisang cried out. ‘*I know it technically hasn’t happened yet, but the parties we had at the Cloud Recesses looked great! I wish you had gotten to see. Don’t worry, I promise to make it up to you and have the biggest party ever once we get out!*’

After all, it wasn’t like he’d be able to drink with-

Lan Wangji picked up the pot of liquor, pouring himself a cup to match Wei Wuxian’s.

“Wait… what?”

“*Wangji!*” Lan Qiren squawked at once. “What are you *doing?!*”

Humming to himself, Lan Xichen acknowledged, “He *did* drink with Wei-gongzi once already. Perhaps this shouldn’t be a surprise.”

“But he — *he*-”

Lan Wangji's face remained impassive, but, if you knew where to look, you would be able to see his aura wilting slightly under his uncle's disapproval.

"Wangji, you-"

“I guess this makes sense. After all, Hanguang-jun wouldn’t have been able to join Wei-xiong for a drink while ‘the Yiling Patriarch’ was dead. Of course he’d jump at that chance to do it now,” Nie Huaisang supposed, shrugging to himself. At those words, all the anger and outrage that had been storming within Lan Qiren deflated at once, and he looked away.

“Hanguang-jun, are you really going to drink with me?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Isn’t that a little too much special treatment for just me?”

Despite his words, he looked delighted by the prospect.

‘*No,*’ Lan Wangji thought. ‘*It’s not too much; it could never be too much.*’

His other-self was surely going to embarrass him beyond all belief while drunk, but if it brought a smile like that to Wei Wuxian’s face, then Lan Wangji would be willing to live with those consequences.

And so, with a light blush, Wei Wuxian watched excitedly as the simulated Lan Wangji emptied his cup in a single gulp. As Wei Wuxian examined the other, he rested his head on his hand, an even more loving expression forming on his face. Softly, he began to whisper:

“One… two… three….”

Lan Wangji’s gaze drooped.

“Four… five… six….”

He rested his head on his hand as well.

“Seven… eight… nine….”

His eyelids fluttered closed.

“Ten.”

Lan Wangji was asleep.

“...You are the strangest drunk ever,” Jiang Cheng decided, trying to stamp down the part of him that whispered that he used to be the one who would drink with Wei Wuxian.

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian was overjoyed. He jumped out of his chair and scampered over, watching the sleeping Lan Wangji with wide, excited eyes.

‘*As I thought, he always falls asleep before he gets drunk! Impressive!*’

It took all of Lan Xichen's mental strength to not coo at the sight of Wei Wuxian excitedly analyzing Lan Xichen's brother. They were truly the most adorable pair in existence.

(Xichen's only consolation was that Jiang Yanli had already lost that battle, and her 'aww' sound was more than enough to turn the real Lan Wangji's ears a scarlet pink.)

Then, Wei Wuxian got almost impossibly close.

"Lan Zhan?" he whispered in the other's ear, the warm breath making a few strands of hair flutter delicately.

Before the simulation, Lan Xichen had thought he knew the limits of how red his brothers ears could get. Apparently, he hadn't even scratched the surface.

But Wei Wuxian was far from done.

"Lan Zhan?" he asked again. "Wangji-xiong?"

But Lan Wangji remained asleep.

'*What is this smell?*' Wei Wuxian wondered.

"Huh?"

"Oh," Nie Huaisang. "Oh. *Oh.*"

"What?" Jiang Cheng asked, but Nie Huaisang didn't respond.

Luckily for the ignorant members of the audience, Wei Wuxian explained for them:

'*It's… his cold sandalwood scent intertwined with the alcohol,*' chasing it down, Wei Wuxian moved his blushing face even closer. '*It's slightly intoxicating, as if it's been mixed with a hint of sweetness.*'

And then-

'*Strange. Why is it starting to feel a bit hot in here?*'

The blush on Wei Wuxian's face deepened.

"Oh, Heavens," Lan Qiren buried his face in his hands unable to believe he was watching this. His nephew's future self loved Wei Wuxian, that much was clear. The fact that the feelings were so obviously mutual was wonderful; miraculous, even. Lan Qiren was truly, honestly happy for them.

He still didn't want to *watch!*

"Lan… er-gege…"

"Young master!" a voice called from outside, making Wei Wuxian flinch hard enough to nearly bang his elbow on a nearby table.

“No! Go away! You’re ruining it!” Nie Huaisang screeched. Although she didn’t say the same, the death-glare Madam Jin was directing towards the window carried the exact same sentiment.

“Who is it?!” Wei Wuxian snapped, also annoyed that the moment had been ruined. Then, through the open window, a head dropped down from above.

“*A-Ning?!*” Wen Qing gaped. “What are you — get down from there!”

“Wen Ning?” Wei Wuxian asked, his anger vanishing at once.

‘*I know he’s still a fierce corpse — and not just any corpse, but ‘the Ghost General’ — but…*’ Jiang Yanli quickly covered her smiling mouth. ‘*How is it possible for him to be just as cute now as when he was alive?*’

Truly, that was a question that not even Wei Wuxian would be able to answer.

Unaware of that specific scientific impossibility he represented, Wen Ning continued to blink at Wei Wuxian from where he was hanging upside down outside the window. The staring continued for several seconds. Finally-

“Come down,” Wei Wuxian requested. As though experiencing a sudden loss of balance, Wen Ning dropped to the ground at once, landing inside the room in a kneeling position. Despite the power he had shown in Yi City, his head was now lowered respectfully — a perfect soldier. In fact, that wasn’t a terrible description of him.

‘*An undying beast. Capable of his own thought, but impervious to pain and injury,*’ Wen Ruohan thought, a grin beginning to form. ‘*Given how strong he was against Song Zichen… and to think that Wei Wuxian has earned his complete loyalty on top of that. I had never seen much potential in him before. Clearly, that was an error on my part.*’

However, Wei Wuxian’s response couldn’t have been more different:

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Head lowered in submission, Wen Ning bowed and spoke: “My apologies, young master.”

“A-Ning, you don’t… you shouldn’t need to….” Wen Qing couldn’t finish. Then-

“Do you have to speak to me from down there?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Why not?” Jin Guangshan quietly wondered. This wasn’t even a sect leader and a servant; it was a fierce corpse and its *master*. What could be a more subservient relationship than that?

Wei Wuxian sighed, then shrugged to himself: “I guess it’s alright.”

Hearing that, Wen Qing frowned and opened her mouth to protest when-

There was a soft pat on the ground. When Wen Ning looked up, he saw that Wei Wuxian had gotten on his knees as well.

"*Huh?!*"

"Young master, you mustn't!" Wen Ning protested at once, panicking completely at the sight. Moving quickly, Wen Ning bent forward and began to kowtow him, determined to show what he believed to be a proper amount of respect. Mere moments later, Wei Wuxian returned the kowtow as well.

Startled, Wen Ning jumped up.

Laughter burst out of the teenage watchers, and even a few of the adults joined in. Watching this unfold, Wen Ruohan stared at Wei Wuxian with nothing sort of fascination.

'*Is he not aware of his worth?*' the Chief Cultivator wondered. '*No… he knows what he's capable of better than anyone. So why… I don't understand….*'

No matter how much he saw, Wei Wuxian continued to be an unequalled mystery to him.

Seeing that Wen Ning had finally stopped, Wei Wuxian got up as well. Dusting off his robes, he looked over at Wen Ning and gave a fond yet undeniably amused smile:

"Wouldn't it have been better if you just stood up to talk to me from the beginning?"

Wen Ning wilted further, looking at the ground without saying anything.

Wen Qing, on the other hand, relaxed at once. It wasn't that she had forgotten Wei Wuxian's relationship with her brother — their positive interactions in the real world made that especially hard to forget — but to see it so plainly left her speechless. That wasn't just a token protest from Wei Wuxian to make himself feel better. He genuinely did not want Wen Ning to bow so lowly to him, and he knew exactly what steps to take to make that clear.

Right now, as she looked back on her past self (and the initial *hate* she had felt towards Wei Wuxian upon hearing what he had done to her brother), she couldn't help but feel silly. She might not know what had prompted Wei Wuxian to resurrect Wen Ning, but the most important circumstances were now clear.

Now, she could confidently entrust her brother's safety to Wei Wuxian.

(A debt she promised she would pay back as soon as the simulation was over.)

Seeing that Wen Ning had no intention of responding to what he had said, Wei Wuxian began to get to work. He set Lan Wangji down on the bed, even going so far as to tuck him in. Careful hands smoothed Lan Wangji's hair out, and the sleeping second jade relaxed further under their care.

By now, Lan Xichen was beaming so brightly that he was practically glowing where he stood.

Then, leaning towards Lan Wangji's ears, Wei Wuxian whispered, "Lan Zhan, oh Lan Zhan. Please sleep for a while longer. I'll be back before you know it. Won't you be a good boy?"

Overcome by a sudden urge, Wei Wuxian couldn't help but brush the tip of his finger against Lan Wangji's eyelashes.

As though those words had jolted something within him, Lan Wangji sat up even straighter. A low chuckle left Jin Guangshan's throat at that, making the second jade's ears turn even redder.

(Not that everyone else was much better. Apple-red faces were more than plentiful among the dozen or so most flustered watchers.)

Following that, Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning sneaked outside. Seeing that Wen Ning was hesitant to speak, Wei Wuxian was the one who began:

"When did you begin to regain consciousness?" he asked.

"Just a short while ago."

And the watchers had seen that happen first-hand. Wei Wuxian had been fighting the Goddess Statue, and his call for powerful resentful beings had been heard by the Ghost General, even as far away as he was. The cave he had been chained up in flashed into Wen Qing's mind, and she felt her hands clench tightly into fists as the thought.

Sympathetic, Jiang Yanli moved closer to the other woman and rested a hand next to hers.

"You said all that you remembered while the skullpiercers were in your head was being chained in a dark place, right? With a few people occasionally coming to check on you?"

Remembering the Lan cultivator that had been included in that lot, the three Lan Clan members frowned.

"Do you remember anything else?"

"Only that someone nailed something into my head."

Flinching at the mental image, Wen Qing promised that she would repay that crime ten fold-

"That was probably Xue Yang. He also used those nails to control Song Lan."

-and then promptly remembered that they had promised to not punish for events that had yet to occur. Although a sour taste rose up in her mouth at the thought, she forced herself to acknowledge that revenge had already been carried out. Wei Wuxian had taken care of that himself.

"Why?" Wen Ning asked.

“I would imagine on the behalf of the Jin Sect,” Wei Wuxian answered. “He was once a guest cultivator there, after all. And the LanlingJin Sect reported that you had been completely annihilated.”

Images of Jin Guangyao and Xue Yang appeared, centered so that they were standing back to back.

Jin Guangshan jumped as everyone turned their attention towards him, glares on quite a number of faces. Laughing nervously, he rushed to defend himself:

“It’s certainly lucky that we have received the simulation. It will keep us from making the same mistakes in our future,” he pointed out. “I will know better than to trust the innocent act Xue Yang has mastered, and you will all know better than to vilify Wei Wuxian for his unique cultivation methods.”

At the reminder of their own ‘mistakes,’ many of the glares the watchers had directed his way vanished, the thoughts turning inward instead. Jin Guangshan breathed out a sigh of relief.

And on the side, Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen frowned, praying that their trust in their to-be sworn brother wasn’t misplaced.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian continued, “Yes, if the LanlingJin Sect hadn’t contributed, then it would have been impossible to keep you hidden. And then… you said you woke up when you heard my voice, right?”

‘*Still sleeping?’ Wei Wuxian had asked, his eyes flashing red.*

“Right. You said ‘wake up,’ so I struggled out of the chains and rushed outside.”

‘*Things that are too loyal are also troublesome,’ Xue Yang had said.*

The two might have had similar pasts, but, with every detail revealed, Wen Qing became more and more relieved that it had been Wei Wuxian who had turned Wen Ning, rather than Xue Yang.

“I see. The Jin Clan wouldn’t be able to make it public that you’d escaped, or there would be mass panic. Even if they want to, they won’t be able to pursue you with any sort of fanfare. And then, after a mess of a journey, you finally reached me,” Wei Wuxian sighed. “You mentioned you don’t know how much time has passed. It’s already been more than ten years. Well, it’s fair to say that I don’t know much more than you do. Do you want me to tell you some of-”

“I’ve heard some,” Wen Ning interrupted.

And the fact that *Wen Ning* had interrupted Wei Wuxian was enough to set most of the watchers on high alert.

“Young master.”

“Yes?"

“I heard… that the Burial Mounds are gone. That everyone is gone.”

A silence followed.

Upon hearing that first sentence, the initial feelings of the watchers — even the most kind, gentle ones of the bunch — were nothing short of relief.

“Good riddance,” Jiang Cheng grinned.

“Oh, thank the heavens,” Jiang Yanli agreed.

The Lans and Nie all nodded in agreement. After all, no matter how much had happened since then, none of them would be able to forget what the Burial Mounds had done to Wei Wuxian.

‘Two days later-’

‘And four days after that-’

‘And six days after that-’

And they were grabbing, tearing, teething, ripping, eating *and-*

“Wei Ying?” Lan Wangji asked, noticing the less-than-relieved expression on his ~~soulmate’s~~ face.

After frowning in thought for a moment, the answer revealed itself to Wen Ruohan: “At the beginning, when the villagers were talking about Wei Wuxian’s fall… didn’t they say the sects had burned the *Burial Mounds* to the ground?”

‘But it’s suicide to go there,’ Lan Xichen had protested disbelievingly.

And then Wei Wuxian had been thrown in, and gotten out. Maybe not entirely whole, but alive nonetheless.

“Wait, A-Ning said ‘everyone’ is gone,” Wen Qing pointed out. “Who is ‘everyone?’”

No one knew.

‘*I’d wanted to tell him some trivial gossip,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*That the Lan Sect rules had increased from three thousand to four thousand, and that Nie Huaisang is now called ‘the Headshaker.’ But now…*’

He could only stay silent.

‘*A-Ning… he doesn’t even sound sad,*’ Wen Qing thought. ‘*It’s like he had already known this would happen even before he found out about it. Like he’d already come to expect the worst case scenario.*’

“Well, let’s not talk about this anymore. Have you heard of anything else?”

'*The siege,*' Wen Ning thought. '*And Sect Leader Jiang….*'

He trailed off. He had already tried speaking to Wei Wuxian about his former shidi the last time Lan Wangji had gotten drunk (and had been cut off quite thoroughly by Wei Wuxian). It was fairly clear that the topic of Jiang Wanyin was off limits for the current time. And yet Wen Ning couldn't let this go.

"Young Master Wei… you died such an awful death-"

Lan Wangji couldn't hold in the flinch that broke through his body at that. For all his widely-acclaimed self control, there was nothing he could do to stop it. Especially when-

'He was torn to a fine powder by his own ghost soldiers.'

Within the Burial Mounds, a corpse pulled itself up Wei Wuxian's body-

'Serves him right!'

'It was just, my destiny… to die like that.'

The corpse's mouth opened wide.

'It was like being stuck in an unending nightmare.'

Nausea welled up within Lan Wangji, and he suspected that if he wasn't inside the simulation, his physical reaction would have been much worse than a mere flinch.

A sigh.

"...So you haven't heard *any* good news?" Wei Wuxian asked, reacting remarkably well for someone who had just been reminded of one of the worst days of their life.

"That's right," Wen Ning confirmed. "None at all."

Wei Wuxian gaped at that response.

Although she knew the real Wen Ning hadn't experienced the same as his simulated self, Wen Qing promised herself she would take her brother out on a nice vacation as soon as this was over.

Suddenly, a loud shattering noise came from the main hall on the first floor. Something glass had just broken.

And the peace vanished with it.

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Jin Ling demanded. Frowning, both Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning ventured closer to the downstairs room where the juniors resided.

"Were we not talking about Xue Yang?" Lan Sizhui asked with somewhat-forced calmness. "Why are we now arguing over this?"

The Jin heir didn't hesitate to respond, "We are talking about Xue Yang! Was what I said wrong? Think about everything Xue Yang did! He's even worse than scum, and Wei Wuxian was even more disgusting than him!"

"*A-Ling!*" Jiang Yanli cried out scoldingly, then paused and flinched back, remembering that her son had no way of knowing the truth. After all, everyone in the future was more than willing to speak however they pleased about her martial brother, and with the numerous unknowns regarding how she had died-

She certainly didn't blame Wei Wuxian, but she couldn't formulate an argument to defend him either.

And it seemed all the other juniors were in the same situation. As Jin Ling breathed in deeply, the juniors all frowned or looked toward the ground, unable to speak to someone so directly harmed by Wei Wuxian's actions.

"You…" Jin Ling growled, his voice lowering in pitch to a hateful roar. "What do you mean 'we shouldn't generalize them?!' These monsters are vermin to our world! We should kill, murder, and slaughter every single one of them!"

Wen Ning flinched.

"A-Ning!" Wen Qing cried out worriedly, and Jiang Yanli wilted at the same moment. Seeing that, both Jiang Cheng and Madam Yu were overcome with worry for her, and anger towards the one who had caused this.

But the one who had caused this was Jin Ling, whose parents were ~~allegedly~~ killed by Wei Wuxian. They couldn't really blame him for his opinion, especially since he was only fifteen. Why, if there was anyone to blame-

'Break his legs?' the future Sect Leader Jiang asked. 'Haven't I told you? When dealing with those without honor, just kill them and feed them to your dog.'

"Hey, why are you being so angry about it?" Lan Jingyi spoke up, the first of the juniors to oppose Jin Ling. "Sizhui didn't say that Wei Wuxian shouldn't have been killed. All he said was that not everyone who cultivates the ghost path is the same kind of person as Xue Yang!"

'*Ah, to think a teenage junior would already understand what it took half the simulation to teach me,*' Lan Qiren thought, frowning deeply. '*He's… truly a remarkable young boy.*'

There was some hope for the future after all.

And another sign of hope for the future, Lan Jingyi's unrepentant casualness, continued full force:

"Honestly, did you have to start throwing things?" the Lan boy continued. "I didn't get to eat that one yet."

Sneering, Jin Ling scoffed: "And what about when he said 'the founder of this path may have not intended to use it for evil?!' Who was 'the founder of demonic cultivation?' Go on, tell me! Who could it be except Wei Ying?!"

"I'm not trying to absolve Wei Wuxian of his deeds," Sizhui countered. "I'm merely suggesting that we should not jump to conclusions before we learn the entire picture."

"Hm. Good kid," Nie Mingjue commented, sending Lan Xichen an approving nod. "We… probably needed to be told that at the beginning of the simulation."

Although Madam Yu huffed at the comment, she also couldn't dispute it.

But Jin Ling was far from done: "I just can't understand you. Your Gusu Lan Sect is also a prominent sect. Back then, you also lost many people to Wei Wuxian's crimes!"

And there was part of the problem. If Wei Wuxian had truly remained a good person — and as more and more was revealed, that became more and more likely — then why had the Great Sects become his enemy? Why had *they* become his enemy?

If they had been asked that at the beginning of the simulation, then "because he's a demonic cultivator" might have felt like more than enough reason. Now, they were desperately praying that there was something more.

"...You know, before we came to Yi City, a lot of people also claimed that the Yueyang Chang Clan's Chang Ping was killed by Xiao Xingchen Daozhang's hands. But was that the truth?"

"Nobody actually saw whether or not Chang Ping Daozhang was killed by Xiao Xingchen. All they had were guesses, so why are you calling them claims? But just try to count how many cultivators lost their lives to Wei Ying, Wen Ning — to the Stygian Tiger Seal! These are truths that everyone accepts, that no one can deny!"

"Oh? So, those aren't just 'claims,' are they?" Wen Ruohan muttered. At that, Lan Wangji couldn't help but remember the first scene the simulation had shown them.

'I heard he has another evil weapon. The Stygian Tiger Seal.'

'Yes, don't forget he has that. Or how he killed three thousand cultivators overnight.'

'Five thousand, if I'm not mistaken.'

Apparently most people had only heard hear-say on the event. But 'everyone accepts' those claims, so Jin Ling had never questioned their truth.

"But-"

"And what can't be forgotten is that he ordered Wen Ning to kill my mother and father!"

"...Maiden Jiang's son?" Wen Ning whispered from where he watched outside.

There was guilt in their expressions. And neither denied their involvement.

"Oh, A-Ning, Wei Wuxian… what *happened?*" Wen Qing asked, looking back and forth between them. Meanwhile, Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli scooted closer to each other, sorrowful over the despairing hate they saw on their son's face.

'*Wei Wuxian's not like that, A-Ling,*' Jin Zixuan thought, then, glancing at his father, couldn't help but recall what Jin Guangshan had been "tricked into" doing for Xue Yang.

With some of the comments he'd heard his father make… could he really continue to pretend he was just a victim?

'*If Wei Wuxian did do something to me… I can't help but think I must have somehow deserved it.*'

(However, Jiang Yanli had been killed by Wei Wuxian too. It was that and that alone that left Jin Zixuan somewhat hopeful that there might indeed be more to the story than simply one of them being at fault.)

"You know, my uncle grew up with him," Jin Ling pointed out. "My grandfather saw him as his own child, and my grandmother wasn't horrible to him either."

A loud, ungraceful snort echoed through the simulation. Madam Yu wanted to spin and unleash a tsunami of fury on whoever was responsible, but, after a few seconds, she came to realize that the person who had made that sound was herself.

(And why wouldn't she? Wasn't it just hilarious? Jiang Fengmian's actions during the Massacre of Lotus Pier had proven that he *didn't* see Wei Wuxian as his own child, and even next to that lie, the best her grandson could say about her was that she 'wasn't horrible to him.' Of course her son would show filial piety toward his dead mother and speak positively of her, but….)

('Wasn't horrible to him.' *That* was the best anyone could say. And now that she looked back on everything, she knew herself that it wasn't even true.)

Meanwhile, Jin Ling's tirade had continued without end. And, with each sentence spoken, the number of lies he had been fed became more and more obvious.

"Wei Wuxian… he made Lotus Pier the liar of the Wen Sect! He wrecked the entire Yunmeng Jiang Sect, and caused the deaths of both my parents and grandparents! Now my uncle is the only one left! Lan Yuan, how can you excuse this?! He brought about his death through the havoc he created, and ended up not even leaving behind a whole corpse! Just what part of the situation do you not understand?!"

'*The part where you accept his responsibility in my death as a fact,*' Madam Yu thought. However, with that feeling, came another question: where *did* those lies come from?

Unfortunately, the answer was more than clear.

'You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!'

And there Jin Ling was, proof of all of Madam Yu's mistakes throughout the years, and evidence of how much damage she could cause even decades down the line.

"Just what excuses do you think you can make up for him?!"

He argued forcefully, but Lan Sizhui didn't reply at all.

After some time, Ouyang Zizhen spoke up: "Why are we suddenly getting heated over such a thing? Let's just drop the subject, alright? We haven't finished eating yet. The food's gonna get cold."

"Ah, good work Zizhen," Nie Huaisang laughed, but the forced joy came out especially awkward when no one joined in.

Shaking his head, Nie Mingjue muttered, "How does Wei Wuxian not hate us? He comes back to life, and all he wants to do is get away. Not even to-"

No revenge, no resentment, nothing. He had even stepped in time and time again to help the juniors, no matter which sect they were from. In this way, he was the complete and total opposite of Xue Yang.

(And, arguably, Nie Mingjue himself.)

Meanwhile, the rest of the juniors were all in agreement with Zizhen about their desire to stop the argument. One after another, they all supported his proposition to return to their food.

"Yes, we should really stop arguing. Sizhui simply forgot to choose his words carefully. It was only an offhand comment — how could he have put much thought into it?"

"Sit down, young master Jin. Let us continue to eat."

"That's right, all of us just left Yi City, so we've technically been through life and death together…. We really shouldn't argue over such a careless mistake."

A 'careless mistake' that the watchers happened to 100% agree with. Lan Qiren sighed to himself, wondering what to do with the information that had just been discussed.

(Madam Yu remained silent, lost in her own thoughts.)

"...I am sorry," Sizhui said at last. "I should have put more thought into my wording. Young Master Jin, please sit back down. We don't want to continue and bring Hanguang-jun down as well."

At the mention of Hanguang-jun, Jin Ling immediately stopped and sat down. After a short amount of time, the hall quickly regained its previous jovial tone.

"...At least it's over now," Jin Zixuan supposed, not knowing how to feel about the situation. He now really, truly wanted nothing more than to know what had happened to his and Jiang Yanli's future selves.

But, given the past actions of the simulation, he had a feeling that was still a while away.

At that moment, Wen Ning silently got to his knees, bending his head low as he stared blankly at the clamoring juniors. Two memories flashed by in the blink of an eye, too quickly for the watchers to get a good look. One had four people, a woman in wedding-red handing a grey body, Wen Ning, a bowl of something. The second showed that same grey figure kneeling down beside a child who wore dirty, ragged robes.

Unfortunately, the images didn't linger long enough for the watchers to make out the people present.

Seeing the despair in Wen Ning's posture, Wei Wuxian waved his hand carelessly and told him, "It wasn't your fault."

The Ghost general looked over at him, then looked down again, hopeless.

"'Not his fault?' Then who's fault was it?" Lan Qiren wondered.

'*Wei Ying,*' Lan Wangji thought. '*What happened?*'

"Oh," Wen Ruohan said at once.

Everyone glanced toward him, wondering why he had made such a noise, and therefore were caught unprepared when the subject of Wen Ruohan's attention slammed a white-robbed foot into Wen Ning's shoulder, kicking him at least ten yards away where he slammed into a tree.

"*Hanguang-jun!*" Wen Qing shouted in an amused-protest (now quite aware of just how durable her brother's body was).

"I… apologize," Lan Wangji forced himself to say, watching as his (very drunk) future self looked down on the collapsed Wen Ning. It was becoming increasingly clear that despite Lan Wangji's (naive) hopes, this incident would be just as embarrassing as the last one.

He sighed.

Wen Ning's body had created another man-sized dent in the ground on the way to the tree, permanently scaring the territory. That said, it was quite clearly not his fault, so Wei Wuxian turned his attention towards the actual culprit.

"Hanguang-jun! Hanguang-jun, calm down!" he shouted, wrapping his arms around the others' chest. The second jade glanced back, eyes hazy with alcohol, and saw an unusually careful and timid Wei Wuxian staring up at him. The two made eye contact for several seconds.

Slowly, Wen Ning stood up.

In an instant, Hanguang-jun was before him, reaching back to deliver a powerful palm strike-

Wen Qing tensed.

It connected, making the Ghost General stumble back a mere foot. Lan Wangji had not put any power into the attack. Slowly, Wen Ning opened his eyes, relaxing from the reflective wince he had fallen into.

“Eh?” the corpse asked.

With a dramatic sway of his arm, Lan Wangji made a ‘hmph’ noise, staring down condescendingly at the Ghost General. The look was not due to the crimes attributed to him, nor due to his status as a corpse.

“Wangji, are you… jealous?” Lan Xichen asked.

“...I would have no right to be,” Lan Wangji responded, refusing to let any inflection into his tone. “Wei Ying and I are not in a relationship. It-”

“Well, that’s a ‘yes’ if I’ve ever heard one,” Nie Mingjue muttered, making the second jade’s jaw snap shut at once, a crimson blush quickly spreading across his ears.

“Wen Ning, are you alright?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“I’m fine.”

“If you’re fine then stand up! What are you kneeling for?”

But Wen Ning remained hesitant, crawling towards Lan Wangji with a muttered, “Lan-er-gongzi, I-”

Frowning at the audacity Wen Ning had to speak to him, Lan Wangji closed his eyes, covered his ears, and turned to face Wei Wuxian instead. From his new position, he was blocking Wei Wuxian’s ability to make eye contact with Wen Ning, effectively cutting them off.

A silence persisted.

“...Are you serious?” Jiang Cheng asked. “Are you… hold on-”

“...*Wow*.”

“That’s adorable!” Nie Huaisang shouted.

Disagreeing completely, Lan Wangji turned to Wen Qing and bowed lowly, explaining, “I apologise again for my actions. Your brother did not agree to take part in this. I assure you, I will apologise to the future version once this is over, and-”

“Calm down, Lan-er-gongzi,” the doctor disagreed. “You saw some of what the other kids got up to while they were drunk in the Cloud Recesses. Trust me, this is nowhere near as bad as it could be. Save your apologies for when they’re actually necessary.”

Besides, the amusement she got from seeing the second jade’s growing embarrassment was more than enough to make up for this.

Finally-

“It’s best if you don’t stand there,” Wei Wuxian called out to the corpse. “Lan Zhan, ah… doesn’t really like seeing you.”

After a beat, Wen Ning asked, “What happened to Young Master Lan?”

“Nothing, nothing. He’s just drunk.”

“*What?*”

Withholding a snort, Jin Zixuan commented, “*That’s* a sentence I never thought would be uttered.”

Although his posture remained as straight as ever, the second jade’s aura visibly wilted at that. As the only one who could read such emotions on him, Lan Xichen felt it was his duty to reassure his brother that what he had done was perfectly normal.

(Though significantly cuter than most people were while they were drunk.)

Going by the extra-blank face Wen Ning made, it was clear how much trouble he was having accepting that.

Finally, he asked, “Then… what are you going to do?”

Wei Wuxian shrugged: “Well, what else can I do? I’m gonna carry him inside and tuck him in.”

“Okay,” Lan Wangji said.

“*Someone’s* excited,” Madam Jin commented, making Jiang Yanli and Lan Xichen give small, suppressed squeals.

“Hmm? Weren’t you covering your ears? How come you were suddenly able to hear again?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji refused to answer.

This time, even Wen Ruohan couldn’t resist chuckling slightly at the interaction. Lan Wangji silently wondered what sort of crime he had committed in a past life to deserve this fate.

Seeing how busy they were, Wen Ning turned to leave-

“Ah, Wen Ning. Be careful. Why don’t you… find somewhere to hide,” Wei Wuxian commented, then, upon seeing Wen Ning’s confusion, continued, “One can say that you’ve already died twice already. Get some rest.”

The Ghost General’s eyes widened at that.

‘*Thank you,*’ Wen Qing thought, gazing warmly at her younger brother. ‘*A-Ning, the person you saved all the way back then was… truly worth it. I’m glad you at least have each other, now.*’

Wen Ning vanished into the night.

“Alright, he’s gone,” Wei Wuxian declared. “You can’t hear or see him anymore.”

Having received that confirmation, Lan Wangji finally uncovered his ears. His light, golden eyes stared at Wei Wuxian, nearly hypnotizing in their intensity.

‘*Ah, his eyes are so clear and honest,*’ Wei Wuxian observed, staring back just as deeply. ‘*The urge to do something wicked is overwhelming.*’

If Lan Wangji was anyone else, he would have ‘eeped’ in fear. As it was, that honor fell to Lan Qiren, who once again was overwhelmed by the feeling that they shouldn’t be watching this. It wasn’t even anything especially explicit, but-

The sheer level of emotion they felt for each other was staggering.

As if trying to prove that, Wei Wuxian’s next thought was, ‘*I feel as if something has been ignited within me.*’

A high-pitched, excited scream left Nie Huaisang’s throat.

And it all faded to black.

“What?!”

“*What?!*” Nie Huaisang repeated.

“Oh, *come on!* They’re ending it there?!” Jin Zixuan protested.

Laughing at his outrage, Jiang Yanli pointed out, “It’s already been a fairly long segment.”

“Still! This is inexcusable,” Madam Jin huffed. “Honestly… just when we were getting to the good part.”

There were nods of agreement from all around, making the flush on Lan Wangji’s ears darken considerably. He was the only one even remotely happy about the abrupt end, grateful that it would give him some time to prepare himself for the upcoming embarrassment.

(It was fine to show something like this to Wei Ying, but for others-)

(And then, once again, it occurred to him that he had still not had a single spoken conversation with the head disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect.)

(His impatience towards the end of the simulation grew immensely.)

Luckily, there was at least one person whose mind could focus on more than watching Hanguang-jun be drunk. With a small sigh, Jiang Yanli leaned closer to Jin Zixuan and allowed her smile to drop slightly:

"Poor Miss A-Qing. She was such a sweet girl."

"*Everything* that happened in that city was a mess," Madam Yu scowled. "Xue Yang… what a dirty, disgusting-"

She cut herself off, the words 'street rat' on the tip of her tongue, but the newfound feeling of wrongness that evoked keeping them down once again. It was a silly thing to pause over (it wasn't an *inaccurate* description, after all) and yet somehow it felt completely wrong.

'*I'm not talking about that girl,*' she thought, laughing at her own foolishness. '*I'm only talking about Xue Yang. A-Qing was… impressive. I can admit that much, but that doesn't mean I can't insult Xue Yang. Everyone is shouting at him. The simulation has truly ruined me if I'm losing my nerve over something like this!*'

But insulting Xue Yang by calling him a 'street rat' still felt wrong.

"*...Delinquent,*" she finally decided on, glaring fiercely enough to keep others from commenting on the ridiculously long pause in her sentence. From their spots on the sidelines, several people had to quickly hide amused grins.

(Apparently the simulation's focus on Yi City was quite useful when it came to the maturity of certain members of the audience.)

'*Ah, it's a good thing I haven't mentioned what actually happened to Wei-xiong's core yet,*' Nie Huaisang thought. '*Putting aside the lack of evidence, directly pointing that out would probably just make Madam Yu and Jiang-xiong defensive. She'd start snapping back again, and all this great progress she's starting to have wouldn't have happened. I love it when not doing any work is the best way to resolve a situation! Go me!*'

On the other hand, Nie Huaisang's brother was in a far more morose mood. Things had gone wrong one after another, and even with this (debatably) happy ending, the circumstances surrounding Yi City were tragic at best. If Nie Mingjue's older-self had managed to execute Xue Yang, or if Xue Yang had just learned how to let go of his desire for revenge-

'*Do you really have any right to say that? If Wen Qing hadn't been shown helping, you would have thought exterminating the entirety of the Wen Clan was just revenge.*'

But the life of Nie Mingjue's father — the lives of everyone in Lotus Pier and the countless clans that had been wiped out by the Wen — were worth far more than a single finger. The Wen Clan had wiped out other sects, so the Great Clans had-

‘What the Wen Sect does has nothing to do with us,’ Wen Qing had declared. ‘We don’t need to pay for their sins!’

Even before Wen Qing had put her life on the line to help Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng, she hadn’t done anything wrong. The countless Wens who hadn’t taken part in Wen Ruohan’s actions were the same.

Nie Mingjue had been certain he had understood that when he saw Wen Qing take Wei Wuxian’s side that first time, but now he wasn’t so sure.

(How, exactly, had Wen Ning died?)

Turning to Wen Qing, Sect Leader Nie attracted her attention and opened his mouth to speak-

“Hi, everyone~” Wei Wuxian’s voice rang out.

“Eh?! A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli blinked, staring up at the ceiling.

“Uncle Jiang and I just finished a talk with Mo Xuanyu and the future’s sect leader Nie,” Wei Wuxian revealed, making both the real Nie Huaisang and Nie Mingjue spin to face each other.

“I-I’m here too, A-Jie,” Wen Ning called out.

A small crossed Wen Qing’s lips.

“A-Cheng, A-Li, San-niang,” Jiang Fengmian greeted. “Is everyone alright?”

With an exhausted huff, Madam Yu bit out, “We’re wonderful. We’ve reached the end of Yi City, and all we can really say about it is that most things that could have gone wrong, did.”

“Though Mo Xuanyu and Hanguang-jun are alright,” Wen Ruohan pointed out. “The juniors, as well.”

A laugh came from the other side, and Jiang Fengmian added, “I’m glad. Though, considering who was looking after them, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

After all, with the Yiling Patriarch and Gusu Lan’s Second Jade as your adoptive parents, there were very few things that could endanger you.

“Xue Yang was dealt with, then?”

“Ah… yes.”

Memories of the dismembered corpse flashed into people’s minds, and the old candy that had been clutched tightly in Xue Yang’s palm dampened much of the enthusiasm they felt.

Xue Yang deserved to die after what he had done. That didn’t make the result any less tragic. However-

“Wonderful!” Wei Wuxian declared, his knowledge of Xue Yang basically amounting to ‘evil demonic cultivator who wiped out several clans.’ “Actually, we were just talking about him with the future’s Sect Leader Nie.”

“Oh?”

“Nie-xiong was elected as their spokesperson when it came to interacting with us, the present/their pasts. On the subject of how to deal with the child version, the clans in the future decided they wanted to forbid him and the others from joining cultivation clans.”

Nie Mingjue hummed at those words, commenting, “While we were discussing with each other, we mentioned possibly having the Nie Clan take him in and keeping an eye on them. Did Huaisang’s future-self mention why that wasn’t their plan?”

“He said there were many calls for harsher punishments, so this was the one thing the future clans wouldn’t budge on. They recommended we sponsor a new organization that will exist for keeping watch on them without introducing them to cultivation in any way. Presumably the great sects will be heavily involved, so your plan on having members of the Nie Clan keep track of him is still more than possible.”

“It would just be without teaching him cultivation,” Lan Qiren concluded. He could certainly see the logic in that. Cultivation, demonic or otherwise, was a weapon Xue Yang had more than proven himself to be untrustworthy with. When taking into account how few people in the world used cultivation, forbidding them from it couldn’t even really be considered a punishment.

It was certainly not the worst idea he had ever heard.

But Lan Wangji frowned further at that, and Lan Xichen read his brother’s expression instantly.

“What about the adults involved?” Lan Xichen asked, speaking both to the watchers around him and to the trio outside the simulation. “The Chang Clan’s leader has already taken part in certain actions we believe they need to answer for.”

“The Chang Clan?” Wen Ning repeated, confusion obvious in his tone. “But… A-Jie, Sect Leader Jiang said they were the ones who Xue Yang wiped out? A-aren’t they the victims? What could they have done that… um-”

“What did they do to provoke Xue Yang’s response?” Wei Wuxian asked, understanding at once.

With a frustrated growl, Nie Mingjue explained, “They took part in needless cruelty towards the child Xue Yang that debatably started everything. It didn’t even remotely justify Xue Yang’s response, but it still needs to be dealt with.”

“I don’t disagree, but dealing with a sect leader is very different from dealing with children,” Wen Ruohan pointed out, smirking as if to remind the others of their inability to punish him,

the one who had arguably done the most wrong. “How do you exect Wei Wuxian to act as a judge while only having the support of the Yunmeng Jiang Clan?”

Right now the sect was doing amazingly, but the other great sects were swiftly recovering. If it seemed like the Yunmeng Jiang Sect was going to start stepping beyond its rights (and become like the Wen Sect), the others would quickly hurl accusations at it and force it to stop. *Especially* if it was the son of a servant leading the charge, and especially now, when tensions were so high. Although Wen Xu would know better than to let Wei Wuxian die, it would most likely mean starting an inner-sect war even sooner than it had happened in the simulation.

An excuse of ‘the other sect leaders told us to do this and I don’t have any proof but you just need to believe me’ would go over about as well as trying to make them believe people could come back to life.

(The fact that both were true was a fascinating sort of irony.)

And besides, even if the other sects were convinced that this was their decision, many of them (read: Jin Zixun) wouldn't cooperate anyways. Acting before the sect leaders had left the simulation would be completely illogical.

“But does that mean that there’s nothing we can do against Sect Leader Chang right now?” Jiang Yanli asked. “Even if they can’t directly punish them, our Yungmeng Jiang Sect could still put pressure on Sect Leader Chang CiAn, right? Maybe we can refuse to speak with them, or we could try convincing the merchants to tax them heavily!"

“That wouldn’t exactly be *much* of a punishment,” Madam Yu pointed out. “Especially if we don’t explain why we’re doing it. Fengmian, just wait for us to come out before we worry about them. Focus on the kids for now.”

“And how many others will get hurt in the meantime?” Lan Qiren asked. “The Lan Sect cannot simply stand by as this occurs.”

A thoughtful hum came from Wei Wuxian, and there were a few odd scratches that indicated he was writing something out on a piece of paper. Jiang Fengmian remained silent as well, allowing his ward to work.

“Wen Ning, could you grab me those charts?” he muttered. There was a scurrying of footsteps.

Some of the watchers made eye contact, staring blankly at each other. Then:

“Okay, you’ve all been in the simulation about two weeks. I’m about 80% sure the rest will take maybe another week and a half, so whatever choice you make will be over that timeline.”

Lan Qiren faltered, thrown off by the specific report of time. Everything moved slower inside the simulation, so it had only been a few days for the watchers, rather than a few weeks.

Wei Wuxian was still quite impressed by the mechanic. It had been done so that the signals would be able to transfer and they'd all be able to talk to each other, but it had far more applications than just that. He couldn't wait until he had more time to try all that out.

On the other hand, they had been watching years pass within the simulation, so that also gave them a feeling that a significant amount of time had passed. The set values of 'a week and a half' left for them to watch was quite different than what Lan Qiren had feared.

And, going by how horribly Xue Yang's trial at the Jins went in the simulation, this was not something he was willing to rush.

"Alright then," Wen Ruohan spoke up, seeing that no one else knew what to say. "Wei Wuxian, Sect Leader Jiang, I suggest you begin preparing for dealing with both Xue Yang and Sect Leader Chang. We can wait to take action, but it will go much smoother if you have already set the foundations. Tell A-Xu he is to provide you with whatever resources you need for this."

"Of course, Sect Leader Wen," Wei Wuxian agreed, once again surprised by the Chief Cultivators generosity. Meanwhile, Jiang Fengmian frowned, uncomfortable with the growing closeness between his disciple and Wen Ruohan, but unsure of what to add now that he'd already told Wei Wuxian to not trust the Wen Sect.

(And, in all honesty, if anyone was safe in Wen Ruohan's presence, it was starting to look like it was Wei Wuxian most of all.)

"Is there anything specific you need?" Wei Wuxian continued.

"Well, if we want this to make sense as justice, then we should probably get Xue Yang involved with the punishment of Chang CiAn," Madam Jin pointed out, recalling the previous conversations the watchers had had on the subject. "We obviously can't let him go as far as he did in the simulation, but we also shouldn't exclude him from the trial, at the very least."

"Sounds good. Then I'll start gathering evidence for a trial while I also look for the kid version of Xue Yang? Oh, and don't worry about that. Mo Xuanyu and I are working out something that'll let me find him."

Nodding absentmindedly, Madam Yu commented, "If you're the ones working on it, I'm sure whatever you make will operate perfectly."

There was a long, telling pause as Wei Wuxian tried and failed to process that sentence. Half of him wondered if he had just misheard Jiang Yanli's voice as Madam Yu's, but, as he saw Jiang Fengmian's similarly-wide eyes, he knew that wasn't the case. The pause persisted.

Clearing his throat, Lan Qiren concluded the conversation with, "Any objections?"

No one said a word, whether that be to disagree with Wen Ruohan's initial suggestion or to try and alter the agreed-upon plan.

"Alright then. Great! I'll start working on that," Wei Wuxian agreed.

"Bye, A-Jie," Wen Ning said.

"Take care," Jiang Fengmian told them.

There was a click, and the three voices vanished once more.

Chapter End Notes

For the bit on what Wei Wuxian's death was like, I got it from here! It's an interview with MXTX. It's pretty neat, so I recommend checking it out!
:)

🎵♩Kiss, Kiss, Fall in Love! 🎵♩

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A-Yue took in a deep breath, reminding herself that too much was at stake to risk failing now. The preteen YunmengJiang cultivator glanced back at her two companions, doing one final check to ensure they were all prepared. Her brother A-Lu stood to her right, while Mo Yu, the new boy their Da-shixiong had brought to the sect, stood on her left. Not the set of teammates she would have necessarily preferred, but she would make due. After all, she was the Head Captain of Squishable Squadron One (of one), and a disciple who trained under *Wei Wuxian*! It didn't matter how incompetent her brother was or how A-Yu was too young to be a cultivator yet; she would get through this, no matter what it cost!

She sucked in a deep breath, holding it so that no one would be able to notice her from the sounds of her breathing. Looking around one more time to ensure that no one was in sight, A-Yue tentatively stepped into the sect's walkway. Standing on her very tip-toes, she sneaked forward to slide behind another wall. If she could just remain undetected long enough to get to past this, then-

"Can I go back now? I'm bored," A-Lu said at a not-a-all-quiet volume.

"*Shhhhhhhhhhh!*" A-Yue hissed back at once, quickly darting back into the alley she had come from to cover her brother's mouth. "Do you not understand that this is a *stealth* mission?! If any of our Shixiong or Shijies find us skipping out on our studying like this, we'll be running laps for *weeks* as punishment."

"Then why are we doing this at all?" A-Lu fired back, the sound muffled due to A-Yue's hands still covering his mouth. "It's going to be lunch time soon, and we still haven't finished even half of the scrolls we were assigned. Of course we're gonna get punished if our seniors find us!"

"Be quiet," A-Yue reminded him with a fierce glare. "Some things are more important than the scrolls."

"I'm gonna tell San-shijie you said that-"

"You wouldn't *dare*-"

"Um…" a small noise was squeaked out, and the siblings turned to face the source. It was A-Yu (a boy who would one day grow up to be called "Mo Xuanyu"), staring up at them with eyes wide in fear.

"What is it?" A-Yue asked at once, kneeling down before him. When her brother saw the complete change in tone and politeness she had when interacting with him versus A-Yu, he gave an indignant 'hmph.' Luckily, A-Yue was well-trained in ignoring her brother when she wanted to.

A-Yu glanced back and forth between the siblings nervously.

“You… you don’t have to do this,” he confessed at last. “I’m… fine?”

“Nonsense!” A-Yue insisted at once, momentarily forgetting her own orders to stay quiet. “Of course this is necessary. Why, I can’t imagine a single thing more important! You’re a disciple of the YunmengJiang Sect — or you will be, at least. You have to meet the Sect Leader at least once, and you have to make a good impression on him when you do!”

Growing nervous at the warning, A-Yu leaned in back, eyes wide.

(To the side, A-Lu gave a dramatic groan.)

“Sect Leader Jiang has been super busy lately because of the Great Sleep, so your only option will be to catch him now, when he comes back from a meeting with the Lans. I took a peak at Da-shixiong’s desk; Sect Leader Jiang will be back in twenty minutes. As your Shijie, I can’t allow you two to have a bad first meeting. Do you understand?”

A-Yu nodded frantically, finally realizing the importance of their mission.

(A-Lu wanted to point out that he and his sister had been the youngest disciples until now, so this was A-Yue’s first time being a Shijie — she had no clue what responsibilities the title required. However, he had a feeling bringing that up would not go over well, and so remained silent.)

A-Yu tensed, now fully-aware of the gravity of the situation. He had to make a good first impression on the Sect Leader, or even knowing the Da-shixiong of Yunmeng wouldn’t be able to save him. Would the Sect Leader send him back if angered? Would he put him though something even worse?

A-Yu quickly put his arm behind his back, hiding the dirty bandages wrapped around it. They had been applied shortly after he arrived at Yunmeng, but had blackened during the extensive exploring A-Yu had taken part in. If Sect Leader Jiang was upset by how he'd wasted them-

“What? Do you wanna grab some new bandages?” A-Lu asked. This was not the first time the boy had asked that question, and, like all the previous times, A-Yu shook his head ‘no’ in response.

A-Yue sighed. Really, she had no idea why A-Yu wouldn’t simply go and ask the head healer for new bandages. It seemed once again obvious to her that boys (even cute, adorable ones like A-Yu), were rather stupid sometimes.

“Whatever. Now then, if we’re all ready,” A-Yue began, clapping her hands together, “then, off we-“

“Is this *really* the best reception YunmengJiang has to offer?” a rough, nasally voice demanded.

All three children froze.

“I apologize, Jin-gongzi,” Wei Wuxian’s voice responded. “If we had known you were going to arrive-“

“This is an outrage! Where’s your Sect Leader?! I could do a lot better speaking to him than bothering with *you*. I demand to be brought to him at once!”

As Wei Wuxian tried explaining their Sect Leader’s absence, A-Yue peaked around a corner to get a good look. Her Da-shixiong stood tall, wearing his father’s purple robes as he always did when someone from another sect visited. To the sides of the room, the sect’s servants frowned at each other and whispered.

“Can you believe him?”

“Honestly, the nerve.”

“As if Jin Zixun-gongzi didn’t visit only *because* he knew the sect leader was going to be gone. The audacity… and all just so he can talk to Wei-gongzi privately.”

“Can you believe *he’s* the one leading the Jin Sect? Our Madam’s poor martial sister will be furious when she sees what he’s done. She won’t let him get away with this.”

Unfortunately, those promises of future punishment did nothing to change the fact that, right now, Jin Zixun was the highest ranking person in the room.

“I heard you’re claiming that little project you’re starting to gather manpower for was supported by the sect leaders,” Jin Zixun continued, barely stopping in his rant to breathe. “Really? An ‘organization’ with no defined purpose so far? Why would my uncle support that?”

An organization? A-Yue hadn’t heard anything about that. And, looking back at her brother, she could see that he hadn’t either.

“How does he know about that?” one servant whispered to another. “Do the Jin have spies in Yunmeng?”

“Couldn’t be,” another responded. “Our sects are on good terms. We may have gotten a bunch of new members recently, but I’m sure that-“

“And let’s not forget the fact that your new ‘organization’ would take from districts even outside of Yunmeng! Don’t you think you’re overstepping your welcome-“

“Not particularly, no,” Wei Wuxian responded, smiling confidently (and ignoring the trembling Wen Ning to his right). “As I *told you,* if you really doubt me, you’re welcome to speak to the people inside the simulation yourself. You can ask your uncle about this if you really want to.”

A loud ‘ha!’ left Jin Zixun’s mouth and he asked, “What? You want me to put my faith in that demonic array you’ve created? Yunmeng may be an honored sect, but Sect Leader Jiang is so sentimental over his old love. Who knows how closely he’s watching her son’s actions. They do say affection can blind even the best of men.”

The cultivators and servants behind Jin Zixun all laughed.

"…What did that mean?" A-Lu whispered. "Who's he talking about?"

However, with no knowledge of demonic cultivation or Cangse Sanren or Wei Changze or the history between them and Yu Zixuan, A-Yue had no way of knowing that Jin Zixun had just implied that Wei Wuxian was using demonic cultivation to *fake* the calls to the Sect Leaders. For Jiang Fengmian to be so biased towards Wei Wuxian was a thought that would never once occur to her — especially with all the respect she offered her Da-shixiong. She could only shake her head at her brother, equally mystified.

Scoffing amid the laughter of his entourage, Jin Zixun leaned close to his second in command and concluded, "I guess the rumors are true. Cangse must have been quite an enjoyable night to get *this* much leeway for her son."

The Jin disciples cackled.

Wen Ning, on the other hand, paled at those words.

And Wei Wuxian's eyes went colder than ice.

…

Less than twenty minutes later, the Jin's were packing themselves up and returning to the carriages they had come over from. They certainly could have flown over, but with the long distance and late hour, some of the poorer cultivators had feared the difficulty of the journey, and had vouched for other modes of transport. It helped that the highest ranking member of the bunch was one such person.

In hindsight, that ended up being quite a good decision. With the way they were still shaking, at least half of them would have fallen off if they had tried to fly. As it was, quite a few tripped as they tried to enter the carts, flinching at the heavy gazes weighing them down.

To add insult to injury, the sources of those gazes, the awestruck Yunmeng servants, gossiped loudly enough for the Jins to hear:

"Wow… Da-shixiong *destroyed* them!"

Gaping openly, another admitted, "I… almost feel a bit bad. Da-shixiong didn't even raise his voice, he just…"

'*Come now, Jin-gongzi. There's no need to joke like that.* Of course *you understood how the array contacting the sect leaders works. Someone with a main clan member's education would never be confused by something like that.'*

'Well, I just… Of course I know what it's saying, I just worry about the accuracy of the report-'

'The accuracy?' Wei Wuxian asked. 'Oh, you mean the precision of the layered arrays.'

‘What?”

‘Yes, I can completely understand why you would be concerned about that. The combination of the Wéifǎn and the Liánjiē segments do initially seem to contradict each other in a way that would throw off the Shōucáng process, but, as I’m sure a temporary sect leader such as yourself knows, writing an inverted Yánqí symbol between them allows for the Jiēshōu Zhě reader to still work. The Fēnpèi and Chéngfǎ segments cancel out — though, of course, I don’t have to explain that to you.’

Jin Zixun had just blinked twice, staring blankly.

‘Ah, that’s right. Jin-gongzi, since we’re in agreement that the array described in the report I gave you works, we really should contact the sect leaders. You’ll be able to confirm that the array I use is the same as the one in the report, and you’ll be able to tell your uncle about how the Jin Sect is currently fairing.’

‘No, there’s no need for-’

‘But of course there is! Jin Guangshan has put so much effort into strengthening his alliance with the Sae and Chin clan leaders. I’m sure he’d love to get an update from you on how that’s going.’

(Judging by Jin Zixun’s following flinch, not very well.)

‘And Jin Zixun-gongzi has been really working on his swordsmanship. It’s truly unfortunate that Jin Zixuan-gongzi has been unable to practice while being in the simulation, isn’t it?”

‘I… of course-’

‘Perhaps the two of you should have a duel once he gets out. At the very least, it would give Jin Zixuan-gongzi a good idea of how much he’ll need to catch up on. If we contact them now, we can arrange it with plenty of time to spare-’

‘No, no, I’m fine-’

‘Oh? Then would you like to fight me, instead?’

And, with the numerous affronts to his pride, Jin Zixun obviously couldn’t let that go.

‘I-if you use one of your tricks-’

‘Well of course I wouldn’t. Only spiritual cultivation, I assure you. Everyone here will be able to tell right away if I use it. In fact, just to be sure, why don’t we have all of you fight me at once? It’ll be hard to use demonic cultivation then.’

‘Are you really suggesting that you can take us all on by yourself*?!’*

Wei Wuxian had just smiled.

Needless to say, it hadn’t gone very well for the Jins.

And then, right when Jin Zixun was about to accuse Wei Wuxian of cheating, Wei Wuxian brought up Jin Guangshan's own words:

'A-Xun?'

"Yes, Uncle?'

'We're all trusting Wei-gongzi to help us with any problems that might occur. I expect you to give him the Jin Sect's full support, am I understood?'

No matter how much he might want to be, Jin Zixun wasn't the heir of the Jin Sect. His current high standing in it was fairly heavily influenced by how much of Jin Guangshan's favor he held. But, if Jin Guangshan valued Wei Wuxian's talent more, then what would he say if he found out what Jin Zixun and his cohort had tried to do?

Even without Wei Wuxian saying it directly, the meaning was clear: depending on how mad Jin Guangshan was, Jin Zixun might not be able to back up his threats in the near future. In fact, if Wei Wuxian was truly favored (and it had to be an unbelievable amount, for Jin Guangshan would have never given such an order in front of the other sect leaders otherwise), Jin Zixun could even be considered a traitor of sorts, if he wasn't careful.

(This was an argument that never would have worked if it was merely the son of a servant saying it, no matter how talented. However, with Jin Guangshan's words, and Jiang Fengmian's unquestioning support, and Wen Ruohan, the *Chief Cultivator*, ordering Wen Xu to help him…

Even the Jin Sect couldn't claim he was just the son of a servant any longer.)

In all honesty, neither A-Yue nor A-Lu had really understood all that much of the conversation, so they were just glad the weird yellow men were gone. And just in time too, for, only a minute after the Jin had left, Jiang Fengmian returned to the Cloud Recesses.

"Ready, A-Yu?" A-Yue asked.

After a moment of hesitation, A-Yu nodded resolutely. A-Yue grinned, and (dragging her brother along by his ear), brought the new member of the YunmengJiang Sect to meet his Sect Leader.

Due to the abrupt ending of the previous segment, a significant portion of the watchers were still on the edges of their seats, waiting impatiently for it to begin again. Therefore, when the world around them darkened as the simulation resumed, there was a collective sigh of relief.

A feeling that only amplified when the simulation picked up right where it had left off: Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji standing outside, nearby the inn.

Taking in deep breaths, Lan Wangji tried to mentally prepare himself for the disaster he was sure would follow.

The pair was staring into each others eyes, one drunk on alcohol, the other lost in wonder. The Yiling Patriarch looked at Lan Wangji with an incomparable level of awe, and a warm smile soon formed on his face.

"Lan Zhan, you're drunk," Wei Wuxian laughed, still unable to believe it despite this being the second time it had happened.

"I'm not," Lan Wangji responded stubbornly, summoning Bichen off the ground with a wave of his hand.

"Wangji, you absolutely-"

"Definitely-"

"Completely-"

"And totally-"

""""""*Are* drunk,""""""" Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, Jiang Cheng, and Wen Qing concluded as one. Deciding to take the high route, Lan Wangji refused to respond to their obvious provocation.

'*I can do this,*' he thought. '*If I just stay calm, I'll be able to get through these scenes without further incident. They will only be embarrassing if I allow them to be.*'

(Or so he hoped.)

By now, the simulated Hanguang-jun had gotten so close to Wei Wuxian that their noses were only a centimeter apart. The glare the second jade was sending his partner quite clearly showed how strongly he believed in his side of the argument.

Wei Wuxian just blinked back, amused.

Seemingly coming to a decision, Lan Wangji then grabbed onto Wei Wuxian's wrist, spinning on his heel and dragging both of them away.

"Huh? Where are you going?" the Yiling Patriarch asked.

"Back to Gusu."

A synchronous flinch broke out among a good fraction of the watchers at those words, the memories they evoked pouring forth.

'Wei Ying. Come back to Gusu with me.'

'To Gusu? I see. After all, your uncle despises people who cultivate on the dark path! You're his most beloved disciple; of course you're the same as him!'

Lan Qiren clenched his fists together, suddenly feeling sick to his stomach.

But, contrary to what had happened in the past, the simulated Wei Wuxian in Mo Xuanyu's body just laughed.

"Wait!" he called out. "You don't want the kids to see us like this, do you?"

To emphasize the 'this' he was referring to, he held up his hand, waving it back and forth to show the way Lan Wangji was still grabbing on.

Nodding once, Lan Wangji let go-

The real version breathed out a sigh of relief-

Only to immediately thrust forward a bamboo flute he had taken from his robes.

"Eh?"

In response to Wei Wuxian's confusion, Lan Wangji furrowed his brows in determination and reached into his sleeve, pulling out a rattle drum, a bell, and a dried flower. He held all four objects out, waiting for Wei Wuxian to take them.

Looking back and forth between the offerings, Wei Wuxian muttered "Hanguang-jun… you sure have a lot of interesting things in your sleeves, huh?"

"He's like a bird displaying mating gifts," Madam Jin couldn't help but comment, sending a fierce blush rising up Lan Wangji's ears (which he only managed to temper after a few dozen deep breaths).

"Though it is nice how personal all those trinkets are."

Certainly much better than her husband, who would use his wealth to cover up how little he knew about whichever girl he was targeting at that specific time.

And, just as that difference implied, Lan Wangji's attention was focused entirely on Wei Wuxian. The refusal to take any of the offerings was immediately noticed.

"Do you not like any of them?" Lan Wangji asked, deflating at once. "Would you prefer joss paper?"

"Oh dear," Jiang Yanli gasped out breathlessly, turning away to burry her head in her fiance's simulated body.

"A-Li?" Jin Zixuan asked.

Trembling slightly, Jiang Yanli struggled to answer, "I — they're just… *so cute.*"

(If Lan Wangji just looked straight forward and refused to acknowledge the comment, then it would be as if it didn't exist at all — or so he told himself.)

Determination rising, Lan Wangji grabbed onto Wei Wuxian's arm again, continuing to drag him towards the inn. Wei Wuxian laughed at the act, but tried to stop him

nonetheless:

“I’m serious, Lan Zhan. If the kids see us like this-” he twisted his wrist, breaking the grip and dancing around to the other side of Lan Wangji with a wink. “Your reputation will be ruined!”

Hanguang-jun reached out to grab again.

So Wei Wuxian twirled away.

The watchers jolted at once, feeling a sudden jump in energy. This wasn’t a command being sent out to spirits, but rather to resentment itself. The energy pooled under the simulated Wei Wuxian’s feet.

A half-second later, he had leapt 20 meters into the air, practically flying over the inn’s roof.

Hanguang-jun followed shortly after.

The pair raced across the slanted roof, the former only stopping when Lan Wangji managed to slip far enough in front to use Bichen as a blockade. Unable to help himself, Wei Wuxian grinned again.

“Ha. Look,” he said, tilting his head teasingly to the side. “Doesn’t this remind you of our days studying in the Cloud Recesses?”

Their fights across the roof over the fate of a jar of Emperor’s Smile. That was a much nicer memory than the one from before.

Lan Xichen smiled, and noticed that Wangji’s attempts at remaining unaffected by what he saw were proving futile. That was no surprise; the second jade had been ready for embarrassment, not *this*.

A small, soft smile momentarily slipped past Lan Wangji’s defenses and was now lighting his face up in a warm glow.

“Back then, I would have been holding a jar of Emperor’s Smile,” Wei Wuxian recalled. “And *you* would be trying to capture and punish me-”

Before he had fully finished that last sentence, he noticed Lan Wangji shifting to attack. With another laugh, Wei Wuxian twisted around the other’s motion, twirling behind Lan Wangji in a way that made his robes flare out on all sides. He tapped Hanguang-jun’s back with a grin, then quickly had to flee Lan Wangji’s response.

As the second jade’s hand reached out to grab onto Wei Wuxian, there was a sudden change in the simulation. Images layered on top of each other into something new, and, in a single smooth transition, the world shifted.

They were in the Cloud Recesses. Wei Wuxian stood in his original body, dodging Lan Wangji through the rain.

'To Gusu?' Wei Wuxian had asked.

And then:

'Who do you think you are?! I'm not afraid of you or the Gusu Lan Clan!'

Everything had been ruined. The stress of the war — Wei Wuxian's ~~justified~~ fear that his demonic cultivation would turn the world against him — had torn them apart.

And after that-

'It was like being stuck in an unending nightmare.'

And after that, Wei Wuxian had died.

But now….

The past Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji molded back into their twenty-years-later versions, laughter in the air and a notable smile on Hanguang-jun's lips (a far cry from the annoyance that had been on his past self's). They sprinted along the rooftops and frolicked about, so light-footed it seemed as though they were barely touching the ground.

'*Fairies Dancing in the Wind,*' Nie Huaisang thought, inspiration for a painting surging within him. '*No, no; Wind Spirits Under the Moon would be a better name. No, wait-*'

New ideas continued to overwhelm Huaisang, but, in the simulation, one thing remained constant: Wei Wuxian had been brought back to life, and now he and Lan Wangji were refusing to let this second chance go to waste.

"Woah," Wei Wuxian called out, just barely dodging another one of Lan Wangji's attempts to grab him. Their duel had taken them across the rooftops of five different buildings, and yet they continued to dance around each other without showing even the slightest traces of exhaustion. Wei Ying ducked under Lan Wangji's arm, slipping behind the other man with a teasing spin. By the time Lan Wangji had turned to face him, Wei Wuxian had already jumped off the roof, flipping over mid-air and landing on the opposite side.

Lan Wangji followed soon after.

By now, even the watchers who hadn't known Lan Wangji before the simulation could read the expression on his face. It would be hard not to, given their context of what was being shown.

It made Jiang Cheng feel sick.

'*What do they think they're doing?*' he wondered. '*Are they seriously just-I mean, I would have expected better of the Lan Clan's second jade. Madam Jin was right: they're like birds in a mating dance. Animals, who just-'*

(Animals, who were playing around with each other happily. As equals in skill. As he and Wei Wuxian had never managed to be.)

'*I won't be like my other self,*' he thought. '*I'm not going to torture Wei Wuxian — I would never. I'm not-ever. But… if I can't give him something like this then….*'

Was he going to leave, no matter what Jiang Cheng did? Was he really going to abandon the people who had raised him — who took him in, when no one else would? Was he really going to go?

~~Would it be because the future's Sect Leader Jiang had gained a new hobby of torturing people on the off-chance that they might be Wei Wuxian, or was that just one drop in an *ocean* of reasons?~~

With a tricky bit of maneuvering, Wei Wuxian blocked Lan Wangji's attack and slipped out of his grip once again. He landed solidly on another roof, waiting for his airborne partner to land as well.

In a flutter of white silk, the second jade joined him. They made eye contact for a moment, then both turned to look over the garden below. As if coming to some sort of conclusion from that, the drunk Lan Wangji reached inside his robes once again.

"Huh? *More?*" Wei Wuxian laughed, disbelieving and delighted all at once.

Jiang Yanli squealed.

And several others joined her when Hanguang-jun pulled out a jar of wine, saved within a qiankun pouch some time earlier. Wei Wuxian's eyes widened, and even louder laughter followed soon after.

That sound had played on repeat for quite some time that night. The volume didn't quite suit the tranquility of the otherwise-peaceful night, but Lan Wangji found that he didn't really mind.

In fact, he really wasn't opposed at all.

"Ah, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said at last. "You're amazing when you're drunk."

(And just like that, Lan Wangji's earlier promise to never drink received its strongest opposition yet.)

The simulated Hanguang-jun tilted his head, confused by Wei Wuxian's reaction. Nonetheless, Wei Wuxian walked forward and took the jar from him, tearing the cloth covering off with his mouth as he sat down.

'*Ah, I've got it! I'll call it A Jar of True Love… no, that sounds stupid,*' Nie Huaisang sighed, frustrated at his own lack of progress. '*If only I was as good at coming up with names as Wei-xiong is.*'

Oh, well. He would think of something.

There was a slight movement from the side, and Wei Wuxian's eyes were drawn to it instantly.

As were Wen Ruohan's. He turned to face the source of the motion, narrowing his eyes at the shadowy figure. It was too far to see clearly, but the way the man was watching them was obvious nonetheless.

Wei Wuxian thought for a bit, then looked over his shoulder at Hanguang-jun.

"Lan Zhan, when we settle matters here, I'll go back to Gusu with you, all right?" he asked.

And Jiang Cheng couldn't quite contain the flinch those words caused in him.

Gleeful, Wei Wuxian took a big gulp of the alcohol, savoring the taste, then held the jar out for Lan Wangji to take back.

"Trust me," he said.

'*I will. I do,*' the younger Lan Wangji thought, only to flush deeper in embarrassment at how quickly he had responded.

In his own answer, the older Lan Wangji took the offered jar and brought it up to his mouth. Wind swept by, sending his hair flying gracefully as he drank from the same jar as Wei Wuxian had.

And for once, not even Lan Qiren had any complaints.

'*They're not in the Cloud Recesses. I… suppose it's fine,*' he thought. '*It's certainly greatly preferable to what happened when Wei Wuxian first returned from the Burial Mounds.*'

Yes, if those were his only options, then he would pick this any day.

"Now then," Wei Wuxian's smile faded away, and he reached a hand out, two fingers raised. "*I su*mmo*n t*he *spi*r*its of t*he *dea*d."

The watchers jolted as the surrounding resentment snapped to attention, rising up at once on Wei Wuxian's command. Truly, their sensitivity to resentment had just grown and grown with each segment that passed.

(Wen Qing hoped it wouldn't pose a problem for them after the simulation was over.)

Following the shockwave of resentment that had bursted out from the ground near Wei Wuxian, green light began to whisp up and take form. An old man; a young girl; the spirits of those who had died full of resentment nearby.

However, a moment later, the energy fizzled out.

An uncomfortable flip jolted in Lan Qiren's stomach at that forceful dispellment. It made him feel like he was a sack full of sand that had been flipped upside-down, allowing all of its

contents to pour out. For a moment, he almost thought his own insides had been sucked out of his body, falling into a pile on the floor.

Something was preventing resentment from taking form.

(And since when had *that* ever felt like a bad thing?)

“Huh. Even that wasn’t enough to summon them?” Wei Wuxian wondered. Frown deepening, Lan Wangji turned and leapt to the roof of a nearby building, an additional ten meters higher than before.

“An array,” he observed.

Hearing that, Wen Ruohan frowned. How had he never heard of an array that would keep resentment from forming? Given that cultivators were still in business in the future, he was sure the conditions required meant the array could only work for a short time, but still. Surely, in his research, he would have heard about something like-

“As expected,” Wei Wuxian smirked. “This array was also taken from my manuel on demonic cultivation.”

A brief silence passed.

“...Is he serious?” Jin Zixuan asked, somewhat unable to believe this was yet *another thing* Wei Wuxian had created. “Spirit attraction flags, compass of evil, demonic cultivation in general, and now-”

“That is *so* unfair!” Nie Huaisang whined. “Why did he get all the intelligence of our generation! Hoarder! Thief!”

“This may be why the culprit behind the cat corpses tried leading us to Yi City,” Wei Wuxian speculated, proving Nie Huaisang’s point further. If someone led the juniors specifically to Yi City, then it would need to be someone who knew why that city was important.

Someone with knowledge of its connection to demonic cultivation.

The techniques the nearby spy had trained in were notably different than that of the grave robber’s goons. This was most likely an additional group, who probably had a different goal than the grave robber did (especially given that they had *led* the juniors to another piece of the corpse). Unless it was an organization Wei Wuxian hadn’t encountered yet, this person being involved with the cat corpse’s perpetrator was the most likely outcome.

Which meant-

The person hiding in the shadows vanished, retreating now that his targets had realized they were being watched. The Yiling Patriarch smirked.

“The array may be complicated, but, with the right derivation, one can still find its crux. Lan Zhan, do you have a piece of paper?”

Hanguang-jun stared back blankly. After several seconds, he tilted his head in confusion.

As Lan Xichen joined Jiang Yanli in cooing at the scene, the real Lan Wangji had to remind himself of his earlier plan several times to remain calm.

He was a disciple of Gusu Lan. He could remain composed. It didn't matter that his own brother had turned traitor and abandoned him; he could get through this.

On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, the simulated Lan Wangji quite clearly had no idea what was going on, and was perfectly happy to just stand still, further embarrassing his younger self.

Wei Wuxian sighed.

Then, without an ounce of hesitation, Wei Wuxian grabbed onto Lan Wangji's sleeve and slipped his own hand inside. Feeling around for what he was looking for.

'*Oh, my. Molestation already?*' Jin Guangshan wondered. '*Well, that was certainly a good excuse Wei Wuxian found. I couldn't have come up with something better myself. And I can't blame him either. Hanguang-jun usually isn't my type, but this defenseless version is much more attractive than I would have expected. Really, both of them together are just… perfect.*'

Those last few words weren't too different from the thoughts his wife had at that same scene. However, as you switched from one to the other, the feeling conveyed by that sentence changed completely.

(For a reason he couldn't quite describe, the real Lan Wangji felt a sudden chill run down his back.)

Soon enough, Wei Wuxian found what he had been looking for. He pulled out the paper and brush, sitting down on the roof to get to work. Meanwhile, the drunk Lan Wangji stared blankly at the moon.

For a brief moment, Nie Huaisang's curiosity overwhelmed him and he leaned over Wei Wuxian's shoulder to take a peak at the writing. He regretted it instantly.

Squiggles and symbols and equations were being transcribed onto the paper at record speed. It undoubtedly meant something to Wei Wuxian, but the level of talisman knowledge needed to decipher it was not something Nie Huaisang possessed.

'*I thought being in the simulation meant I could* escape *homework for a while! I better not let Da-ge see this, or he'll ask Wei-xiong to tutor me when this is all over!*'

Nie Huaisang would do anything to avoid that.

"All done," Wei Wuxian declared at last. Before him, two and a half *dozen* pieces of paper covered in writing laid still, the work spread out for Wei Wuxian to see. At that moment, however, an enormous gust of wind swept by, scattering the papers at once. In the cover caused by the wildly spinning mess, someone made their attack.

A quintet of small blades shot through the air, approaching Wei Wuxian. A second after they were thrown, they instead smashed into a clay pot; Lan Wangji had thrown the jar of alcohol in the way. The remaining attacks were swiftly knocked to the side by Bichen, which was held firmly in Lan Wangji's hand. Apparently, being drunk was far from enough to reduce Lan Wangji's skill.

"You are really just… the weirdest drunk ever," Jin Zixuan commented.

Then, from the dark, two figures emerged, flinging another half dozen knives towards the pair.

Lan Wangji knocked them away easily, however the last one wasn't a knife at all. Rather, it was a gray orb the size of a walnut, which, upon coming into contact with Bichen, sparked briefly.

Then exploded.

Jiang Yanli yelped, jumping back, and Jin Zixuan unconsciously tensed before her.

However, both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had reaction speeds that were more than capable of avoiding the explosion, and they landed steadily on the grass below. When they looked up, they saw one of the perpetrators carrying the abandoned papers Wei Wuxian had been working on, smirking as he vanished into the darkness.

"Damn it!" Jiang Cheng cursed. "Ah, Wei Wuxian, you idiot. Why do that all outside?! If you hadn't been fooling around with Lan-er-gongzi you-"

He cut off, realizing that no one in present company would approve of the words he had been about to say.

"Oh my, he sure got away fast," Wei Wuxian observed, the picture of casualness. "He stole something of mine. Aren't you going to go after him?"

"It was an act. I will not go after him."

Several people stared blankly, and Jiang Cheng scowled: "...What?"

"Oh. Not bad, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian complimented. "Even like this, you could still tell I was pretending."

"...Pretending?" Jiang Yanli asked.

Wei Wuxian glanced back to where the corpse of one of their attackers laid, adding on, "These people want to use me to find the crux of the array, but the person who set up the array is also highly skilled. It'll take more than a day or two to find the crux. However… while the crux I marked was fake, this linking spell is not."

And with that, he pulled out a compass of evil, inscribing a red array of resentful energy on top.

“I suppose this is what they call ‘casting a long line to lure in a big catch,’” the Yiling Patriarch smirked.

For some strange reason, Nie Huaisang felt a little uneasy at that.

At a distant grotto near a river, a man sat elegantly on an expensive chair, a servant standing to his left. On the table before him was a set of tea, as well as the papers he had apparently stolen from Wei Wuxian. Unfortunately for the watchers, his face and clothes were obscured in shadow.

“That… can’t be natural,” Wen Ruohan said. “There’s nothing blocking the light there.”

“What? You think the spirits who created the simulation are intentionally disguising his identity?” Madam Yu asked, looking disgusted by the very thought. “What would be the point of that?”

After thinking for a moment, Lan Qiren commented, “They do seem to enjoy keeping secrets from us.”

“Isn’t the whole point of this simulation to teach us?” Madam Jin asked. “Keeping secrets seems illogical.”

Humming lightly, Wen Qing pointed out, “And yet, the impact of learning why Wei Wuxian did demonic cultivation was much stronger than it might have been if we hadn’t already accused him of so many things.”

No one had an argument against that.

As the unknown man set his tea cup down, the watchers were brought back to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. Footsteps pounded against the ground, and they raced through the trees at breakneck speeds.

Lan Wangji’s eyes widened slightly at the skill his future self and Wei Wuxian displayed. He watched carefully, committing their movement patterns to memory.

With an enormous jump, Wei Wuxian leapt high above the trees, landing with a thud on the ground next to the table. It was abandoned — recently, judging by the still-steaming cup.

“Hm, that person sure was careful,” Wei Wuxian supposed, picking his papers back up. They had been left behind, so it seemed likely that the array wasn’t a priority to the perpetrator. If it *had* been urgent, they would have taken the risk of bringing the pages (incorrect though they may be) to see if they could gleam anything from the data. They hadn’t, so....

'*This was probably more a test for me than it was a genuine attempt to get information,*' he hummed softly. ‘*Does someone know I was brought back? Was this meant to be some kind of confirmation?*’

“Cowardly rats,” Nie Mingjue muttered. “Hiding in the dark like that.”

He was quite confident that, if their intentions had been righteous, there would have been no need to hide from Hanguang-jun like that. His gaze darkened with anger.

“There isn’t anyone here,” Lan Wangji observed, landing beside Wei Wuxian.

“Ah, Hanguang-jun. You don’t often read these sorts of novels, so you wouldn’t know, but you can’t catch these sorts of characters that easily.”

Nie Huaisang beamed, knowing that he had personally introduced Wei Wuxian to many novels of that variety.

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian blinked a few times. “Your headband is askew!”

And, unlike the first time Wei Wuxian had said that at the archery competition, it indeed was. Lan Wangji clumsily reached up, attempting to fix it but only making it look worse in the process.

“Oh, look at you fumbling,” Wei Wuxian giggled, for what seemed to be the hundredth time that night.

(Not that Lan Wangji was complaining.)

He stepped closer, standing right before Lan Wangji and staring into his eyes. The fondness in that gaze turned even warmer than before, its intensity nearly suffocating those who witnessed it.

“Lan Zhan, are you still going to do whatever I ask?” Wei Wuxian wondered breathlessly. “Do whatever I tell you?”

‘*Yes,*’ a tiny voice in Lan Wangji whispered as several people around him began to squeal.

Similarly, the virtual Hanguang-jun gave a soft: “Mn.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes flicked up and down, disbelief quickly forming into a near-frantic scanning for something he could ask for. It had to be something perfect (after all, who knew if he would ever get a chance like this again), but it couldn’t be anything too far out there either, or even the drunk Lan Wangji would refuse him. Then, his gaze shifted higher and higher, finally landing on something just above Lan Wangji’s eyes.

Lan Qiren frowned, wondering what Wei Wuxian could be looking at. The only thing up there was-

“Lan Zhan, can you… take off your forehead ribbon?”

Obediently, Hanguang-jun reached up.

And Lan Qiren coughed, choking at once.

“Uncle? Are you alright?” Lan Xichen asked, rushing close.

“He-” the usually-composed Lan gaped openly. “They — he can’t-”

But, with a firm tug, Hanguang-jun finally allowed the ribbon to fall from his head.

“Well, it’s not… the end of the world?” Jin Zixuan pointed out, trying (and failing) to help. “I mean no disrespect, but… it’s just a forehead ribbon.”

Jiang Cheng nodded in agreement.

(On the other hand, Nie Huaisang, the only foreign junior to have already spent a year at the cloud recesses, knew exactly what the ribbon meant, and chuckled deviously.)

The low laughter coming from the Nie heir only became louder as the ribbon was deposited into Wei Wuxian’s waiting hands. Holding the ribbon carefully, Wei Wuxian turned it over a few times, examining the cloud-patterned fabric intricately. Despite his searching, he couldn’t find anything of note.

“So there really isn’t anything special about it,” Wei Wuxian wondered, his memory of the archery competition, when he had accidentally undone the ribbon, flashing into his mind. “Huh. And here I thought it would be hiding some sort of big secret. But then, back then, why did you get so mad when I took it off?”

The real Lan Wangji was incomparably grateful that neither the simulated Wei Wuxian nor the real juniors knew the reason why.

(Except for one Nie Huaisang, whose laughter had steadily grown into a maniacal, uproarious cackle as time went on.)

But then-

‘*Or maybe it’s just that the past Lan Wangji simply hated me, alongside everything I did.*’

Feeling as though he had been dunked into the cold spring, the flush running up Lan Wangji’s ears vanished at once. No matter how much had happened since then, the argument that had transpired between him and Wei Wuxian upon the Yiling Patriarch’s return from the Burial Mounds was not something he could forget.

It wasn’t entirely his fault — there was a near-countless number of factors in play — and yet the reminder steeled his conviction to avoid such a fate with the real Wei Wuxian even further than before.

Suddenly, a loud gasp came from before him.

While Lan Wangji had been distracted, his older self had been hard at work. With deft hands, Hanguang-jun had taken the forehead ribbon back from Wei Wuxian and-

And-

And then he’d-

“I…” the real Lan Wangji spoke softly, staring at the simulation with steadily-growing horror. “What am I-”

An equally distracted Wei Wuxian finally looked down, feeling something tighten at his wrists.

Lan Wangji’s forehead ribbon had been used to bind Wei Wuxian’s hands together, and layers upon layers of knots kept it pulled tight.

A beat passed.

“*WHAT?!*” a loud screech echoed through the chamber, the high pitch resembling a pained ghost’s wail. Every eye turned toward the source of that sounds, and the watchers were only somewhat surprised to identify it as Lan Qiren. The man looked almost as distraught as he had been during the burning of the Cloud Recesses.

(And even *his* distress had nothing on the real Lan Wangji’s.)

“...What are you doing?” Wei Wuxian asked, finally realizing what was going on.

In response, Lan Wangji stared down assessingly at the ties he had made, before adding yet another knot to the pile.

“I… this is… this is-”

“Uncle, are you-”

“No. No. No. No. No. No-no-no-no-”

“Uncle,” Lan Xichen tried again, fully aware that his brother was in no place to offer help of his own.

“We are not watching this,” Lan Qiren declared, turning around. “I am happy for you, Wangji. I truly am. But I will not — I won’t-”

Once seven or eight knots had been tied, Wei Wuxian finally spoke up: “Hey, do you still want this ribbon of yours?”

As though in affirmative, Lan Wangji grabbed the other end of the ribbon, lifting it up and forcing Wei Wuxian’s hands above his head.

Several loud shouts broke out through the silence, and Jiang Cheng reared back in disgust:

“What are you *doing?!*” he demanded, practically spitting the words out. By this point, even he had no idea if he was directing the question towards the real Lan Wangji or rhetorically at the simulated Hanguang-jun, but he didn’t care. Jiang Cheng turned around, unable to face the scenario before him-

But, unconcerned, Hanguang-jun continued to hold the entwined hands in front of his own face, admiring the masterpiece he had created.

Putting aside how little Lan Qiren personally enjoyed watching intimacy, this was his *nephew.* Though he may not have Xichen's understanding of Wangji, he could tell perfectly well how proud those eyes were.

'*If I let this keep going, we might have to watch… I can't do that do Wangji,*' Lan Qiren thought, forcing himself to calm down and quickly noticing the growing distress in his nephew's reddening ears. '*I…. This, more than anything, belongs to just him.*'

Hands suspended in air, Wei Wuxian thought to himself, '*Wow, I probably look a lot like a criminal right now…. Wait, why do I have to play along with him? Wasn't I supposed to be the one playing him?*'

He looked back at Lan Wangji, his confusion increasing.

"Take it off," he finally said.

"Oh, they're going to stop," Lan Qiren breathed out a relieved sigh, smiling slightly when he saw his younger nephew relax as well. "I'm glad that-"

Except Lan Wangji's hands weren't undoing the knots.

They were removing *Wei Wuxian's robes-*

"Don't remove that!" Wei Wuxian protest at once, laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation and stepping back.

Watching that, Jin Guangshan smirked, mentally adding, '*It is always more fun when they try running away. Quite the catch you've found, Hanguang-jun.*'

His gaze dropped down to the bound wrists, and the smirk on his face deepened.

'*Not bad at all.*'

Back in the outside world, the real Wei Wuxian felt a sudden, unexplainable shiver run up his spine.

And a very similar one went down Lan Qiren's. He, however, knew exactly why he felt what he did. In the years he had spent leading a sect at the same time as Jin Guangshan was, he had gotten to know the other man reasonably well. They had a fairly amicable relationship — their sects could work together just fine — but he was not ignorant to the hobbies Jin Guangshan had on the side.

(Nor was he ignorant to the various comments the man had made about Wei Wuxian and Lan Qiren's own nephew since the simulation had begun.)

He frowned: "Jin-xiong, you-"

“Remove this!” Wei Wuxian protested. “Take off this thing on my hands! Take *it* off! The thing you’re tying me with — the ribbon!”

Lan Wangji frowned at the request.

“You said that you’d listen to me, didn’t you? Be a good boy and take it off.”

‘*Calling him a ‘good boy’ again?’* Madam Jin thought, slowly beginning to grin. ‘*You seem to be enjoying this more than you’re pretending to, young man.*’

As if agreeing, Lan Wangji just stared blankly. He turned his gaze away, as though puzzled by Wei Wuxian’s words and needing to ponder them for a while longer.

“Oh, I see now! You were in such high spirits when you tied me up, but suddenly you don’t understand when I want to be untied, huh?!”

“Ah… I never expected this from *Hanguang-jun,*” Jiang Yanli commented, sharing a soft laugh with Jin Zixuan. Upon hearing that, the real Lan Wangji just wilted further. His posture was still as straight as ever, but Lan Xichen felt as though he could see years of Lan Wangji’s lifespan vanishing before his eyes.

‘*Sorry, Wangji, but… you* are *very cute.’*

“The Lan Sect’s forehead ribbon was made from the same material as its uniform,” Lan Sizhui revealed. “Although it looked flimsy, it was actually quite sturdy. As Hanguang-jun had… as Hanguang-jun had… as, um-”

“What’s wrong Sizhui?” Lan Jingyi asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen *you* stutter over the words before.”

Faced with the realization that even *Lan Sizhui* couldn’t maintain his dignity in the face of what had happened, Lan Wangji began seriously considering joining his uncle in a state of cardiac arrest. It wouldn’t be entirely fair to make his brother take care of both of them, but, as Lan Xichen was a traitor to their family, Lan Wangji was starting to consider that an acceptable punishment.

Clearing his throat, Lan Sizhui forced out, “As Hanguang-jun had wrapped it tightly around and had tied a long strand of knots, Senior Wei couldn’t struggle out of it no matter how… no matter how hard he tried.”

“Nice one, Hanguang-jun,” Lan Jingyi cheered, and, judging from the sounds they heard, he and Ouyang Zizhen high-fived (easily ignoring a groaning Jin Ling).

‘*Ah, I really did shoot myself in the foot, didn’t I?*’ Wei Wuxian thought to himself, trying to escape as Hanguang-jun began bringing him back to the inn. ‘*Good thing it’s just a forehead ribbon and not some weird magical rope, or else he would have really tied me up.*’

“Weird magical…” Lan Qiren coughed out, heaving under the strain. “...Weird magical rope? Wei Wuxian, what ideas do you have in your head?! My nephew wouldn’t… he wouldn’t….”

Except he that clearly wasn't quite true.

As Lan Wangji traveled back to the inn, he stared into the distance, swinging the ends of the ribbon around contently. Struggling again and still failing to free himself, Wei Wuxian returned to his attempts to negotiate:

"Can you please take it off? Hanguang-jun, how can someone as graceful as you do something like this? What's the point in tying me up? It's going to reflect poorly on you if someone sees us like this, right?"

"Yes!" Lan Qiren agreed at once. "The simulation is supposed to activate the concealment zone when we say we want to stop watching, right? Well then, I-"

"*Uncle, stop!*" Lan Xichen shouted at once, cutting his uncle off in a very un-Lan-like manner. "We have no idea how much we'll miss if we activate the concealment zone now. We need to be here for Wangji-"

"Yeah!" Nie Huaisang added on. "And if you do that, we won't be able to watch the romance happen!"

Nie Mingjue sighed, sending the frozen Lan Wangji an apologetic look.

Unfortunately for the real Lan Wangji, despite Wei Wuxian's continuous protests and arguments, the future's Hanguang-jun made no move to stop in his journey back to the inn. Rather, at the words 'if someone sees us like this,' he almost seemed to become even more determined to get back.

'*Stay calm,*' Lan Wangji told himself. '*Be dignified. It will only be embarrassing if I allow it to be. I just need to stay calm and outlast this, and everyone will forget about it soon enough. And-*'

With an abrupt jerk, Wei Wuxian was pulled forward even faster. He protested immediately:

"W-wait a sec! I said it would be bad if someone sees this, not that you should let them see it! Hey! You're just pretending to not understand me, aren't you? Are you doing this on purpose? So, you're only going to hear me when I say what you want to hear, huh? Lan Zhan! Lan Wangji!"

'*It's only embarrassing if you let it be. It's only embarrassing if you let it be. It's only embarrassing if you let it be. It's only-*'

Inside a dimly-lit building, a jar of alcohol fell to the floor, pouring out rapidly.

"This is more like it," Lan Jingyi's voice declared. "All of us just made it out from Yi City. We've shared a life and death experience! We shouldn't be arguing."

Silently, more morose than ever before, Lan Qiren wondered, '*How could I have possibly predicted that a day would come in which I was* grateful *the leaders of the sects were being shown a Lan disciple getting drunk?*'

The simulation was responsible for a previously-untold number of impossibilities, wasn't it?

"Ah," Jingyi grinned, radiating satisfaction. "Come on! Drink up!"

Seeing the bright flush on Lan Jingyi's cheeks, Jin Ling scoffed: "Your alcohol tolerance is terrible."

A moment later, however, he hiccuped, his cheeks also turning red.

"You too?" Jiang Cheng whined, unable to believe his nephew.

Rolling his eyes, Nie Mingjue commented, "Considering what you and Wei Wuxian got up to in the Cloud Recesses with Huaisang, I don't think you have any room to talk, young master."

Jiang Cheng flushed.

Leaning close, Lan Xichen whispered, "Come now, Da-ge. The two of us don't have much room to talk either, now do we?"

"*Xichen!* You promised you wouldn't bring that up ever again! Besides, we were better than *this!*"

"Not that much better," the first jade responded, smiling tranquilly.

"Zizhen!" Jin Ling called out next, glaring at the person before him. "Come on! Let's keep drinking!"

"Zizhen is over there," Lan Sizhui responded, gesturing to behind Jin Ling. "I'm Lan Sizhui."

"Huh?" Jin Ling asked, narrowing his eyes to get a good look at the person before him.

"At least *one of them* is sober," Lan Qiren sighed, and saw Wen Ruohan nod in agreement.

"Perhaps he somehow managed to skip this part of the Lan gene," the Chief Cultivator commented. Though it was more likely that someone as responsible as Sizhui had simply decided to not drink at all.

Behind them, Lan Wangji found his ears finally returning to their normal color thanks to the lack of focus on his future self. If this continued, it might be possible for him to get through the segment without being overwhelmed by embarrassment.

He relaxed slightly, confident in his ability to succeed.

"Oh, Lan Sizhui," Jin Ling realized, recognizing the person before him at long-last. "That annoying guy who's a stickler for the rules."

"Rules? What rules!" Lan Jingyi shouted. "Sizhui, why don't you drink a little too? It's not like the seniors can see us from the second floor!"

“Oh, no. He’s jinxed it!” Nie Huaisang hissed.

“...I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Sizhui calmly refused. And then, just as he was about to say more, voices came from outside:

“So you *are* just pretending to not understand!” Wei Wuxian declared, his voice becoming somewhat-frantic. “Lan Zhan! Listen to me!”

And just like that, he was dragged inside for all of the juniors to see.

‘*It. Is. Only. Embarrassing. If. You. Let. It. Be.*’

Nearly choking on the bun in his mouth, Lan Jingyi rushed to throw himself over the food and alcohol, hiding the latter from his elders. Meanwhile, every other junior stood frozen, staring in shock at what was before them.

“H-hanguang-jun!” Sizhui stood up at once, hoping to distract from the very-obvious attempt at hiding alcohol Lan Jingyi was doing. “Why did you come through the entrance again? I… thought you were upstairs?”

Smiling bashfully, Wei Wuxian explained, “Haha. Your Hanguang-jun was feeling a bit too hot and decided to take a stroll outside so that he could catch all of you off guard. You see? Here you are, drinking when you’re not supposed to.”

Now, normally, Lan Qiren would be fuming at the audacity Wei Wuxian had to say that when he had done exactly the same at their age. Normally, he would need to be talked down by his nephews so that the simulation could continue.

Now, however, the sight of Lan Wangji’s forehead ribbon still tied around Wei Wuxian’s wrists had shorted out his mind past the point of no return. Even if he wanted to ignore what Lan Xichen had said and activate the concealment zone, he simply no longer had the mental capacity to do so.

The famed Lan-xiansheng was, for now, gone.

‘*Lan Zhan, please just drag me upstairs,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*If we go now, maybe the juniors won’t notice.*’

The real Lan Wangji nodded frantically.

“Well, we should just — ah!” Wei Wuxian yelped as he was suddenly dragged forward. Hanguang-jun had lifted up the ribbon, proudly displaying the bound Wei Wuxian for the juniors to see.

Jin Guangshan hummed in appreciation.

Meanwhile, Lan Sizhui gaped.

“H-Hanguang-jun! Your forehead ribbon!”

Lan Wangji held his arm even further out, and the ribbon binding Wei Wuxian's wrists together was presented for all to see.

Suddenly, the world tipped over. When Lan Qiren opened his eyes, he noticed that he was on the ground, staring up at the bleached-white roof of the simulation.

"Uncle?!" Lan Xichen called out.

The piece of chicken Ouyang Zizhen had picked up fell into the pot below. Every junior was staring at the pair of their seniors with gaping mouths, and the horror in the Lans' gazes was obviously apparent.

"I am so glad I'm not you right now," Jin Zixuan muttered, directing the comment at the real Lan Wangji. Despite what he expected, he didn't even get an annoyed glare back.

(The second jade had far more important things to worry about. The complete and utter destruction of his reputation, for example. As well as the fact that his older-self was apparently an incorrigible beast!)

'*Ah, after Lan Zhan sobers up, he won't have the face to look at others ever again!*' Wei Wuxian thought.

Judging by the deep, deep, red spreading across his face, the real Lan Wangji was already there.

Finally:

"...What is he doing?" Jin Ling wondered.

Clearing his throat, Wei Wuxian forced a grin and answered, "Showing you guys a special way to use your forehead ribbons!"

"A-a special way?" Lan Sizhui asked.

"Yup! When you find a really strange corpse and you feel that you need to take it back and examine it properly, you can take off your forehead ribbon and bring it back like this!"

Even in a situation like this, Wei Wuxian could lie without flinching. Unfortunately, not even *he* was able to excuse something like this in a natural way.

"What a disaster," Madam Yu muttered, unable to believe what she was watching.

"I-you can't do that!" Lan Jingyi protested. "Our forehead ribbons are-"

Lan Sizhui stuffed a chicken wing into his mouth, speedily interrupting, "Oh, I see! I had no idea it could be used in such a way! Thank you for your guidance, seniors!"

"Y-yes," Wei Wuxian laughed, only to cut off suddenly as Lan Wangji continued pulling him away.

As Jiang Yanli giggled at that, Jin Zixuan wondered "Wait, what had he been about to say?"

Lan Xichen coughed awkwardly, beginning, "To be honest-"

"*Nothing,*" Lan Wangji insisted, forcing his mind to focus on the conversation around him so that he could stop his evil, evil older brother from saying too much. "Nothing… important."

Lan Qiren had thought he had been grateful for Lan Sizhui's presence before, but that was *nothing* in comparison to how he felt now. By this point, he would probably forgive just about anything Lan Sizhui could possibly do.

(The boy was certainly much better than Xichen! Although Lan Qiren appreciated his older nephew rushing to his side when he collapsed, that was nowhere near enough to redeem the way Xichen had somehow turned into a mischievous, teasing demon while Lan Qiren was looking away.)

If only he had activated the Concealment Zone-

Though it wasn't like he didn't understand why Lan Xichen had stopped that.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" Wei Wuxian protested as Lan Wangji pulled him up the stairs.

Jin Guangshan chuckled lightly.

And Lan Qiren's frown deeped. Yes, it was easy to understand why Xichen had stopped him from activating the concealment zone.

(The command they had already given the Concealment Zone had somehow missed this scene. They could activate it again, but Lan Qiren, Lan Xichen, and Nie Mingjue all knew they would rather embarrass Lan Wangji by having everyone watch than allow him to be stuck with just Jin Guangshan.)

Once they reached the top, Lan Wangji entered their room, turned around, and closed the doors. After some thought, he also pushed over a nearby table, blocking the exit. Both he and Wei Wuxian were now trapped inside.

On one hand, Lan Wangji was grateful for the increased privacy. On the other….

'What are you doing? How have I become such a vicious beast?! What went wrong? Why did I deviate from the rules so completely? No matter how nice it was to drink alcohol with Wei Ying… how… I don't-'

What on earth was his other-self planning?

After waiting for a moment, Wei Wuxian glanced over at the now-sealed exit and asked, "What? Are you gonna kill me here?"

Some of Jiang Cheng honestly wished that was the case. What sort of disgusting, deviant, unspeakable things could Lan Wangji be planning? He and Wei Wuxian had been looking at each other in that revolting way for the better part of an hour, and things just kept getting

worse over time. If he was going to try to make a move, maybe killing Wei Wuxian would indeed be the better-

‘*Really? Who killed him?’*

‘Who else? His old friend Jiang Cheng, leader of the Jiang Clan.’

Jiang Cheng froze, his thoughts beginning to race.

‘*It’s… probably not true,*’ Jiang Cheng told himself. ‘*It was just a rumor. Wei Wuxian never said anything to that effect. It’s probably-*’

He paused.

It was *probably* not true.

But-

Within the room, there was a large paper screen, which separated the inside of the room into two halves. One half had a table and chairs for eating and chatting, while the other had a long bed. They were high quality for an inn, without being overly-extravagant or gaudy. However, Hanguang-jun was not one to get distracted by such things. Walking with determination, Lan Wangji dragged Wei Wuxian to the other side of the screen, then pushed him down, forcing him onto the bed.

And Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but recoil back at that. He spun at once, gritting his teeth and glaring at the real second jade with an unparalleled level of disgust.

“*You-*”

“A-Cheng,” he heard a voice whisper softly from his right. Freezing at once, he turned to face the source, and saw Jiang Yanli smiling softly at him.

"I… A-Jie, it-”

“A-Cheng, look at A-Xian,” she instructed. “He’s fine. If he really wanted to escape, he could. You don’t need to worry.”

“I’m not *worried*, I-”

He paused, looking back at the simulated Wei Wuxian once more.

“I-”

Although Wei Wuxian had given a quick ‘ow’ when his head knocked against the wood, he had recovered easily. Sitting back up, he gazed at Lan Wangji calmly, tilting his head in confusion.

'*What? Is he trying to make me sleep already?*' Wei Wuxian wondered. '*It's not even nine yet.*'

Having heard the earlier exclamation of pain, Lan Wangji lifted the hems of his robes and sat down on the bed next to him, reaching out to feel Wei Wuxian's head. Although he remained expressionless, the care and gentleness in his motion was obvious to everyone who could see it.

"Did it hurt?" he asked.

Lan Wangji's hand felt around, and Wei Wuxian's lips twitched:

"It hurts!" he complained. "It hurts so much!"

'*Where did it come from?' Lan Wangji asked, staring at the curse mark on Wei Wuxian's leg.*

'It just… kind of randomly… I don't know how… it just came on its own.'

And then, with the Zidian scar:

'You met Jiang Wanyin,' Lan Wangji inferred.

Wei Wuxian shrugged carelessly.

And before that, all the way back in the Cloud Recesses, when Wei Wuxian had been the only one to get punished for bringing all of them alcohol:

'It's fine, it's fine,' Jiang Cheng said, not wanting Lan Xichen to ask any more questions. 'It's not that serious. He can walk! Right, Wei Wuxian?'

But now….

'Did it hurt?'

"It hurts so much," Wei Wuxian repeated. In response to the Yiling Patriarch's cries of pain, Lan Wangji's hand became even gentler as he patted Wei Wuxian's shoulder, the gesture an attempt to comfort.

"He's fine, okay?" Jiang Yanli told Jiang Cheng once more. And she was right, undoubtedly. And it was the fact that Wei Wuxian was admitting the pain that proved it.

But they were being embarrassing and dishonorable and humiliating and a *shame on their families* — they were acting like *cut sleeves* and-

But, as Wei Wuxian continued to whine, Lan Wangji continued to comfort him. Slowly, a smile formed on Wei Wuxian's face.

A smile which once again took Jiang Cheng completely by surprise. He fell silent once more, staring at the ground in quiet contemplation.

After some time, Wei Wuxian again raised his wrists for the other to see:

“Why don’t you let me go? Hanguang-jun, it’s so tight that my hands are almost bleeding. It hurts so much! Take off the ribbon and let me go, okay? Okay?”

Lan Wangji instead covered Wei Wuxian’s mouth.

Nie Huaisang snorted.

“Ah, Wangji-xiong, you’ve come so far!” he laughed. “Back at the beginning you could never tell when Wei Wuxian was being serious, but now… this is just-”

“So cute!” Lan Xichen cooed.

“Xiongzhang,” Lan Wangji complained, the whine still heard despite the evenness of his voice.

“Mmm! Mm nm mmmmfffmm,” Wei Wuxian said in an attempt to voice his complaints. “Mmmmnnnmmmmffff mmm!”

‘*So you pretend to not understand when I ask you to do something you don’t want to do, and if you can’t pretend you’re just going to not let me say it?!*’

“Seems that way,” Madam Jin commented, making Nie Huaisang squeal. The watching Nie Mingjue sighed at his brother’s enthusiasm, but couldn’t quite stop a smile from forming on his face as well.

‘*How evil!*’ Wei Wuxian huffed. ‘*Now that you’ve gone this far, you can’t blame me for doing this!*’

Abruptly, the simulation’s energy shifted. With their ever-growing sensitivity to resentful energy, the watchers could feel a shift in the process being used. At that moment, Lan Wangji’s hand (which was still firmly planted on Wei Wuxian’s mouth), mysteriously became transparent.

Wen Ruohan frowned, “What is-”

Then, from behind the now-clear hand, the watchers watched as Wei Wuxian grinned, smirked, then opened up his mouth and licked the hand in front of him.

Lan Wangji stood up at once, knocking his chair onto the ground with the force of the moment. He could distantly hear his brother calling out to him, but the ringing in his ears was so loud that it muffled all else.

‘*Wei Ying, you… I don’t…* what*?!*’

Similarly, the simulated Lan Wangji jumped back, his hand opaque again. Wei Wuxian’s attack had only been the dip of a dragonfly, barely noticeable at all, and yet Lan Wangji looked at his palm as if it had been singed by a flame. He spun around, turning away from Wei Wuxian to clutch his hand against his chest tightly enough to feel his own, beating heart.

‘*Those… those embarrassing, disgusting*-’ Jiang Cheng cut his thoughts off, breathing heavily as he did. What was he supposed to think, if not that? He didn't ask to be shown any of this! But if he asked the Concealment Zone to block him specifically off, then everyone would have questions.

But he couldn’t just *watch* as Wei Wuxian-

He spun around, not caring whether he was copying the simulated Hanguang-jun, and began to stare quite intently at the wall before him.

“What’s this?” Wei Wuxian asked, slipping closer. “What are you doing over here?”

As Wei Wuxian scooted closer on the bed towards Lan Wangji and leaned in (a teasing grin prominent on his face), Jin Guangshan couldn’t help but think, ‘*Really, that boy is such a…* vixen*, sometimes. I wish I could show this to A-Yin and A-Wu. They could take a few notes.*’

For some reason he couldn’t quite identify, Jin Zixuan suddenly felt a wave of discomfort come over him. Unconsciously, he scooted a bit closer to his fiance, moving farther from his father in the process.

Laughing to himself, Wei Wuxian thought, ‘*He looks like he’s given up on life, having been tainted by a pervert and such. Anyone walking upon this scene might think I’d already done something to him.*’

And yet the watchers, who had been there since the beginning, knew full well that wasn’t what was happening.

“Honestly, Lan-er-gongzi,” Madam Jin sighed. “He’s finally initiating the contact. This is no time to fall back.”

In Lan Wangji’s humble opinion, this was *exactly the time* to fall back.

Perhaps agreeing, the simulated Lan Wangji took on an even more defeated look than before. Many of the watchers were still struggling to read the second jade’s expressions, but, with the added context of the real Lan Wangji’s reactions, they were able to piece his emotions together fairly well.

Unlike Wei Wuxian:

“You didn’t like it? Well, you can’t blame me for that,” he argued. “You were the one who was being all pushy and didn’t let me speak. Why don’t you come here, and I’ll wipe it for you?”

His bound hands reached up, and he poked Hanguang-jun’s shoulder once.

In an instant, Lan Wangji was on the opposite side of the bed, nestling into a corner with a startled expression. His ears were now *glowing* with rouge.

“Ah, stupid, stupid, stupid-”

Nie Huaisang's annoyed complaint was cut off when Jiang Yanli advised, "Lan-er-gongzi, reacting like that is only going to make A-Xian even more determined."

"I… acknowledge your point, Maiden Jiang," Lan Wangji forced himself to say.

"Would you really mind it though?" she wondered, her soft, unjudging voice drawing Lan Wangji out in a way the teasing had never managed to. "Do you truly oppose this?"

"I-" he cut off, the red covering his ears surpassing even his other-self's in their intensity. "No, I… I wouldn't be-"

Kneeling on the bed, Wei Wuxian moved even closer to Lan Wangji and, in the most devilish tone he could manage, asked, "What? Scared?"

At once, Lan Wangji stood up and marched away from the bed.

This time, even Nie Mingjue couldn't offer Lan Wangji any help when Nie Huaisang groaned at Hanguang-jun's stupidity.

"I'm not…" Lan Wangji cleared his throat. "This isn't the time-"

"This is the *perfect* time, what are you talking about?!" Nie Huaisang demanded, furious that Lan Wangji was trying to defend his older self's unforgivable actions. "You're ruining everything!"

"Nothing is being *ruined,* now is simply not an appropriate time."

"Hm? Where are you going?" Wei Wuxian asked, allowing his bound hands to fall to his lap again. "My hands are still tied up because of you; you can't run away. Why are you scared when I'm not?"

Hanguang-jun jolted at the question.

"Yes, yes!" Lan Xichen smiled widely, barely able to contain his excitement. "Go back."

Then Wei Wuxian stood up, and Lan Wangji was startled into hiding behind the paper sheet in the middle of the room.

Although a significant portion of Lan Qiren wanted to be embarrassed about his nephew's childish behavior, he couldn't help a small smile from creeping up his face.

Even as a child, Wangji had been the picture of poise; how long had it been since Lan Qiren had seen his nephew act like this?

(And, considering how different the Lan juniors raised under Hanguang-jun were, how much of that loss was his fault?)

Those questions were never voiced aloud, and so never received an answer. Instead, Wei Wuxian continued show the world a version of Lan Wangji who couldn't be more different from the reputation Hanguang-jun had maintained.

Two soft, golden eyes peaked out from behind the paper sheet.

“Hey, hey, hey, come here,” Wei Wuxian called out, making Lan Wangji hide again.

Embarrassment flooding his brain, Lan Wangji stared quite intently at the ground, refusing to make eye contact with his far-too-widely grinning brother.

“Come on! Don’t run,” Wei Wuxian added on, giving chase. Like a skittish rabbit, Lan Wangji circled around the paper barrier, maintain a two meter distance from Wei Wuxian. And so Wei Wuxian followed. And thus Lan Wangji continued to flee.

Around and around and around they went, the two of them circling the obstruction between them like children. As time went on, the sound of laughter in the air neither dampened nor decreased in intensity, instead only growing more joyful with each second that passed.

And once again, Jiang Cheng felt an uncomfortable pit growing within his stomach. With every second that passed after he noticed it, he found himself growing angrier and angrier.

‘*Seriously? What do* I *have to feel guilty about? I’m not the one who did those things the older version of me was doing. I don’t know what happened to that-me, but Wei Wuxian is happy in Lotus Pier.*’

In Yunmeng, Wei Wuxian had droves of adoring shidis and shimeis. His little ducklings would follow him around everywhere, but even they wouldn’t go to Gusu with him. Wei Wuxian wouldn’t leave the Jiang Sect just for Lan Wangji. He wouldn’t leave them, both Jiang Cheng *and* Jiang Yanli, behind. It wouldn’t be fair of him to.

‘*He can’t. We… we saw the proof ourselves. I ran in front of those Wen guards; I* lost my core *for him. I happened to manage to get it back by a lucky turn of fate, but I had no way of knowing that when I ran out in front of the guards. I nearly gave up everything for Wei Wuxian. There’s no way I don’t deserve to stand with him — for us to stay together.*’

(Right? That had to be true.)

‘*Jiang Cheng, listen up,’ Wei Wuxian had said. ‘When you become the leader, I’ll be your subordinate. I’ll follow your lead, just like my father followed your father-’*

~~Just like Wei Changze, who had left the sect to follow the person he loved?~~

As Jiang Cheng’s thoughts went on, a never-ending cycle of emotions tumbling within him, the simulation continued unimpeded. The dim, golden light of the nearby candles filled the room with warmth that combated the brisk, earthly chill of the wind brushing through the open window. It was now a late enough hour that the only sounds present were those generated by the room’s inhabitants, and the childish joy rang clearly through the dusk.

In his earnest playfulness, a golden aura had practically encompassed Lan Wangji’s body, only matched by the delight in Wei Wuxian’s laughter-

‘*Wait, what am I doing?’* Wei Wuxian suddenly asked himself, freezing mid-step. ‘*Am I playing tag with him? What the… have I officially lost it? Lan Zhan has an excuse for being drunk, but why am I playing along?*’

“Because you love him!” Nie Huaisang hissed, not quite quiet enough to escape the two, identical disapproving glares Lan Wangji and Nie Mingjue shot him. Nie Huaisang just shrugged, completely unrepentant.

Noticing that his chaser had stopped, Lan Wangji stopped as well, peeking out from behind the barrier. It would be quite strange to call a full-gown man ‘cute,’ but none of those present would be able to honestly say he was not. In addition to that, the still prim-and-proper state of his clothing created a strange sort of dissonance that only made the sight more appealing.

(Most especially to Wei Wuxian.)

“Do you want to continue?” he asked, tilting his head in a half-mocking, half-genuinely-curious way. If this was the normal Hanguang-jun he was speaking to, there was no way the other would say ‘yes.’ However-

Expressionless, Lan Wangji nodded.

Wei Wuxian coughed to cover up his sudden laughter.

Madam Jin was the matriarch of the Jin Sect. She was far too dignified to give a cheer or shout ‘yes’ at those words. Adorable or not, this scene did not contain any useful information. There was no reason for her to want it to go on longer.

(And yet, somehow, she could not stop herself from giving a slight squeak of joy at Lan Wangji’s adorable nod.)

Jin Zixuan sent Lan Wangji a pitying glance, feeling as though he had somehow gotten yet *another* half-brother, this time from his mom’s side.

Luckily, the real Lan Wangji was far too distracted by Wei Wuxian to notice.

The Yiling Patriarch’s smile grew wider and wider as he stared at the second jade, until finally he couldn’t take it anymore: ‘*Hahaha! Oh, Heavens, drunk Lan Zhan seriously wants to play tag with me? Hahahahaha!*’

The laughter he was trying to suppress was even greater than a tidal wave. Although he managed to hold it back this time, his entire body was shaking with joy.

‘*The Gusu Lan Sect forbids noise, fooling around, and even walking quickly. Lan Zhan probably never got to play like this as a child. Hmph, how pitiful.*’

“What do you think, Wangji?” Lan Xichen whispered, and Wangji shuddered at the conniving serpent tone. “That is indeed quite a problem young Wei-gongzi has raised. Perhaps we should amend it as well, once we leave the simulation. If we invite Wei-”

“No. Need.”

‘*Ah, well,*’ Wei Wuxian thought next. ‘*Lan Zhan won’t remember a single thing when he sobers up. I might as well keep playing with him, then.*’

He grinned.

Attacked on all sides, Lan Wangji could do nothing but stand frozen (ears as red as rubies) while the simulation continued.

With a shrug, Wei Wuxian resumed his chase. Lan Wangji turned and fled, continuing to maintain the same distance as before. They looped around and around and around, getting the playful, childish interactions they might have had as teenagers ~~if it weren’t for the war~~.

“Run, run! Go faster!” Wei Wuxian called out. “I’m gonna catch you!”

Jiang Cheng momentarily took a break from the mental debate he was having with himself to give a long, tired facepalm.

“You are so embarrassing,” he groaned.

“Go on! Be careful! I’m gonna catch you! If I catch you, I’m gonna lick you again!”

The words were clearly intended to be a joking threat. However, they instead made Lan Wangji freeze.

Wei Wuxian crashed into his waiting chest.

‘*Ah, what innocence,*’ Jin Guangshan thought, a smile working its way onto his face. ‘*I’m sure I can think of quite a few ways Hanguang-jun would like to use that silly promise of yours.*’

Another shudder ran up Lan Wangji’s back, and Wen Ruohan frowned in confusion. After a beat of silence, the chief cultivator’s gaze shifted rightward, landing coldly on the Jin Sect’s golden Sect Leader.

Wei Wuxian blinked in confusion several times, not entirely sure what had happened. Growing impatient, Lan Wangji reached forward, grabbed Wei Wuxian’s bound hands, and slipped them over his own head. Wei Wuxian eeped.

Their noses were now a mere centimeter apart, and their eyes took in each other’s greedily.

“...Wow,” Nie Mingjue muttered.

Lan Wangji stood up at once, turning to stare in horror at his once-ally.

“Sorry,” Sect Leader Nie rushed to say, coughing a few times. “I just — I only meant-”

“You’re so romantic, Wangji-xiong!” Nie Huaisang called out, overflowing with excitement. “Now kiss!”

“What are-” Lan Wangji’s protest was cut off as Lan Xichen stood up.

“No, no. We’re too early for kissing yet-”

A strangled “Yet?!” left Lan Wangji’s lips.

“-Right now he needs to just embrace Wei-gongzi tightly!”

Standing up as well, Madam Jin chimed in, “They’ve known each other for twenty years. Kissing is fine now! Just wait for Wei Wuxian to give permission first!”

“No, no!” Jiang Yanli chimed in. “Confess first! Go, Hanguang-jun!”

‘*Do we really have to watch this?*’ Jiang Cheng wondered, turning away. He knew, however, that the others would most likely not appreciate those thoughts being spoken out loud. Besides, it was impossible for him to speak over the increasing volumes of the other watchers anyways.

"He should break into song!"

“No! That would ruin the moment!” Wen Qing insisted crossly.

“He might as well skip all that. Wei Wuxian obviously wants more!”

“ONLY KISS AFTER YOU’VE CONFESSED!”

“KISS *AS* A CONFESSION!”

“NO!”

Before the enthusiastic cheerleaders, the overwhelmed Lan Wangji, and the grumpy Jiang Cheng, the simulated Hanguang-jun camly reported, “You caught me.”

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Ah… yes. I caught you.”

There was a pause, and Hanguang-jun grew impatient.

“You caught me,” he repeated.

“Oh, lord,” Lan Qiren muttered, turning his head away in second-hand embarrassment. By this point, his nephew’s attempts at remaining calm no matter what was being shown had long since failed.

(Those two Lans had been completely and utterly defeated by the simulation.)

(The third Lan was having the time of his life.)

“...Yes, I caught you,” Wei Wuxian said again, still not understanding.

Lan Wangji's gaze intensified in his impatience.

'*What was it I said I'd do if I caught him?*' Wei Wuxian wondered.

…No.

"This time doesn't count," he protested. "You walked over yourself."

Although he was still too dignified to do so, the drunk Lan Wangji looked like he very much wanted to pout.

'*I… this is unbelievable. Not only does the drunk Lan Wangji like to play hide-and-seek, but he also likes to be licked?*'

"Only by you!" Nie Huaisang shouted at the top of his lungs. Nie Mingjue and Lan Wangji's glares — which, before the simulation, would have *individually* been more than enough to freeze the Nie heir in his tracks — had no effect on the boy.

Wei Wuxian shifted, lifting his arms up as if to take them away, only to be forcefully stopped by Lan Wangji resting his hand on Wei Wuxian's forearm. Hanguang-jun held it securely, refusing to let it move whatsoever. After thinking in silence for a moment, Wei Wuxian shifted closer.

And closer.

And closer.

Frozen, the real Lan Wangji could only watch in steadily-mounting ~~excitement~~ fear as Wei Wuxian's face approached his own.

And then Lan Wangji's hand, which had been holding Wei Wuxian's forearm against his own collarbone, felt the tip of a tongue tap lightly against it.

An enormous flinch shook Lan Wangji's body, and he would have fallen back onto the floor if it weren't for his phenomenal reflexes. All around him, there was a deafening cheer:

"*YES! FINALLY!*"

Even the simulated Lan Wangji flinched back slightly, and he removed his hand as fast as he could. He took away Wei Wuxian's arms, turned his back to him, and darted to the side. Silently facing a wall, he tightly clenched the hand Wei Wuxian had licked mere moments ago.

Watching, Wei Wuxian tilted his head: '*Does he like it, or is he scared of it? Or… maybe a little bit of both.*'

'*Definitely both,*' Wen Ruohan thought, mentally sighing to himself. Although this was the sort of thing he had never had any interest in (he had made heirs because that was what was *expected* of the leader of a clan, not because he understood what Jin Guangshan had meant

when the man had described the ‘appeal’), but Wen Ruohan could admit to seeing the importance of what the simulation was displaying.

Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian were the two most important figures in the simulation, and this night would change their relationship incomparably.

At that moment, Lan Wangji turned around, attracting Wei Wuxian’s attention, and calmly requested: “Again.”

“Again? Again what?”

Although there was no flush of embarrassment to be seen, Hanguang-jun hid behind the paper curtain, peeking out so that only half his face was visible.

There was a squeak.

“Oh, dear. Lan-gongzi,” Jiang Yanli gave a concerned gasp, turning towards Lan Xichen with a startled expression. “Are you quite all right?”

“Ah, yes. Thank you for the concern, Jiang-guniang,” the Lan heir managed to get out. “It’s just… it’s-”

Shrugging to himself, Wei Wuxian began the chase once again. They made one loop around the barrier, and then, before Wei Wuxian had turned a corner to start his second lap, he ran into Lan Wangji again.

“I knew it. You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?” he asked.

Once again, Lan Wangji brought Wei Wuxian’s arms around his neck.

“Too adorable?” Wen Qing suggested, filling in the gaps upon seeing how much trouble Lan Xichen had. Among the older siblings, she was by far the least affected by the scene (already highly-immune to adorableness thanks to Wen Ning’s constant presence in her life). By contrast, Lan Xichen was speechless, Jiang Yanli was barely resisting the urge to coo, and Nie Mingjue’s mind seemed to have shut down approximately ten minutes ago.

(He might be used to Nie Huaisang playing the ‘adorable younger brother’ card to get away with things, but never in his wildest dreams had he expected *Hanguang-jun* to be capable of the same.)

(Which of course meant the real Nie Huaisang was currently brainstorming ways he might be able to get the real Lan Wangji to distract Nie Mingjue after they left the simulation.)

Much like the watching older siblings, Wei Wuxian was far from immune to the cuteness of the person before him. He grinned, then, keeping his arms around Lan Wangji’s neck, leaned forward, tilting the other as well.

“You like this, don’t you?” he asked. “Don’t turn around. Speak. Do you like it or not? If you like it, we don’t have to run around every single time.”

Although the watchers were certain that the drunk Lan Wangji's emotions were running wildly, nothing could be seen on Hanguang-jun's jade-like face.

'*I had never thought unreadable expressions could be an advantage, but… for Wei Wuxian, perhaps they are,*' Madam Jin suddenly thought, her relationship-analysis abilities powering up to Level 2. '*The only reason Lan Wangji was ranked lower than Lan Xichen for most eligible bachelors was the fact that his expressions were always unreadable and cold. However, to someone as intelligent as Wei Wuxian, maybe the struggle of trying to figure that out is half the fun. How interesting.*'

The fond smile on her face then fluctuated, dimming slightly as she turned her gaze upon her son and his fiance.

'*No matter how well it's turned out… perhaps it was a mistake to try and force them together. But it's not as though arranged marriages are rare, and think of all the advantages. For one, it connected us to Yunmeng and Ziyuan-*'

Those thoughts cut off abruptly, as Madam Jin recalled how strained her relationship with her once-friend had become.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian had guided them both to the bed and resumed observing Hanguang-jun intently. As always, Lan Wangji's expression revealed nothing (to everyone except Lan Xichen). However, when taking his actions into account, it was becoming increasingly clear how he felt.

"Confess!" Nie Huaisang whispered. "Confess, confess, confess, confess-"

The real Lan Wangji dutifully ignored him.

"Alright then," Wei Wuxian muttered. "Hey, Lan Zhan…. If that's what you like… then I'll make sure you're satisfied properly."

"Oh?" Jin Guangshan muttered quietly, mind racing at the possibilities.

Then, Wei Wuxian did something completely unexpected:

He held up one of Lan Wangji's hands, bent down, and kissed between two slender fingers.

Hanguang-jun jolted at the action, but Wei Wuxian held tight.

Deafening alarms began ringing in Lan Wangji's head, an endless signal of panic that neither logic nor courtesy could circumvent. The endless stream of '*Wei Ying. Wei Ying. Wei Ying.*' got progressively louder until it was simply '*WEIYINGWEIYINGWEIYINGWEIYING!*'

(If Lan Qiren wasn't mistaken, that was *steam* beginning to leave his nephew's flushed ears.)

But Wei Wuxian was far from done.

Next, he moved onto the knuckles. Between each knuckle, he set down another feather-light kiss.

The growing mix of excitement, arousal, and disbelief was growing clearer and clearer in Lan Wangji's expression.

"Oh, *wow*," Nie Huaisang muttered, covering his gasping mouth with his hand. "I can't believe it. I can't believe it, I can't-"

Wei Wuxian attacked the wrist next, flipping Lan Wangji's hand over to set his mouth against the unmarked skin just above the palm.

'*We shouldn't be watching this,*' Lan Qiren realized at once. '*This is private. We shouldn't be-*'

And yet, how long had it been since he had last seen his nephew look so disbelievingly happy?

(And besides, would activating the concealment zone and leaving him alone with Jin Guangshan really be any better?)

At that last peck, Hanguang-jun had flinched again, feeling Wei Wuxian's warm breath dance across the top of his skin. The apprehension in his clenched fist was drowned out by the tentative but undeniable excitement behind his golden eyes.

"YES! YES! YES!"

Moving slightly higher, Wei Wuxian administered yet another kiss, just as devastating as all the ones before.

"Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes," Nie Huaisang hissed out. "*Yes!*"

Raising his eyes, rather than his head, Wei Wuxian glanced up at the white-clad cultivator before him and whispered, "Have you had enough?"

"Say no say no say no say no-"

But Hanguang-jun just pursed his lips, refusing to say a word.

As Nie Huaisang groaned, Madam Jin instead smirked. Although that wasn't the response Nie Huaisang had wanted, it was the kind of answer Wei Wuxian would like best. A near-unreadable expression and a refusal to answer, forcing Wei Wuxian to go further to provoke answers out of him. It was a response only Lan Wangji would give.

And that was exactly who Wei Wuxian was falling in love with.

And indeed, unperturbed by Lan Wangji's lack of response, Wei Wuxian finally sat up and, unhurried, requested, "Tell me, did you ever burn joss paper for me?"

He leaned in close, practically draping himself over Lan Wangji's chest in the process.

And the real Lan Wangji stood frozen, his mind blanking out at the sight. No matter how much his subconscious screamed at him to look away, he, for some strange reason, simply couldn't bring himself to.

Laughing again at Hanguang-jun's refusal to answer, Wei Wuxian inched towards him. Then, through the layers of clothing which separated them, pressed his lips against where Lan Wangji heart was.

Nie Huaisang gasped, and the rest of the pro-ship squad became weak in their knees.

"If you don't talk, I'm not going to give you any more of these," Wei Wuxian threatened, leaning in again. "Tell me, how did you recognize me?"

Lan Wangji's lips quivered, as though he was on the verge of confessing.

'*I doubt anything else would ever be able to weaken him like that,*' Wen Ruohan chuckled.

The two of them stared at each other, Lan Wangji's resolve cracking by the second. Then, Wei Wuxian's eyes fell down to the soft pink lips before him, and impulse took over.

Before anyone had even realized what was happening, Wei Wuxian had tugged Lan Wangji close, kissing him on the lips.

And at that moment, '*WEIYING*' just became a flatline *beep* as an endless string of error messages poured forth.

"Wha — did he — *What the fu-*"

"HE DID IT!" Nie Huaisang shrieked, cutting off Jiang Cheng's exclamation with his own. "He actually-did he actually — Da-ge, pinch me!"

The Nie Sect Leader's instinctive response of 'I can't, we're in the simulation' was completely silenced by his own shock at what had just happened. And he was far from alone.

Behind him, Lan Qiren abruptly fainted.

"*Uncle?!*

Unlike the utter chaos occurring between the watchers, the two within the simulation seemed frozen in time. Both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji stared at each other with wide eyes, a million emotions reflected in the usually unreadable orbs.

It was the pinnacle of romance, in Nie Huaisang's humble opinion.

Then, Hanguang-jun raised his hand. Wei Wuxian tensed, momentarily fearing that he would be smacked dead on the spot for his impudence, and quickly scrambled off the bed. However, that wasn't what happened at all.

SMACK!

Lan Wangji had hit *himself*, becoming unconscious in an instant. He fell back onto the bed, dead to the world.

Wei Wuxian blinked down at him in confusion.

"I…" Nie Mingjue frowned. "Wait, what?"

"What are you *doing?!*" Nie Huaisang shrieked, raising a voice to a volume no one in the room had ever heard him speak at before. "Wangji-xiong, you… you-you complete and utter buffoon! It's fine to say 'no' if you don't want it or aren't ready for it, but the future-you obviously totally and completely *is!* How could you ruin the perfect chance Wei-xiong gave you?!"

"I-" Lan Wangji cut himself off, unable to retort. Surprisingly, this hesitance was not because the image of Wei Wuxian *kissing his older-self* was seared into his mind (well, not entirely because of that). Nor was it because, as would be the case for the pre-simulation Lan Wangji, the second jade was too appalled by suggestion to offer a response.

No, worst of all, it was because as small part of himself *agreed* with Nie Huaisang.

'*I spent thirteen years without him,*' Lan Wangji thought. '*Was I really just not ready? But I… I was fine with paralyzing Wei Ying when he climbed into my bed. I even slept through the night with him in that position. Why would I back out — render* myself *unconscious? I-*'

A large part of him still couldn't believe that he of all people had wanted to do more with Wei Wuxian. However, after the years they'd spent apart (and the misunderstandings and fights and Wei Wuxian's *death*) this had felt like the natural next step.

And yet-

Slowly, moving stiffly and clumsily, as though in a trance, Wei Wuxian began to put the room back in order. He moved the table away from the door, and opened the windows wider to let more of the chilly air in.

Then, he knelt down beside the table to burry his face in his hands.

'*I had too much to drink,*' he thought, the surge of emotion he had been swept up into earlier lingering noticeably.

"...I hate you, Wangji-xiong," Nie Huaisang grumbled.

Nie Mingjue whacked his brother over the head (the hand phasing through the simulated body), shouting "Huaisang! Don't pressure him into doing anything he doesn't want to do!"

Unable to resist, Wen Qing piped in, "I think the issue here is how clearly Hanguang-jun does want to-"

“Wen-guniang, I request you hold your silence,” Lan Qiren gasped out. Next to him, Lan Xichen knelt down, fretting worriedly over his recently-collapsed uncle. Even though he had managed to sit up again, Lan Qiren’s skin was quite pale.

(Jiang Cheng’s wasn’t much better, though it was caused by an entirely different set of emotions.)

Bringing his wrists up, Wei Wuxian used his teeth to untie the forehead ribbon which had bound his wrists. One by one, each knot was undone, the cloth slowly falling to the ground.

‘*What a waste of a perfect opportunity,*’ Jin Guangshan sighed. ‘*Wei Ying was even the one to initiate everything. All Lan Wangji had to do was accept it… although I suppose even that was too much to ask of a Lan. Honestly, what a disappointment.*’

(It was a good thing it appeared their illusionary bodies weren’t able to respond to the same extent their real ones were. Jin Guangshan wouldn’t be able to explain the physical response he would’ve undoubtedly had, and it would have made the sudden end to the scene feel even worse for him than it did. Small mercies, the Jin Leader supposed.)

After a short while, Wei Wuxian let out a small sigh.

‘*I really had too much to drink today,*’ he thought again. ‘*Lan Zhan’s such a serious person… I shouldn’t be fooling around with him like this. I’m being disrespectful towards him.*’

‘*No,*’ Lan Wangji thought. ‘*No, Wei Ying, I do want it, it’s not-*’

He cut off.

(How was his other-self always far too forward when Lan Wangji didn’t want him to be, and then suddenly turning hesitant and unwilling when the real-version was finally accepting it?! Where was the logic in that? Just when Lan Wangji felt like he was finally starting to understand his older self, he was proven wrong once again.)

Then, however, ever so slowly, Wei Wuxian raised his hand, pressing the tip of his finger against the lips which had touched Lan Wangji’s just a moment ago.

And the real second jade’s ears flamed bright red.

“The next morning,” Lan Sizhui’s disembodied voice revealed as the simulation transitioned.

Jiang Cheng let out a sigh of relief.

(He wanted Wei Wuxian to be happy — he definitely, truly did — but he would certainly not complain if he never had to see something like that again. Luckily, it seemed as though Wei Wuxian had realized the error of his ways right at the end there. Hopefully that would be the end of it.)

Noise picked up as the scene formed before them, and the cheerful figures of the future's juniors appeared. That said, it was notably only the Lans who were cheerful at the early hour.

(Jin Ling looked about ten seconds away from ordering Fairy to tear the loud early birds to shreds.)

Jiang Cheng sympathized.

The simulation then crept up, bringing them to the room where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had spent the night. Apparently too embarrassed after the previous night, Wei Wuxian had neglected to join Lan Wangji on the bed. However, as the second jade awoke, the movement woke the Yiling Patriarch up as well.

"Hm? Is it five already?" Wei Wuxian wondered.

Seeing the conflicted expression Wangji made at the sight, Lan Xichen frowned slightly. On one hand, he didn't want to force his brother into a relationship the other didn't want. None of his teasing had been with that intention in mind, and, luckily, it seemed fairly clear that both the younger and older versions did desire Wei Wuxian.

(The drunk Hanguang-jun's repeated "you caught me" made that more than clear enough.)

So then, why had Hanguang-jun refused Wei Wuxian's advance? It was rare for Lan Xichen to not understand his brother, but he took some solace in the fact that the real Lan Wangji was obviously just as confused as Xichen was in regards to his older self's actions.

They thought and thought, and yet neither Lan brother could come to an answer.

Sitting up, the simulated Lan Wangji looked over and saw the red marks which had been left on Wei Wuxian's wrists. Silently, he got out of bed and retrieved a small turquoise bottle from within his sleeves, quickly applying the contents. As the ointment was spread over his wrists, the little tension left in Wei Wuxian's body vanished at once.

Pouting, Wei Wuxian whined, "It hurts! Hanguang-jun, you're so rude when you're drunk!"

"You've reaped what you've sown," Lan Wangji responded, not even looking up.

Madam Jin snorted, then quickly covered it up with a cough. The real Lan Wangji was already fairly overwhelmed by what had just happened. Pointing out how much more comfortable the two of them were with each other (Hanguang-jun responding in-kind to Wei Wuxian's teasing, rather than panicking like he had after the first night he had gotten drunk) would most likely be just a step too far.

Besides, it wasn't dignified to pick on the weak.

"...Lan Zhan, you really don't remember what you did while you were drunk, do you?"

Shaking his head once, Lan Wangji easily responded, "I do not."

'*That's probably true,*' Wei Wuxian supposed. '*Otherwise, he would have killed me out of embarrassment for what I did.*'

'*No, that's not-*' Lan Wangji's thoughts cut off, and he found himself unable to articulate, even to himself, the feelings tumbling within him. '*That isn't… the impression I want you to have of me.*'

And yet, as always, the simulation could not be changed.

Unconsciously, as Wei Wuxian stared at the other, lost in thought, he began biting his own lip. It was quite clear what he was thinking about.

"Oh, good," Nie Huaisang let out a sigh of relief. "Don't worry, Wangji-xiong, you haven't ruined your chances quite yet."

"I wasn't worried."

"Truly, it's fine," Jiang Yanli piped in. "A-Xian doesn't seem to mind."

"I'm *not* nervous."

"Mmhm," Wen Qing said.

Jin Zixuan could only stare in pity at Lan Wangji, somewhat-grateful that the attention was at least not on him.

'*Oh dear,*' Wei Wuxian's thoughts rang out. '*Gusu Lan is so strict, and Lan Zhan isn't romantic at all. He definitely hasn't kissed a girl before. What do I do now? I happened to receive the grand honor. Should I tell him? What if he gets so upset he starts crying once he knows? Or, well… he might have done so when we were younger, but not now.*'

'*I wouldn't either way,*' Lan Wangji thought, trying to focus more on how he wouldn't because he was too dignified to, and less on the part of him that said he wouldn't because he would be *happy* over what had happened.

'*Then again, it's sometimes like Lan Zhan's a monk made of wood. It's possible that he's never even had such thoughts before-*'

Quite a few doubtful looks appeared on the watchers as Hanguang-jun's 'you caught me' replayed in their minds.

'*Wait!*' Wei Wuxian tensed up at once. '*The last time he was drunk, I asked him 'is there anyone you like?' and he said 'yes.' Maybe he's already kissed her? But judging by Lan Zhan's continuous self-restraint, he's probably really careful about not crossing any lines. They've probably never kissed or even held hands. Though, thinking of it now, maybe back then he didn't understandthe kind of 'like' I was talking about….*'

As his thoughts continued to drift off, Lan Wangji continued applying ointment.

Wen Ruohan had a feeling that the future Hanguang-jun's reaction would be quite amusing if he knew what Wei Wuxian was thinking.

Suddenly, someone knocked three times on the door.

"Hanguang-jun, everyone is up. Will we be leaving?" Sizhui asked.

Lan Qiren relaxed at once. As furious as he was that the simulation had shown the watchers something so personal to his nephew, the existence of Lan Sizhui gave him renewed appreciation for the simulation.

(No matter how silly some of them could be, Lan Qiren could never be anything but grateful for getting to see the future's juniors.)

The scene transitioned them to outside, where said juniors were all gathered around each other, chatting cheerfully.

"Remember to come to my place sometime," Lan Jingyi insisted.

Sizhui smiled at his friend's enthusiasm, then added, "We'll be leaving now."

"See you next time!"

As this was going on, a separate discussion was happening on the side.

"When you go back, don't keep arguing with your uncle," Wei Wuxian scolded, making Jin Ling glare angrily at the ground. "Listen to him. Be careful from now on. Don't run around trying to night hunt alone again."

Both Madam Yu and Jiang Cheng gave simultaneous pleased smirks at that, having grown rather frustrated with the number of times Jin Ling was put in danger throughout the simulation.

However-

'*...With what happened to his parents, I suppose it's only natural he would want to prove himself to others as soon as possible,*' Wei Wuxian continued.

And many of the watchers frowned at the reminder of the still-prevalent mysteries surrounding Wei Wuxian's fall from grace, the Jiangs and Jins most of all. Unconsciously, Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli moved closer to each other, protective and seeking comfort in equal measure.

"What are you, fifteen? Most disciples around your age haven't hunted down any great beasts either! Why are you so eager to rush towards such an accomplishment?"

"My uncles were also fifteen-or-so when they became famous!" Jin Ling protested. "Even that dog Wei Wuxian was only around fifteen when he killed the Xuanwu of Slaughter! If he could do it, why can't I?!"

And Jiang Yanli's smile faltered again, and she found herself wishing her son hadn't inherited her brother's need to compare himself to Wei Wuxian. It was putting Jin Ling in danger, and it most certainly hadn't brought Jiang Cheng happiness either, when it was him who felt that way.

Then again, she supposed it was no wonder Jin Ling had become so stuck on that, considering who had helped raise him.

'*If I had been there… if I had raised A-Ling….'* she pursed her lips, looking away. '*A-Xian, what happened to me?*'

But Wei Wuxian had no way of hearing that. Instead he had tensed up, a shiver running down his back at hearing his name come right after the word "dog." Slowly, he forced himself to relax, shaking the goosebumps off his arms. Then:

"Wei Wuxian was the one who killed it?" he asked. "Wasn't it killed by Hanguang-jun?"

"It was both of us," Lan Wangji insisted calmly.

Instead of responding to Wei Wuxian with the same assertion, Jin Ling did an awkward frown at that name. He looked at his 'uncle Mo Xuanyu,' then turned back to stare intently at Lan Wangji. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again, thinking some more. Then, he sighed.

"You and Hanguang-jun…. Nevermind, that's your own business," he huffed, crossing his arms and looking away. "Anyways, I don't care about you guys at all. Have fun being cut-sleeves. The disease is incurable."

"Hey, how is it a disease?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Jin Ling just scoffed, but a light blush crossed his cheeks as he said, "I already know the meaning behind Gusu Lan's forehead ribbon. Now that it's like this, stay by Hanguang-jun's side properly. Even if you're a cut-sleeve, you should be a modest one. Don't go about messing with other men, especially people from our sect! Or else… don't blame the results on me!"

"I… Is that…" Jin Zixuan stared intently at his son, uncertainty clear on his face. "That seemed… a little different from before."

'*Damn cutsleeve,' Jin Ling had hissed.*

But now: '...Nevermind, it's your own business.'

The words were similar, but the emotions and intent behind them were worlds apart.

Now, finally, Jiang Yanli's usual smile returned to her face, and she nodded once: "I think it is. Compared to how A-Ling treated A-Xian's interest earlier… I think A-Ling is starting to change."

They glanced at each other, sharing a warm smile at the thought.

However, Wei Wuxian was far more concerned with the previous thing that had been said.

“Forehead ribbon?” he repeated. “Is there a special meaning behind the Gusu Lan Sect’s forehead ribbon?”

“Oh, no,” Lan Qiren whispered.

“Come on! You know what it means! Stop getting so carried away! Don’t go bragging like that! I don’t want to talk about this anymore! Are you Wei Ying?!”

“Huh?” Nie Mingjue asked, not having expected the sudden yet straightforward question at the end there.

“Do you think we’re similar?” Wei Wuxian wondered, voice calm.

Based on who had been narrating the simulation for them, the watchers all knew Jin Ling would find out eventually. With this, they managed to be a little assured that the eventual reveal would go over well.

However, that reveal was not to come quite yet. After thinking in silence for a moment, Jin Ling whistled loudly, and Fairly came barking over.

“We were having a nice chat! What are you sending your dog loose on me for?!” Wei Wuxian yelled as he ran away. As expected, his fleeing brought him to hide behind Lan Wangji, trembling as he clutched the other man’s sleeve.

‘*Don’t think about the kiss. Don’t think about the kiss. Don’t think about the kiss, don’tthinkaboutthekiss-*’

Through great struggle and sacrifice, Lan Wangji finally managed to quiet his own thoughts.

“Hmph. Goodbye,” Jin Ling decided, stomping off.

‘*That’s definitely the peacock in him,*’ Jiang Cheng decided, unable to resist sending an amused glance a blushing Jin Zixuan’s way.

One by one, the disciples left. Jin Ling walked towards Lanling, unwilling to face Jiang Cheng just yet, and every other disciple returned towards their own sect. Despite that, the tearful farewells the more emotional disciples gave made one thing quite clear: the life-or-death struggles they had gone through had formed a bond between them that nothing could break.

(A fact further proven by the obvious reluctance on Lan Jingyi’s face as he watched the others leave.)

Lan Qiren sighed briefly, but couldn’t help the small tinge of amusement he felt within him as well. After watching the drunk Wangji run around as the child he had never truly gotten to

be ~~because war was coming and they had to be prepared, but they *hadn't done enough* and their children suffered because of it~~, he had grown a new appreciation for the strange innocence the future's juniors had.

Hanguang-jun and the future Lan Xichen had been phenomenal guardians for the next generation. Lan Qiren couldn't be prouder.

Finally, only Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and the Lan juniors were left.

"Where are we going next?" Lan Jingyi wondered, still pouting at being left behind.

Smiling in amusement at his friend's reaction, Lan Sizhui added, "Zewu-jun is currently night-hunting in the Tanzhou area. Are we going directly back to the Cloud Recesses, or will we meet up with him?"

"We will go to Tanzhou," Lan Wangji decided.

Wei Wuxian grinned, beginning the walk forward, and said "Great! Maybe we can even lend a hand. We don't know where to go to look for our dear friend's head anyways."

Once again, Nie Mingjue couldn't help but sigh at the unusually troublesome corpse Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had to deal with.

By now, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's lead over the juniors had lengthened considerably. The teenagers trailed behind respectfully, engaged in their own conversations.

'*A pack of ducklings, following after their parents,*' Madam Yu observed disbelievingly.

Thanks to both that and the lack of other people on the road, Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian had a chance to speak unheard.

After a bit of silence, Lan Wangji calmly stated, "Jiang Wanyin knows who you are."

Said boy flinched.

Swaying slightly from his seat on Little Apple, Wei Wuxian agreed, "Yeah, he knows. What can he do, though? He doesn't have any evidence."

And he had accused so *many* people of being Wei Wuxian that people would need evidence for anyone to consider the claim. He had tortured — *brutalized* — who knew how many demonic cultivators, to the point where even his own nephew didn't believe the accusations.

'*I lost my core for him,*' Jiang Cheng reminded himself, clenching his fists tightly and barely noticing his sister's attempts at comforting him. '*I lost my core for him. I gave up everything for him — the version of me that did that is only a few years older than I am now. I'm much closer to him than I am to my adult-self. There's no way I wouldn't deserve to be with Wei Wuxian. There's no way he would leave! There's no way Gusu Lan is a better fit for him than Yunmeng!*'

But-

“Jiang Cheng’s only evidence is that he saw my reaction to dogs, but if he actually went around saying that the Yiling Patriarch was terrified of dogs, everyone would probably think SanDu Shengshou had just become crazy after how many times he’d failed.”

And, like always, Wei Wuxian was right.

“So, I’m actually really curious,” the Yiling Patriarch continued. “How *did* you recognize me?”

“I’m more curious as to why you have such a bad memory.”

Collective grins broke across the more excited watchers’ faces as they recalled the song that had tied the two souls together, even across multiple lives.

‘*I can’t believe I ended up being less romantic than* Lan Wangji. *That really is pathetic,’* Jin Zixuan thought, sighing to himself.

Then again, having witnessed the tension between the two in the previous scene, Jin Zixuan knew full-well how difficult that standard would be to match.

Sensing that Lan Wangji wasn’t going to actually answer, Wei Wuxian gave up on his interrogation quickly enough. He was undiscouraged, however, and continued the journey to Tanzhou with an easy smile on his face.

There was a flash forward, and the city was within their sights. On the way, however, they passed by a garden which neared the size of a large estate, and contained enough greenery to feed a pack of rabbits for a hundred years.

Lan Xichen gave a surprised hum, examining the layout closely.

The greenery was not carefully-cultivated plants, but rather dried-out natural growing ones, which had been allowed to spread freely over the land. There was a pavilion, a few fences, and a few stools, but they had been worn down and knocked over by time. It had been abandoned long ago.

Nevertheless, the juniors were excited.

“The garden we passed was big and majestic, but there was clearly no one caring for it,” the disembodied voice of the far-future Lan Jingyi explained, teary at the cruel fate that had befallen the once-beautiful garden. “All of us rushed in at once, knowing that Hanguang-jun wouldn’t object so long as it wasn’t against the rules.”

“Seriously?! How unfair!” Ouyang Zizhen protested. “I can’t believe we didn’t get to see it!”

“Speak for yourself!” Jin Ling snapped. “The gardens at Koi Tower are probably a hundred times bigger and grander. I didn’t need to see it!”

The watchers could *hear* the smirk on Lan Jingyi's face when he said, "Well, if that's what princess thinks. Alright then, since you're not interested, how about Sizhui and I take just Zizhen to see the garden?"

"Wha-"

Madam Jin coughed into her sleeve, hiding a laugh at her grandson's antics. Meanwhile, Jin Zixuan buried his bright red face in his hands, hating the knowing looks everyone was sending him.

"We'll all go together," Lan Sizhui decided. "We can ask Senior Wei and Hanguang-jun to take the four of us next time they have a night-hunt near there."

"Ah, no fair!" Nie Huaisang protested. "I want to go on a garden field trip with Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong too!"

Huffing ~~fondly~~, Nie Mingjue commented, "We have gardens at Qinghe. Why would you want to go to this place?"

"I bet its special," Nie Huaisang declared, confident that the simulation wouldn't be showing them otherwise.

And indeed:

"This is the garden of the Damsel of Annual Blossoms, isn't it?" Lan Sizhui commented after a while.

"Oh?" Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes in interest.

"The Damsel of Annual Blossoms? Who is that?" Lan Jingyi asked. "Does the garden have an owner? Why does it look so worn-down? It's seems like its been left uncared-for for a long time."

'*Let Sizhui answer your first question before bringing up another one,*' Lan Qiren scolded, hiding an amused smile with a cough.

Luckily for the watchers, all of Lan Jingyi's questions were answered soon enough.

"Annual blossoms are flowers that have a short flowering period, only blooming during certain seasons. There is a large variety in types and colors, filling the garden with a unmistakable fragrance when they bloom."

As the kids chatted, Wei Wuxian glanced over, a nostalgic look on his face.

Lann Sizhui placed his hand over one of the pavilion's pillars, he felt along the wood, thinking for a while, before saying, "If I remember correctly, this probably is it. This garden used to be rather famous. I read a book about it once, and it was mentioned in the chapter 'The Blossoming Spirit of the Forest Damsel.' In Tanzhou there is a garden, and in that garden there is a damsel. Under the moonlight, if one recites poetry she

deems fine, she grants them an annual blossom, the fragrance of which persists for three years. If she deems it poor, she casts a blossom at their face, then fades away."

Lan Jingyi yelped, "So if you recite the poetry wrong she throws a flower at your face? Hopefully they were flowers without thorns, or, if I were to try, my face would probably have started bleeding."

Seeing his uncle's scowl, Lan Xichen laughed and whispered, "At least he appears aware of his strengths."

"If he knows his poetry would fail, he should practice it more," Lan Qiren hissed back. "I'm glad that child had a happy upbringing, but *still.*"

Trying his best to not seem patronizing, Lan Xichen nodded along to his uncle's complaints, pretending to listen seriously.

Stretching his arms over his head, Lan Jingyi thought to ask, "What sort of fae was she?"

"I would not call her a fae… she is more of a spirit. The legends have it that the earliest owner of the garden was a poet. He planted these flowers himself and treated them as friends, reciting poetry to them every day."

'*What a ridiculous waste of time,*' Madam Yu couldn't help but think.

Unable to hear her, Sizhui continued, "Affected by the emotions of the poetry, a spirit crystalized from the flora of the garden and became the Damsel of Annual Blossoms. When someone came, if their poetry was decent and allowed her to remember the one who planted her, she would be happy to give them a flower. If the poetry was wrong or didn't sound pleasing, she would emerge from the bushes and hurl a flower in that person's face. The one who was attacked would faint, and, upon waking up, realize they had been thrown out of the garden. Ten years ago, and endless number of people would come here."

"What a wonderful tradition," Lan Xichen beamed.

Feeling that Wen Ning might enjoy making an attempt, Wen Qing suggested, "Perhaps some of us should try together, when the season is right."

"That sounds wonderful," Jiang Yanli agreed, sneaking a glance at Jin Zixuan. Seeing it, he nodded back at her, blushing heavily. It appeared they had a date.

'*Would Wei Ying like to go?*' Lan Wangji wondered.

As if knowing he was being thought of, the simulated Wei Wuxian spoke next, laughing, "Romantic. Romantic. But I know for sure the Gusu Lan Sect's Library Pavillion would never hold a book saying such things. Sizhui, be honest; what book were you reading, and who gave it to you?"

Lan Sizhui blushed, sneaking a glance at Lan Wangji, but remaining silent as if worrying he would be punished.

"Why are you such a cool guardian, Wangji-xiong?" Nie Huaisang cried out.

Nie Mingjue jolted, "Huaisang?! What's that supposed to mean?!"

Glaring angrily at Nie Mingjue (who had, several times today, sided with Lan Wangji instead of his own *brother*), Nie Huaisang jokingly whined, "I can't believe you're asking that. Not only do you try to make me train-"

"As I should!"

"You also refuse to join our 'Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong' club! I bet San-ge would be on my side."

"Well, you should be happy then! He was there for you when I-"

Nie Mingjue cut off abruptly.

'*When I died,*' he finished in his head, realizing at once how much those words would ruin the playful teasing that had been going back and forth between them. It wasn't that he had *forgotten* the seriousness of what had happened to him, but the fact that they had simply been told about it, combined with how much else was going on, made it a little hard to keep in mind.

An awkward silence stretched out.

Luckily for Nie Mingjue, the simulation continued soon enough.

"Is the Damsel really pretty or something?" Lan Jingyi asked. "She has to be, right? Why else would so many people come?"

Glancing back at Lan Wangji one more time to make sure he wasn't about to be scolded, Lan Sizhui smiled and explained, "She probably was. She crystalized from such pleasant things, and was such a romantic spirit…. However, no one has ever seen the Damsel's face. There were many people who received her flowers, and plenty who were immediately knocked out, but no one ever saw her. Well, there was one exception."

"Hm?"

"Who?"

"The Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian."

If Jiang Cheng had been drinking, he would have choked at those words.

"A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked.

On the side, Wei Wuxian looked rather embarrassed, grumbling, "Ugh, why is it him again? Can't we talk about something else?"

Everyone ignored him.

Despite himself, Wen Ruohan couldn't help but chuckle at that.

"So? What did Wei Wuxian do?" Lan Jingyi asked, excited. "He was such a big villain. What did he do this time? Did he snatch the Damsel away and take her outside?!"

And if 'The Yiling Patriarch' was truly how the rumors described, that may have been right. It, however, was not.

'*I remember that,*' Wei Wuxian thought, a small smile forming on his face despite his earlier reluctance. He glanced back at Lan Wangji, and saw the other already meeting his eyes.

Then, there was a transition.

"Oh?"

Large lotus flowers bloomed above a clear lake, signaling that they had been brought near Yunmeng. In the busy streets, store owners gossiped with each other freely.

"Hey, did you hear?" one of them asked. "A demon's been causing trouble in Tanzhou."

"What? What kind of a demon is it?"

"I have no idea. Even Wei-gongzi can't do anything about it."

Lan Wangji, who was coincidentally passing by on his way back from a nighthunt, paused and turned around at those words, facing the speakers.

Although he didn't say anything, the words 'worried about your Wei Ying?' were clear on Lan Xichen's face. Unfortunately for Lan Wangji, that look spurred on thoughts he couldn't ignore. Because, just a short while ago, he had watched as Wei Wuxian had….

As Wei Wuxian….

Wei Ying-

'*WEIYINGKISSEDMEWEIYINGKISSEDMEWEIYINGKISSEDME-*'

(It would be a while before he was capable of having other thoughts again.)

Meanwhile, his simulated self was left to frown deeply, repeating '*Tanzhou?*'

Leaping through the trees, the simulated Lan Wangji raced towards the origin of that rumor. The leaves were bright, and the flowers were in full bloom. That was more than

enough to indicate that this was a different time, but, when Lan Wangji paused to look around, the watchers were finally able to see him clearly.

"Oh, it's a little Lan-er-gongzi," Wen Qing observed.

Lan Wangji jumped at that, not having expected teasing from her of all people. Though, truly, he should have known better. Despite often acting distant and cold, she was an older sibling as well.

(And, throughout the simulation, it had become clear to Lan Wangji that Nie Mingjue was the only one among them who could be trusted.)

The young Lan Wangji frowned at that moment, commenting, '*The resentful energy is so thick around here.*'

"It's nothing compared to the Burial Mounds," Lan Qiren sighed, not liking the memories those words evoked.

Then, laughter came from below.

"Wei Wuxian?" Jin Zixuan realized at once.

And it was. Wei Wuxian sped across the path below Lan Wangji, dodging the various vines that came his way. And that wasn't even the most impressive thing. Behind him, a tsunami of flowers were tumbling down, threatening to suffocate him if he didn't flee fast enough.

He looked as though he was having the time of his life.

"For Heaven's sake, what did he do this time?" Madam Yu sighed, ignoring the tinge of fondness that came with that.

From behind one of the nearby trees, Nie Huaisang watched nervously. Nevertheless, Wei Wuxian's excited laughter continued.

"Haha — ah!" he suddenly stopped, tripping as some pebbles in the stone path came loose under his feet. He made contact with the ground-

"Wei-xiong, watch out!"

"Eh?" he glanced back.

'*He's being a little* too *casual about this,*' Wen Ruohan thought.

Only a second before the vines made whip-like contact with Wei Wuxian's vulnerable form, they were cut in two by Bichen. Lan Wangji landed on the ground between them and Wei Wuxian, stopping the avalanche of flowers with a well-timed barrier talisman.

"Show up, demon," he commanded, sending another talisman forth.

It sent up a cloud of dust upon contact.

And revealed an upset maiden instead.

"Oh dear," Wen Qing sighed, seeing the displeased pout on the Flower Damsel's face. The current lack of aggression made it quite clear that her intent had never been to truly harm.

Which meant Wei Wuxian probably provoked her into this.

"Flower Damsel, I've finally seen your face!" Wei Wuxian laughed, running forward. He gave her an assessing look, taking in her delicate pink makeup, her elaborately done hair, and the blooming flower resting atop her head.

Jin Guangshan was very, very appreciative.

Lan Wangji was less so.

He stared disturbingly blankly at Wei Wuxian and the flower spirit, neither voicing nor showing his annoyance. Finally, however, Nie Huaisang peaked out from behind the trees and made his way to Lan Wangji.

"Ah, well… you see-"

Instead of allowing Huaisang to explain, the simulation brought them into yet another flashback.

The sixteen year old Nie Huaisang stood within the garden they had all just seen. It was far more lush than the one 19 years later, and full of unbloomed flowers across every bush.

"Last night, I dreamed that falling flowers would not stay," the Nie heir recited. "Alas! I couldn't go home, although half of Spring is gone."

And, to his left, a flower opened into full bloom.

"Wow! She gave me a flower! She really did it!" the Nie heir realized, lighting up.

Part of Nie Mingjue was tempted to complain about the way his brother was spending his time, but, upon recalling the words he had almost said just a short while ago, refrained.

(Besides, it was somewhat nice to see his brother be happy. The future one they had seen after Wei Wuxian's resurrection looked more than a little stressed by his position of Sect Leader.)

The flower was released from the tree it was on, floating delicately into Nie Huaisang's waiting hand. He stared at it, both mesmerized by its beauty and proud of what it represented.

"Oh? Reciting poetry?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, Nie Huaisang and Jiang Yanli all jumped, not having seen him approach.

“What the — where did he come from?!”

“I *hate* how good he is at hiding his presence!” Jiang Cheng growled.

Wei Wuxian stared at the flower in Nie Huaisang’s hand a moment longer before a mischievous grin crossed his face.

“I can do that too!” he declared.

“Hm?”

“Those who know me say I’m worried, but outsiders complain about the nonsense I talk!”

He grinned.

The flowers before him wilted.

Laughter broke out among the watchers.

“Wei Wuxian, I *know* you can do better than that!” Lan Qiren snapped.

But Wei Wuxian wasn’t done.

Running over to another flower, he recited, “Let me hold your hand. Let’s be friends.”

It wilted as well.

“Eh?” Wei Wuxian asked, pouting in the most adorably disappointed way possible.

(Lan Wangji could admit he might be a bit biased regarding that description.)

Undeterred, Wei Wuxian ran and dramatically knelt before another bush, saying “The young shoots of reeds are gray; the white dew looks like frost. That person whom I am thinking of, do you dare remove your makeup?”

An angry puff of pollen was released from the blooms.

‘*Oh, I see what he’s doing,*’ Wen Ruohan thought.

And Sizhui’s explanation to Jingyi was relayed on top:

“Supposedly, in order to see the Damsel’s face, Wei Wuxian went out of his way to come to Tanzhou all the way from Yunmeng. He would come to the garden, recite poetry wrong on purpose, intentionally anger the Damsel into hitting him with flowers, and get thrown out.”

And that exact scene played out before their eyes.

“When he woke up, he would crawl back inside and continue to recite incorrectly-”

As proven by what the simulation was showing them.

“-and she would throw him out again. After he repeated this more than 20 times, he was finally truly attacked-”

And that brought them to what they had seen earlier: Wei Wuxian seemingly running for his life as flowers and vines alike chased after him, intent on throwing him out.

“-And, during that, he saw the Damsel’s face.”

Partly because Lan Wangji, thinking that Wei Wuxian might be in genuine danger, had intervened.

‘*I shouldn’t have saved him,*’ Lan Wangji thought grumpily, watching Wei Wuxian continue to flirt with the spirit as they were brought back to what had happened after the young second jade had intervened.

(However, remembering the sheer and utter helplessness he felt as Wen Chao threw Wei Wuxian into the Burial Mounds completely washed away the little anger he felt.)

Unfortunately, the simulated version of him didn’t have that same luxury.

“Hehe, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian rushed over, leaning on his shoulder. “Lan Zhan, it’s all thanks to you that I finally managed to see the flower maiden’s face clearly. Hey, as thanks-”

He reached into a Qiankun pouch in his sleeve.

“Have some super nice fruit milk with a scent of flowers and fresh fruit!”

“Huh?!” about half the watchers said.

“That’s… random,” Wen Qing observed.

“Speaking of which, right now you came to rescue me so hurriedly,” Wei Wuxian observed. “What? Were you worried about me?”

Lan Wangji turned away at once, his ears turning bright red, and stormed off.

Wei Wuxian chased after.

“Hey, answer me!” he requested. “Were you or not?”

The second jade looked away.

“Come on, answer me-”

As the pair got farther and farther away, the watchers were finally able to notice the sounds of crying.

“Ah!” Nie Huaisang wailed as the upset Flower Damsel swung him back and forth through the air with her vines. “Ah! Waah!”

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were already out of hearing range.

“Aren’t you forgetting someone?!” Nie Huaisang protested, but the two were lost in their own world.

“I… I apologize,” Lan Wangji coughed.

Humphing, Nie Huaisang responded, “Absolutely not forgiven! How could you leave me like that, Wangji-xiong? I take it back — yours and Wei-xiong’s older selves might be ideal parents, but I’ll stay with my Da-ge for now!”

Lan Xichen quickly hid a laugh as he saw Nie Mingjue practically begin to glow at those words.

And with that, the flashback faded away. The watchers returned to where they had been previously: that same garden, but nineteen years later. Right now, Lan Sizhui was finishing his story:

“Following that, Wei Wuxian would go around everywhere praising how beautiful the Flower Damsel had looked.”

Lan Wangji was ~~not~~ pouting.

“The Damsel was rather irritated as well. She did not show up for quite a while, and, whenever he came, she would pound him with a storm of flowers. The scene was allegedly more wondrous than anything else.”

The boys were all laughing so hard they couldn’t breathe.

“What an annoying person!” one of them said.

“Was he really that bored?”

Bringing his hand to his chin, Wei Wuxian wondered, “It’s not that ridiculous. Who hasn’t done a few things like that when they’re young? Speaking of which, why do people even know about something like this? And it’s even seriously recorded in a book? The book’s the ridiculous one.”

Lan Wangji was looking at him. Although Hanguang-jun was just as expressionless as always, there was an unusual glint in his eyes as though he was laughing at Wei Wuxian.

‘*Oh, Lan Zhan, don’t you dare make fun of me,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*I know at least eight — if not ten — embarrassing stories from when you were young too! I’ll tell the boys sooner or later and destroy the invoilitile, irreproachable reputation they have of their Hanguang-jun.*’

At that last line, Lan Wangji couldn't help but recall the previous night, which would surely have destroyed the 'inviolable, irreproachable reputation' his older-self had if it were to be found out.

Getting drunk.

Trying Wei Wuxian up with his *forehead ribbon.*

Playing tag around the room.

The *kiss.*

At that last thought, his ears flared red once again, and a strange ringing blocked out any other thoughts he could possibly have.

"You children are all so hyper all the time," Wei Wuxian finally said. "You've definitely been reading idle books instead of focusing on cultivation. When you get back, make sure Hanguang-jun punishes you by making you copy the Sect Rules. Ten times."

The boys wailed, "Ten times even while doing a handstand?!"

"A handstand?!" Jin Zixuan repeated.

Wei Wuxian blinked in shock, then did a double take towards Lan Wangji to ask, "Your sect makes disciples do handstands while copying? That's awful."

Calmly, Lan Wangji replied, "There was someone who did not learn their lesson by simply copying sect rules. Handstands not only guaranteed better behavior in the future, they also improved cultivation."

Wei Wuxian looked away bashfully at the roundabout referral to him.

'*Added another thousand rules to the wall and changed the Lan's style of punishment,*' Jiang Cheng thought. '*I don't know whether to be surprised Wei Wuxian impacted the Lans so much, or disappointed I had expected anything less.*'

Night fell, and it became clear the juniors had decided to set up camp in the dried-out garden. A fire had been started, and Wei Wuxian and the Lan Juniors were sitting around it.

"Did Hanguang-jun leave?" Wei Wuxian asked, glancing around.

Nodding, Sizhui explained, "Hanguang-jun went out on patrol in order to ensure the safety of the camp."

"That's good, that's good," Wei Wuxian nodded, gesturing to the few still-standing Lans to sit with him. "Oh, that's right. I have a question. What meaning does your sect's forehead ribbon hold?"

The juniors all flinched.

And Lan Wangji's face paled and heated up in equal measure.

(And yet he wanted Wei Wuxian to know; wanted him to think about it. It was a feeling he wanted to stamp down, but the curiosity remained nonetheless.)

Unable to understand the quickly-stammering juniors, Wei Wuxian raised a hand calmly, getting them to stop. In the silence, the watchers could hear a sound from the pulses of resentful energy jumping in tune with Wei Wuxian's emotions.

Ba-*dum.* Ba-*dum*.

His heartbeat was getting faster and faster.

The red on Lan Wangji's ears darkened to the color of a fresh-picked apple.

Hesitantly, Sizhui glanced up and asked, "Senior… do you not know?"

"If I knew would I have asked? Do I seem that bored to you?"

"...Yes," Lan Jingyi mumbled. "After all, you even had us line up one by one and tricked us into looking at that sort of thing…."

"Wasn't that to get you out of your comfort zones? It really is effective. If you listen to what I say, you'll definitely benefit in the future. So: the ribbon?"

To the real juniors who hadn't yet attended Gusu, the importance of the forehead ribbon was still a mystery. They all leaned forward in anticipation.

Lan Qiren tried (and failed) to withhold an apprehensive groan.

A long while of hesitation transpired before Sizhui finally began to explain: "Okay, the forehead ribbon of the Gusu Lan Sect means to 'regulate oneself,' correct?"

"Right. And?"

"The founder of the Gusu Lan Sect, Lan An, once said one can only let go of all their regulations when they are with the one they love an cherish."

That deep, sinking feeling began to form once again in Jiang Cheng's stomach.

"As a result, the message that has been passed down to our generation is that, um, our sect's forehead ribbon is a very special object and very, very personal and sensitive. One cannot easily give another permission to touch it, one cannot take it off as they please, and once absolutely cannot tie it on anyone else."

Simultaneously, Nie Huaisang and Madam Jin sucked in breaths of air, their anticipation rising.

"It is prohibited," Lan Sizhui emphasized. "That is… unless… unless-"

The bright, flushed faces of the Lans were more than answer enough.

'*Only in front of their destined beloved can they let go of their self control.*'

Wei Wuxian stood up at once.

And Lan Wangji flinched back. How would Wei Wuxian respond? Excitement? Regret?

But he had *kissed*-

No, Lan Wangji would not allow himself to have any foolish expectations.

But-

A bright red blush spread across Wei Wuxian's cheeks, and he turned around and fled.

"Huh?!"

"What-"

"Wei Ying?!" Lan Wangji asked, nervously standing up as well. He could feel his heart fighting to escape his ribcage — banging against it at a rapid pace.

He needed to see Wei Wuxian's face.

Luckily, the simulation followed after the Yiling Patriarch at once. When it stopped, they saw Wei Wuxian leaning against a tree, breathing heavily. His cheeks were flushed, his pupils were dilated, and there was a slight shake in his body as he rested his hand on the trunk.

'*What have I done?*' he thought. '*Then… then-*'

In a quick flash, images from the archery competition flew through the air. Wen Chao shooting an arrow, then Lan Wangji shooting said arrow down, then the conversation, then Wangji's departure, and then….

In crystal-clear clarity, they watched as the forehead ribbon was pulled off.

And now….

All the blood in Wei Wuxian's body rushed to his head.

And the segment drew to a close.

For a moment, there was silence. Then, a chuckle; a giggle; a snort.

"YES!" Nie Huaisang suddenly shouted, bursting out of his seat. Gone were the days at the beginning of the simulation where he would cower silently before all the adults. After watching everything that had happened (and watching them be wrong about Wei Wuxian

time and time again), Nie Huaisang's hesitance had all but vanished. Besides, so long as the no-touch zone was in effect, he would be fine.

Which meant even Lan Wangji's embarrassed glare wasn't enough for Huaisang to hold back his excitement.

"Did you see that? Did you see that?!"

Rolling his eyes, Nie Mingjue pointed out, "We're all here; of course we all saw it."

"Yeah yeah yeah," Nie Huaisang responded, his words coming out at three times their usual speed. "Still: can you believe it?! It'll all coming together now. And they… and they kissed!!!"

Jiang Yanli laughed as well, "Yes, though, perhaps I should talk to A-Xian about that. A bit more communication before moving to that would have been nice. At least he appeared to realize his mistake immediately."

"You can talk after the simulation," Wen Ruohan interjected, making Jiang Yanli flinch slightly. "The simulation enjoys pulling tricks on us and leading us in the wrong direction at first. We should see everything before we inform him of what happened."

"And as soon as we do that, we can plan the wedding!"

"Wedding?!" Lan Qiren squawked out, turning to stare intently at Nie Huaisang. "Young Master Nie, I suggest you slow down a little. Wangji doesn't want…"

He trailed off, uncertain of the accuracy his response.

"Wangji isn't *ready* for that," he coughed. "Yet."

The word 'yet' made Lan Wangji jump minutely, and, for the 138th time that hour, Lan Wangji's memories replayed the kiss for him in slow motion.

And he was far from the only one to pick up on that.

"Does the 'yet' indicate they have your blessing?" Madam Jin asked.

"H-hey!" Jiang Cheng interrupted. "The Lans aren't the only sect involved. You need our blessing too, and-"

'And Wei Wuxian's my shixiong.'

'And A-Jie is his shijie.'

But martial siblings were very different from a real family.

'And I won't let you do something as disgusting as that' would never be accepted.

'And he's *like* a real brother to me,' might be more accurate. But-

‘He looks so much happier with you’ was the truth. 'And I don't think I have a right to ask for more than that.'

The wind left Jiang Wanyin’s sails, and he deflated on the spot.

Seeing that her son had no intention of finishing his sentence, Madam Yu quickly moved to preserve their dignity and concluded, “And there are several other matters to consider first.”

“Oh?” Wen Ruohan grinned. “And what would you be referring to when you say that?”

The warmth that had been present before now instantly left the watcher’s gazes.

“I wonder whom I could *possibly* have meant,” Madam Yu snarled, her voice dripping with venom. The simulation having moved on from the past made it hard to keep it at the forefronts of their minds, but no one had forgotten what the Wens had done.

And Wen Ruohan, on the other hand, had not forgotten what the Jiangs had done either: “You say he needs your blessings? I’d argue that all evidence seems to prove both he and the Yunmeng Jiang Clan are happier when they’re apart.”

Pursing his lips together, Lan Qiren stepped forward: “Is now really the time to discuss this?”

“I don’t see why not,” Nie Mingjue growled, glaring at the Chief Cultivator.

“I agree,” Wen Ruohan said. “If Yu-furen would like us to settle our differences as soon as we leave the simulation, that’s fine with me.”

“You sick-”

“No! Wedding first!”

Everyone froze, the tension in the room vanishing at once as they turned to face the source of the words: Nie Huaisang. He stared at them all unflinchingly, eyes shining.

“Think about it; in the world of the simulation, the war was the reason Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong couldn’t get together earlier. You all can have your fights and conflicts and battles if you want to, but we gotta do a wedding first,” he declared, then, turning an unnervingly smug grin on Wen Ruohan, concluded, “You shouldn’t have any problems with prioritizing that, right?”

“Huh?” his brother said.

And yet, after a moment of silence, Wen Ruohan tilted his head in acknowledgement.

‘*The Nie heir really is observant, to try to stall the war using this of all things,*’ he thought. ‘*If the simulation doesn’t reveal more about him, I should send a group of spies into Qinghe focused specifically on watching him.*’

Unfortunately, although Wen Ruohan had gained a deeper understanding, almost everyone else had just become more confused.

"...I'm sorry, you want us to focus on the wedding first?" Lan Xichen asked, not believing his own ears.

"Well," Wen Ruohan began, turning his eyes upon the coldly glaring Lan Wangji. "I suppose I can see the value in prioritizing that. However, the time we have between segments is limited; let us save this discussion for later."

"Brilliant idea, Your Excellency," Jin Guangshan said at once, eager to get back into Wen Ruohan's good graces. "On that note, regarding the actions of the Blossom Damsel…."

As Sect Leader Jin continued speaking, moving the conversation along, Lan Wangji turned his attention away from the people around him. Not much new information had been learned about the future's world in this segment, but his future self's relationship with Wei Wuxian had been altered irreversibly.

'*Wei Ying kissed me. And I tied my forehead ribbon around him. And Wei Ying kissed me. And I wanted to bring him back to Gusu. And Wei Ying kissed me. And I* knocked myself out *in response.*'

Honestly, his future-self made no sense whatsoever.

And yet, Hanguang-jun was communicating much better with Wei Wuxian than the teenage Lan Wangji had been, so perhaps he still had things to learn.

'*And Wei Ying kissed me.*'

And they had still never actually met, but-

'I think I might lo-'

"-ve got someone to introduce to you, Uncle Jiang," Wei Wuxian said cheerily, showing not a trace of the cold, knife-like anger that had reared its head around Jin Zixun.

"Oh? Who is it?"

"One of the other disciples said he'd mentioned this kid to you, but I wanted to introduce him in person," Wei Wuxian waved an arm behind himself, gesturing at the youngest of the children standing there. "Uncle, this is Mo Xuanyu."

Jiang Fengmian froze.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize on behalf of Jin Guangshan. He kinda writes himself sometimes.
:)

Obligatory Mami Tomoe Head Joke

Chapter Notes

A million thanks to Tintin!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jiang Fengmian stood frozen.

“Mo Xuanyu?” he repeated, turning to stare down at the child. A pair of wide, bright silver orbs looked back at him, blinking back tears as the boy trembled.

(In fear.)

Just like a young Wei Wuxian had looked, when he found out Jiang Cheng had dogs at the pier. So Jiang Fengmian had tried to fix that — alienating his son from him in the process. So then Sect Leader Jiang had tried to fix *that*, ordering Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng to stay together, hoping that getting his first human friend would help with his son’s loneliness.

And then Wei Wuxian had been chased off, climbed up a tree, jumped down onto Jiang Yanli, and gotten injured in the process. Not once through any of that had any of his children (blood related or not) thought to approach him for help.

And here Mo Xuanyu stood.

Terrified.

Because of Jiang Fengmian.

And, as per usual, a voice he recognized as his wife’s completely drowned out any other thought he could have:

‘*You said you would do better, so do it! Don’t just stand on the side like before! You’ve taken care of hundreds of young disciples throughout your life! Why is this any different?!*’

It wasn’t different. He knew it wasn’t. In this case, the right thing to do would be to kneel down in front of him and-

Mo Xuanyu flinched back as Jiang Fengmian approached, frightened by the fast movement.

“I… Are you okay?”

“Sorry!” the boy cried out, eye watering more and more by the second. “Sorry! I didn’t — I’m sorry!”

Mo Xuanyu knew he wasn't supposed to flinch back. He knew showing fear in front of ~~Madam Mo~~ the highest power in the area would only end in disaster. And now even his mom was gone. She was back with the Mos and Mo Xuanyu was here, alone, abandoned and left to survive by himself. And these were *cultivators*. Mo Xuanyu's father was a cultivator too, but Jiang Fengmian *wasn't his father* and what if he… and what if he….

"I-I'm sorry!" Mo Xuanyu bawled out, sobbing even more heavily despite his attempts to stop. "Sorry!"

"Shhh. It's fine. Nothing's wrong," Jiang Fengmian tried to help, but his protests went unheard.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Suddenly, Mo Xuanyu felt a hand on his back, rubbing slow, soothing circles. He paused.

"It's alright," Wei Wuxian — Mo Xuanyu's new Da-shixiong — whispered. "Uncle Jiang won't hurt you, I promise. I'll keep you safe."

The boy's eyes widened, a few traces of hope sneaking in. Jiang Fengmian forced himself to keep smiling.

This was ridiculous. Wei Wuxian had always been good with kids, but Jiang Fengmian had never been bad, per say. He should be better than this; he should know what to do.

But he had thought he was doing well with Wei Wuxian, and that was the opposite of true.

"Feeling better?" Wei Wuxian asked, noticing Mo Xuanyu's sniffles start to dissipate. A small nod came in return, and Wei Wuxian smiled. Absent-mindedly, Jiang Fengmian noticed that his head disciple was still wearing his father's old robes, as he had taken to doing so whenever he represented the sect. It was strange to see those old robes being used again.

'*Changze,*' he thought. '*What would you think, if you had been allowed to see the simulation?*'

He would never know, but he could guess. After all, Wei Wuxian and Mo Xuanyu now stood before Jiang Fengmian, a memorial to all of his failures.

(He had never met Mo Xuanyu, but it had been this body that Jiang Fengmian's son attacked 'just in case' it might be Wei Wuxian. Even with everything that had happened since, Sect Leader Jiang had never forgotten that.)

Seeing that Jiang Fengmian hadn't moved in a while, A-Lu stepped closer and asked, "Sect Leader Jiang?"

Hearing that, Wei ~~Changze~~ Wuxian glanced up as well, still rubbing circles onto ~~Wei Wuxian's~~ Mo Xuanyu's back. Jiang Fengmian quickly forced himself to calm down. That may be the body Wei Wuxian would one day reside in, but it was still the child Mo Xuanyu before him. It wasn't Wei Wuxian; there was no reason for Jiang Fengmian to hesitate.

(But hesitate he did.)

He continued hesitating in the way that had caused everything around him — the children before him, the walls of the pier, the simple comfort in Wei Wuxian's gaze — to be destroyed by the Wens, in a future not-yet seen.

'That's right! I want revenge!' Jiang Fengmian's simulated son had shouted, burning with hate. 'Revenge' had become his driving motivation, rather than the ideals of the sect. And that continued, years down the line.

Until the older one was known *for torturing demonic cultivators on the off chance that they might be Wei Wuxian.*

All because Jiang Fengmian had messed up with his son, and messed up with Wei Wuxian, and failed against the Wens, and now-

'He's still my head disciple-'

'He's wasted on you!' Wen Ruohan had shouted back.

And now Wei ~~Changze~~ Wuxian stood before him with ~~his son~~ Mo Xuanyu and Jiang Fengmian was just going to mess up and lose everything all over again-

"Uncle Jiang?" Wei Wuxian asked, and the trembling Mo Xuanyu's eyes widened in apprehension.

'*Don't you dare hesitate now,*' Madam Yu hissed.

"Ah… yes," Jiang Fengmian cleared his throat, making sure his expression was as gentle as possible. "I'm sorry for startling you, A-Yu. Are you okay?"

The boy nodded frantically, hiding his arm behind his back. The sudden motion caught Jiang Fengmian's eye, and his attention was instantly drawn to the blackened bandages wrapped around it.

"Oh, Cha — *A-Xian*," he quickly corrected himself. "It seems A-Yu needs some new bandages. Could you bring him to the healer?"

"Hm?" Wei Wuxian glanced over. "Oh, would you look at that. Seems like someone's been having fun around here."

Mo Xuanyu blushed, burying his face in Wei Wuxian's chest.

"No worries, my young disciple. Allow me to aid you!" with a dramatic swing, Wei Wuxian picked Mo Xuanyu off the ground and held him up. "Uncle Jiang has given us a mission, A-Yu. Do you think we can manage?"

At that question, Mo Xuanyu peeked out from Wei Wuxian's chest, glancing over at Jiang Fengmian. Whatever he saw there allowed him to relax a little more, and he nodded once.

“Fantastic!” Wei Wuxian declared. “Come along, A-Yue, A-Lu. We’ve got a job to do!”

“On it!” the siblings shouted, running after and leaving Jiang Fengmian behind. As he watched them go, a discomforting sense of uncertainty overcame him.

‘Fengmian, meet A-Ying,’ Wei Changze had told him, proudly displaying the brightly-smiling boy in his arms. ‘A-Ying, say ‘hello’ to your Uncle Jiang.’

‘Hi, Uncle Jiang!’ the silver-eyed child giggled, and, on the side, Cangse Sanren joined her son in his laughter.

Jiang Fengmian could remember having smiled back.

Then Cangse’s grin turned mischievous and she asked, ‘A-Ying, don’t you have something to show your Uncle Jiang?’

The then-two-year-old boy’s eyes had widened, and he quickly scampered out of Wei Changze’s arms to stand in front of Jiang Fengmian, motioning for the man to kneel down. A bemused smile on his face, Jiang Fengmian had done just that.

Practically bouncing off the floor in his excitement, Wei Wuxian had held his hands out to his father, who calmly deposited a lilac pouch into Wei Wuxian’s waiting hands. The boy then spun around, holding the bundle out to Jiang Fengmian.

‘Open it, open it, open it!’ he requested.

And so Jiang Fengmian had. Reaching forward slowly, he had grabbed onto the string tying the bag together and undone the bow. Instantly, there was a flash of blinding light, and then, when it faded….

‘Tada!’ Wei Wuxian declared, holding out a miniature lotus flower with great pride. It had been made out of the bag, a talisman written on the inside of the pouch activating to reform and reshape its seams until the final product resembled one of the plants that gave Jiang Fengmian’s home its name.

‘Changze and I wrote the talisman out, but it was A-Ying’s idea,’ Cangse revealed. ‘I bet he’s going to be quite a little inventor when he grows up!’

Flabbergasted, Jiang Fengmian had only been able to laugh in response.

That was the only time he had met Wei Wuxian while the boy’s parents were still alive, and it was the last time he had seen them. He had never once mentioned the event to the boy, and Wei Wuxian had been too young at the time to remember anything.

Why had Jiang Fengmian never brought it up?

(Because Ziyuan would have gotten mad. Jiang Fengmian had just wanted to spare everyone the conflict.)

Somehow, it almost seemed like he had suppressed those thoughts so much he had forgotten about them entirely. At least, until he had seen Wei Wuxian, dressed in Wei Changze's robes, pick up the boy whose body the future Wei Wuxian would one day inhabit. At that, he paused. Jiang Fengmian really didn't know how to feel. Logically, he knew he should have done better just then — that Mo Xuanyu *wasn't* Wei Wuxian, and even if he had been, that wasn't an excuse.

But-

He closed his eyes, and an image of the burning pier flooded his mind.

(Even after a few days of being awake, standing in Yunmeng and *not* seeing the destruction that had overcome the simulated one felt strange to him.)

(Having left the simulation so soon after the war meant Jiang Fengmian hadn't fully gotten to see its recovery from what happened. However, after recalling what his children and Wei Wuxian had been forced to go through right after the massacre of Lotus Pier, he knew he had no right to complain.)

The child Mo Xuanyu peeked out from Wei Wuxian's hold, speaking timidly to A-Yue and A-Lu, a small smile on his face.

'*Still, that was pathetic,*' Madam Yu's voice sighed. '*Do better. Don't you dare ruin another kid.*'

After all, hadn't Wen Ruohan made it very clear what he thought of Jiang Fengmian's performance? And the Chief Cultivator might be an insane, homicidal sadist, but that didn't mean he was wrong about everything.

'*I'll do better,*' Jiang Fengmian promised. '*I will.*'

"...So," Nie Huaisang began.

"So?" Lan Wangji inquired, outwardly calm but privately dreading whatever the Nie heir's next words would end up being.

Tilting back and forth nervously, Nie Huaisang spoke double-speed as he inquired, "Do you have any plans for when we get out?"

After a pause, Lan Wangji answered, "We agreed to only discuss that after we have been given all the information the simulation has to offer. I will wait."

"No, no, not about the sects' politics!" Nie Huaisang protested at once. "About Wei-xiong! What are you gonna do with him?!"

"I-" Lan Wangji began, only to cut off, ears flaming. "I will… I hope to meet him properly."

"And then?"

There was a beat of silence, and the flush on Lan Wangji's ears darkened.

Then slowly, hesitantly, Jin Zixuan raised his hand and offered, "A-Li and I thought maybe you two could join us on our first date. She'll be able to bring him easily, if the disciple exchange has been canceled."

Despite his best efforts, Lan Wangji couldn't stop himself from perking up at the suggestion.

"Great idea," Lan Xichen agreed at once. "I know; Wangji, I saw you and Jin Zixuan-gongzi looking at that ice cream shop in Caiyi town during the abyss segment. Why don't we-"

"No, no, we can't have their first meeting be there!" Nie Huaisang protested at once. "A simple ice cream shop isn't nearly romantic enough! This has to be perfect!"

Rolling his eyes, Nie Mingjue muttered, "Huaisang, don't you think you're taking this a bit too far? We have bigger things to worry about dealing with than their relationship."

Lan Wangji nodded frantically in agreement.

Meanwhile, Nie Huaisang gave a scandalized gasp.

"Da-ge, you can't mean that!" he protested. "It's clearly the most important thing going on in the simulation right now. I mean, we finished Yi City, we've gotten most of the past out of the way, and just need to finish collecting all the pieces of that annoying corpse. I've had enough focus on tragedy; we're on the happy times now!"

Nie Mingjue supposed he didn't have a response to that. It certainly did seem to be the direction the simulation was going, after all. He was grateful for that; he wasn't sure Huaisang would have been able to take much more tragedy, even if the people involved were strangers to them.

Just as Nie Mingjue had finished that thought, he noticed the world around him darken as the simulation began anew. It was a little difficult to tell what was going on at first, mostly because Wei Wuxian's thoughts were a rather uncharacteristic frenzy of sheer, undisputed *panic.*

'*I took off his ribbon, I took off his ribbon, I took off — the ribbon, it means-*'

The memory of that fateful moment replayed over and over again before their eyes. The archery competition, Wen Chao's actions, and then Wei Wuxian's ignorant attempt to help and-

'*I wish they would stop showing this,*' Lan Wangji thought, glaring at the ground in embarrassment. Whether that embarrassment was in regards to Wei Wuxian's forward action or his other-self's infuriated response was hard to tell, but, regardless, he was the only one upset to see this scene played again.

Jiang Yanli gave a happy little cheer.

‘*All these years… I never really gave that incident much thought,*’ the overwhelmed Wei Wuxian realized. ‘*At first I did wonder if the forehead ribbon had a special meaning to the Lan clan, but, afterward, I completely forgot about it. Though, in hindsight, the way the other Lan disciples had glared at me….*’

“As they well should have,” Lan Qiren grumbled. His slightly-growing approval of Wei Wuxian did not mean he had forgiven everything the boy had done — and this was undeniably at the top of his list of sins.

~~Which, considering they had started the simulation with ‘he’s a monster who invented demonic cultivation and murdered thousands,’ was quite telling.~~

“Now, uncle,” Lan Xichen gave a sunny smile, keeping his voice low so that Wangji wouldn’t be able to hear. “It’s only inappropriate if Wangji and Wei-gongzi remain ‘just friends.’ I believe there’s an easy solution to this-”

“Xichen, honestly! You — you’ve taken on all of your mother’s worst traits!”

It was only after he had finished saying those words that Lan Qiren realized that he had touched upon a subject that was never spoken of at Gusu Lan. He pursed his lips together, looking away from his nephews at once.

‘*Like… A-Niang?*’ Lan Xichen mentally repeated, eyes going wide at the revelation.

However, try as he might, he couldn’t bring himself to inquire further.

And that was lucky for the Nie heir, as that meant that Nie Huaisang had a front row seat to watch as Wei Wuxian’s panic reached never before seen heights.

‘*No wonder Lan Zhan got so mad! His forehead ribbon was yanked off by a brat without his consent in front of everyone’s eyes! To think that Lan Zhan didn’t shoot me on the spot! His self-control is frightening.*’

A panicked sweat covered Wei Wuxian’s face, and his eyes became wide in horror.

‘*People with good manners are so scary! He is indeed worthy of the name ‘Hanguang-jun!”*

Having worked himself up into a tizzy, Wei Wuxian then began to pace back and forth, circling around the tree he had leaned against at a breakneck pace.

“He is indeed worthy of the name Hanguang-jun,” Jin Zixuan quietly repeated, not noticing how his words made the nearby Lan Wangji jump as if burned by his own embarrassment. The Jin heir was far more preoccupied with his own thoughts.

The last segment had made one thing indisputably clear: Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were the most romantic people on the face of the planet. And that was coming from Jin Zixuan, who had seen his father masterfully flirt with….

Who had watched as his father….

With women who weren't his mother….

Anyways, despite his own lack of experience, Jin Zixuan did feel as though he knew romance when he saw it, so he was confident when he said Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were the undisputed best. After the soup incident and the many, many, many things his other self had said, Jin Zixuan knew he would have his work cut out for him to make it up to Jiang Yanli.

The most obvious solution, in this case, was to observe the masters. He wouldn't miss a single thing.

'*Wait a minute,*' Wei Wuxian's thoughts abruptly veered off. '*Since coming back to life, I've continued touching his forehead ribbon, haven't I? Quite a few times at that! And just now-*'

An image of Hanguang-jun proudly presenting the tied-up Wei Wuxian covered the screen.

Lan Wangji flinched.

In the real world, the Lan healers began to panic as their second young master *once again* began to heat up unnaturally.

"Lao-shi! It's another fever on Lan-er-gongzi!"

"Again?!" the main doctor cried out. "Hurry! Bring me a wet cloth!"

The incident would not be so concerning normally, but for it to happen to a young man with the cultivation level Lan Wangji had sparked many concerns. In addition, no identifiable pattern could be found. Sometimes he would heat up for only a few seconds, while other times his heart rate would double for hours on end! It had not yet reached a level at which it would be considered dangerous, but the lack of an explanation as to why this was happening necessitated the current alertness.

"Stay strong, Lan-er-gongzi," one of the healers whispered, clutching his hand tightly. "You're the second jade of Gusu Lan. I truly believe you can make it through this."

Despite being unaware of their concerns, Lan Wangji worked desperately to calm his racing heart.

Just like the simulated Wei Wuxian, who was still pacing back and forth endlessly.

"What's he doing, walking around there like that?" Lan Jingyi wondered, watching Wei Wuxian lap the tree repeatedly. "...Did he eat something bad?"

"Maybe," another boy agreed. "Look at that, his face is switching back and forth between red and white."

After considering that for a moment, yet another boy said, "We didn't eat anything particular there though. Could it be… is it because of the meaning behind the forehead ribbon?"

"Got it in one!" Nie Huaisang cheered.

(Subsequently, Lan Wangji's attempt to calm himself down was rendered moot.)

Wei Wuxian made another frenzied lap around the tree.

"Huh. It seems he really is obsessed with Hanguang-jun. Look at how happy he is."

'*Happy?*' Lan Wangji repeated, straightening himself out of his embarrassment to focus on the simulation. He watched, speechless, as Wei Wuxian made another loop.

That same word repeated in Jiang Wanyin's head as well, though it was greeted by a completely different set of emotions.

By approximately the fiftieth loop, Wei Wuxian had finally managed to start calming himself down. He paused in his stride, taking in several deep breaths.

Lan Wangji had… with his forehead ribbon….

Hanguang-jun had just….

A deep, deep flush overwhelmed Lan Wangji's ears, and blood rushed to his head so quickly he felt faint.

Suddenly, there was a crunch of dry leaves from behind.

Wei Wuxian and spun around. There was a figure before him bathed in shadow. Tall; straight; dignified.

And missing a head.

"Oh, no," Wen Qing sighed, and Nie Mingjue gave a nod of agreement.

Wei Wuxian's smile froze, and he turned to face the corpse head on. Slowly, the Lan juniors also began to notice its presence, turning away from the fire to stare at the unmoving creature. Their eyes widened.

"Shh," Wei Wuxian softly whispered, putting his pointer finger in front of his lips. The juniors froze.

It really was amazing to Wen Ruohan how, in such little time, these juniors had gone from viewing Mo Xuanyu as a 'cutsleeve lunatic' to trusting him enough to *not defend themselves* when a fierce corpse was standing directly in front of them. And to think that Wei Wuxian had ended up in the Burial Mounds at the end of his last life rather than training the next generation of Jiangs to match his skills. Not for the first time, Wen Ruohan sighed.

‘*What a waste,*’ he concluded yet again.

~~Especially because, if he, Wen Qing, and now Nie Huaisang were right, Wei Wuxian hadn’t been physically *capable* of cultivating with the Jiangs towards the end there.~~

“What’s going on?” one of the juniors hissed, trusting ‘Mo Xuanyu’ enough to not draw his sword, but nonetheless panicking at the sight of the corpse. Remaining as calm as ever, Wei Wuxian shook his head ‘no.’ Sizhui slowly resheathed his half-drawn sword, and the other juniors followed shortly after.

The headless figure reached out to the side, and, upon coming into contact with a tree trunk, began feeling it out, as though trying to figure out what it was. He walked a small step forward, finally stepping into the light.

‘*Woah, he’s huge,*’ Nie Huaisang realized at once. ‘*He almost looks like-*’

That thought cut off as Nie Huaisang’s gaze landed on his older brother. Because yes, they did look similar, but it couldn’t be him. After all, Nie Huaisang had gone through a whole emotional whirlwind not too long ago upon figuring out the truth behind the Nie Sects burial grounds. There was nothing more to discover.

(Nie Mingjue *couldn’t* be this corpse that had been destroyed so thoroughly it was completely unrecognizable.)

‘*Oh dear,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, gazing down at the rags on the floor. ‘*Those must be the Qiankun pouches. Lan Zhan and I were so busy following Yi City that we didn’t have much time to play rest, and the attractive force between the parts has grown stronger now that more pieces are together.*’

“The body parts aren’t the only things whose ‘attractive forces’ have grown stronger,” Lan Xichen teased, nearly causing a squeak of steam to escape Lan Wangji’s burning ears.

The headless man put his hands to his neck, feeling around again. Its hands brushed over the clean, crimson cut on its throat, and checked and rechecked for his missing head. After some time had passed without success, rage suddenly overtook the corpse and it slammed its palm into the tree beside it.

With a bone-shattering *crack*, the trunk broke in two.

‘*What a temper!*’ Wei Wuxian observed.

Although Lan Wangji had complete faith in Wei Wuxian’s abilities, the large number of juniors surrounding him (all of whom Wei Wuxian would have to protect) caused him to tense slightly in preparation.

At long last, the terrified Lan juniors finally managed to speak:

“W-what sort of monster is this?” Lan Jingyi stuttered, trembling as he held his sword firmly before him.

Seeing the way Wen Qing frowned at the ‘monster’ comment, Nie Mingjue unconsciously did so as well. The Wen doctor was an extremely smart woman who had ~~proven him wrong about the Wens and~~ saved Jiang Wanyin’s life despite the risk to herself and her family. Her brother had proven time and time again that his title of ‘the Ghost General’ was not at all indicative of his moral character.

But the fear Lan Jingyi had of the unknown being in front of him made it all too easy to understand why the sects would have become so scared of Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation.

However, casual as can be, Wei Wuxian just said, “You haven’t been reviewing the basics, have you? This is obviously a corpse, categorized as a ghoul type. How could you refer to it as a ‘monster?’ That’s a completely different category!”

"Shut up!" Jiang Cheng hissed, watching the corpse warily.

Similarly, Lan Sizhui whispered, “Senior, you… you’re talking so loudly. What if he hears you?”

Carrying the same sentiment as Jiang Cheng's words, just being much more polite.

“It’s alright; it’ll be fine no matter how loudly we talk. He doesn’t have a head, so he doesn’t have eyes or ears, which means he can’t see or hear anything. If you don’t believe me, give it a shout.”

Perking up in curiosity, Lan Jingyi asked, “Really? Let me try!”

A loud yell broke through the night as Lan Jingyi tried his hardest to make a loud noise.

A dark cloud formed around Lan Qiren.

‘*He’s just a boy,*’ Lan Qiren told himself. ‘*Just a child. Hasn’t Wei Wuxian shown you that righteousness does not inherently connect with acting proper? And, in the first place, Lan Jingyi is a simulation. You can’t do anything-*’

The yelling got louder and louder.

’Can’t… do-’

And louder-

‘*It doesn’t… it’s-’*

His voice went up eight pitches and the volume increased tenfold.

“Would you *be quiet!*” Lan Qiren shouted back.

Luckily, and by complete coincidence, Lan Jingyi decided he was done shortly after.

“U-uncle,” Lan Xichen approached cautiously. “Are you… alright?”

Huffing loudly, Lan Qiren grumbled, “We must thank our ancestors that we have Lan Sizhui. We would all be doomed otherwise.”

However, at that moment, the corpse turned to face the Lan juniors and began to approach.

Lan Qiren’s anger vanished at once.

“Move!” he shouted.

“But you said it would be alright!!!” Lan Jingyi wailed.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Wei Wuxian shouted, “It really is alright! Look: I’m shouting at it, but it’s not coming over, right? It's not going to you because you were loud, but because of the fire! It’s hot! There’s a lot of live humans, and they’re all male! The yang energy is too heavy! He can’t see or hear, but he can walk in your direction! Why aren’t you putting the fire out already? Scatter!”

“Ah,” Jin Zixuan breathed out, and he saw Jiang Yanli relax immensely at her martial brother’s words. Although Jin Ling was (thankfully) not present anymore, seeing their son face death alongside these juniors had made the couple quite attached to them as well.

(Which was especially weird, given how some of the ‘juniors’ were technically older than them.)

By now, the fire had been put out by a wave of Sizhui’s hand, and the boys had all quickly scattered around the deserted garden. One second passed, then two, and the headless corpse continued to not move. It had indeed lost its sense of direction.

Along with the simulated juniors, Madam Jin, Jiang Yanli, and Jin Zixuan breathed out sighs of relief.

Then, the corpse began to move towards one of the boys.

“Wei Wuxian!” Madam Yu called out at once as the simulated juniors began to scream.

Jiang Yanli frowned and tensed up, hoping that her mother wouldn’t start blaming Wei Wuxian yet again. However, to Jiang Yanli’s great surprise, she noticed that Madam Yu’s always-expressive face was not flushed in rage nor scrunched up in scorn. That was concern.

Madam Yu was worried for ~~her grandson’s friends~~ the juniors and was relying on Wei Wuxian to protect them.

“But you said it would be fine if we scattered!” Lan Jingyi screeched (causing the real Lan Qiren to wince).

“Don’t move!” Wei Wuxian ordered in response. Just like before, the juniors followed Wei Wuxian’s commands without even pausing to think about it.

Wei Wuxian knelt down and picked up a pebble that laid beside his feet. With a flick of his wrist, he threw it towards the corpse, and it bounced against the man's back.

The corpse instantly froze.

After another two seconds had passed, it turned around and began to walk towards Wei Wuxian.

Madam Yu finally relaxed. Although it was carefully suppressed, Jiang Yanli could still see a bit of gratitude in her mother's gaze.

And that was the main difference, wasn't it? There had always been an unspoken expectation in their family that Wei Wuxian would put his life on the line to defend them — her parents had proven that well enough by their last words to him and Jiang Cheng. But now, after everything Madam Yu had seen from him….

Wei Wuxian didn't *have* to do anything for the juniors. Putting aside keeping them alive, he didn't need to teach them or take care of them or to try and teach Jin Ling to be more accepting; he was doing that because of who he was.

Perhaps Madam Yu was finally starting to understand that.

With loud thumps that shook the earth, the corpse stepped closer and closer to Wei Wuxian. Breathing softly, the Yiling Patriarch merely shifted slightly to the side (two steps, maybe less), and the corpse walked right by.

"I told you to scatter, not to run around," Wei Wuxian said, undisturbed as ever. "Don't run too quickly. The ghoul has a high level of cultivation. If you move too fast, he'll notice the shifts in the air."

Backing up slowly, Sizhui observed, "It seems like he's searching for something. Is it… his head?"

'*Clever boy,*' Wen Ruohan thought, not for the first time. Having a teacher like Wei Wuxian work with a student like Lan Sizhui really was a sight to behold. The Chief Cultivator still wanted Wei Wuxian to be taken in by the Wen Sect when this was all over, but….

His eyes drifted towards Lan Wangji.

'*The Lan Sect is a good second option,*' he thought.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian nodded in confirmation: "That's right, he's searching for his head. There are quite a few heads here, so, since he doesn't know which one is his, he'll pull off each person's head one by one and place it on top of his own neck to see if it fits or not."

Nie Huaisang squeaked, and Nie Mingjue moved protectively in front of him.

"If it does fit, he'll make-do and wear it for some time; if it doesn't, he'll just throw it away. You should walk slowly. You don't want to be caught by him."

Although Nie Mingjue understood Wen Qing's complicated feelings on the matter due to what had happened to the simulated Wen Ning, he couldn't shut down the instincts that told him to watch the corpse carefully, continuing to guard his brother without rest.

The juniors, equally scared, moved their hands defensively around their necks and backed off. It almost looked like they were playing hide-and-seek with the ghoul, given the delicate way they moved. Every time it seemed like the ghoul had caught on to the presence of one of the boys, Wei Wuxian would throw a rock at it and attract its attention again.

Although Lan Wangji didn't have any particular objections with Wei Wuxian's way of handling the situation, he couldn't help but frown: '*This is similar to how Wei Ying needed to distract the Xuanwu of Slaughter all those years ago. It is quite admirable, but… I do wish there was another way.*'

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian appeared as casual as could be. Hands behind his back, he began circling the corpse, observing it closely and thinking, '*Our dear friend's posture seems a bit strange, doesn't it?*' he thought. '*He keeps waving his arm with a loose fist.*'

Now that Wei Wuxian had mentioned it, the watchers could see it as well. And, even before Wei Wuxian's thoughts reached their conclusion, the Nie brothers froze, eyes widening.

"Are we just going to continue walking like this?! How long do we have to continue?!" Lan Jingyi complained.

"Da-ge?" Lan Xichen asked, noticing Nie Mingjue's sudden stiffness.

"...Of course we don't have to," Wei Wuxian assured them after a pause.

Instantly comforted by this, Lan Sizhui turned to Jingyi and told him, "Senior will definitely think of something."

And think of something he did:

Taking in a deep gulp of air, Wei Wuxian prepared himself before shouting, "Hanguang-jun!!!!! Hanguang-jun!!!! Come save me! Hanguang-jun, are you back yet?!"

Lan Wangji did a double take at that, while Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng burst into laughter. Normally, Nie Huaisang would have joined them or led the charge.

Now, however, he was concerningly quiet.

The simulation, however, was not:

"Hanguang-jun!"

"Come save us!" the juniors joined in.

"Help me!"

“Save us!”

“Hanguang-jun!!!”

Tears were beginning to pour down the youngest disciple’s cheeks as their cries for ~~their father~~ Hanguang-jun continued without rest. A few moments later, a soft, flowing note from a xiao sounded amid the night.

“Ah, Lan-gongzi, that’s you, isn’t it?” Jiang Yanli asked, turning to her fellow older sibling with a warm smile. Lan Xichen barely acknowledged the arrival of his other-self, however.

“Da-ge?” he repeated again.

“I-” the man paused, uncharacteristically stumbling over his words. “Hold on, just… give me a minute.”

Vibrations from Hanguang-jun’s guqin followed a moment after.

“Hanguang-jun! Zewu-jun!” the juniors cried out, tears still streaming down their faces. The relief in their expressions was obvious.

Lan Qiren tilted his head up a bit, unable to resist preening in pride at his darling nephews.

(His eldest heir was, however, preoccupied. Confused by Nie Mingjue’s reaction, he had turned to stare at the mysterious corpse a little more closely. And now, at long last, he made the connection.)

“...Oh,” he whispered, softly, eyes widening in horror.

Two slender figures flashed through the garden’s worn-down doors. They had the same, impeccable, jade-like posture, and identical snowy robes. They walked shoulder to shoulder with each other, one carrying a xiao, and the other, a guqin.

The headless shadow shifted, and both of the white-robed cultivators paused.

The simulated Lan Xichen’s expression quickly shifted to match the real one’s.

“Xiongzhang?” Lan Wangji whispered cautiously. By now, more and more of the watchers had noticed the frozen states of Sect Leader Nie and the Lan heir, but none had managed to figure out the reason why.

‘*It has to be someone else,*’ Nie Huaisang thought. ‘*That can’t be-*’

His eyes, against his better judgment, moved to the corpse’s left arm. Along it, there was a thin, white scar.

‘*A few years ago, I-I had climbed one of the sect’s walls — a bird I wanted to catch kept getting away — and then I got stuck. I needed his help, but when he reached for me I slipped and-*’

And then the fourteen year old Nie Mingjue had jumped out to catch him, getting a long cut along his wrist from a branch when he skidded along it on the way down. Nie Huaisang had gotten away with just a few bruises, but he had never forgotten the existence of that scar. He would recognize it anywhere. The only reason he hadn't earlier was because the various body parts had been strewn about, not assembled into the proper order.

'*But I don't recognize the others!*' he reminded himself. '*Across his chest, and across his legs… I would know if he had ones like that!*'

There was a long line straight across his chest, and his arms and torso contained wounds that looked more like torture marks than anything else. That must have been why the simulated Zewu-jun paused; he was shocked by what he saw. That didn't necessarily mean he knew someone who had been injured to this extent.

Except the simulation was 20 years in the future. A war would pass between now and then — and thinking about everything that had happened to the simulated Wei Wuxian over that time — of course ~~Nie Mingjue~~ the corpse would gain scars that Nie Huaisang didn't recognize.

'*But it can't be-*'

(But then how would he explain the simulated Lan Xichen's reaction? If anyone would know the scars and injuries Nie Mingjue would receive in the coming decade, it would be him.)

All the blood left Nie Huaisang's face at once.

Just a short while ago, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had been trying to summon the corpse's soul to set it to rest. Despite who they were — despite everything they could do — they had failed.

'It's almost impossible for that to not have worked,' the Yiling Patriarch had thought. 'Unless… unless this person's soul has been cut apart along with its corpse. Wow… it seems this person's death was even worse than mine.'

Although the simulated Lan Xichen remained frozen, Hanguang-jun worked fast. Bichen flew forward, circling around the corpse and blocking off its attacks. Seeing that, Wei Wuxian grinned. Alone, he had no way to put the corpse to rest. However, now that Lan Wangji was here to help, there was plenty he could do.

Resentful energy seeped out of the corpse, swirling until it was a whirlwind of darkness. The body ran forward, moving right past the frozen Lan Xichen and jumping onto a nearby roof.

The first jade's hair was thrown to the side by the corpse's near-instantaneous movement, but he otherwise didn't react at all.

"Xichen?" Lan Qiren asked, noticing that the real one appeared just as shocked as his virtual counterpart.

Bichen and the corpse clashed again, the latter releasing a cloud of resentment each time they collided. Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian moved swiftly around them. The garden's shack was made of weak, weathered material, so he had to move lightly, hopping onto a box, a gutter, and finally onto the roof. As soon as the corpse noticed the nearby presence of a human, it switched targets to chase after it.

With a grin, Wei Wuxian ran.

The nearby resentment jumped to attention, filling the watchers' veins with adrenaline as the fight went on.

(Which only served to make those already-panicking even worse off.)

The corpse's powerful arm snapped towards Wei Wuxian, but was fended off at the last second by Bichen. Wei Wuxian grinned wider, still unconcerned. Bichen attacked again.

Then, sensing a powerful sword glare coming his way, the corpse raised his arm menacingly.

'*It's that move again!*' Wei Wuxian realized.

It most certainly was — no matter how much Nie Mingjue wanted to deny it.

Bichen came flying forward, but, moving nearly too fast for the eye to track, the corpse agilely dodged and snatched the hilt of the blade. Gripping the blade tightly, the corpse brought it close and began to examine it, as though trying to figure out what he had latched onto despite his missing eyes.

The juniors paled considerably.

"He grabbed *Hanguang-jun's* sword?" Jin Zixuan gaped. "Who on earth is this?"

Lan Xichen jumped at the question.

However, the simulated Lan Wangji remained as calm as ever. Pulling out his guqin, he set it flat across his arm and reached down to pluck a single string.

In a flash of blinding blue light, a single wave of spiritual energy was sent out. It became a formless arrow, whistling as it whipped towards the distant corpse-

With a slash of Bichen, the corpse cut the energy in two.

'*That wasn't a normal slash,*' Wen Ruohan realized, narrowing his eyes. '*A two handed grab and a vertical attack, rather than a diagonal one.*'

He glanced over at the frozen Nie brothers, and felt his lips curl into a smirk.

'*Ah, I see now.*'

Frowning, Wei Wuxian slipped away into the shadows, trusting Lan Wangji to be able to handle the corpse for now. The battle between the two powers continued, the corpse resuming its attack.

(Using Bichen as if it was a saber.)

'*Soul shattered,*' Nie Huaisang thought again, that term playing on repeat within his mind. '*His soul was shattered. His body was torn to pieces and his* soul *was shattered!*'

He convulsed slightly, feeling a wave of nausea rise up within him despite the fact that there was no food in his stomach to empty out.

'*...I thought his body fighting forever in a saber hall was bad. This-*'

Before he could finish that thought, a piercing note joined Lan Wangji's guqin, and a wave of suppressing resentment followed suit.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli realized, relaxing at once (and not just because the resentment commanded her to).

Wei Wuxian had indeed returned. Using the simple bamboo flute he had crafted in the forest, he joined Lan Wangji in playing Rest. However, his playing was nothing short of atrocious.

Wincing at the sharp, piercing scratches coming out of Wei Wuxian's flute, Jiang Cheng grumbled, "Why can't you ever just play normally?! What's the point in you being so talented if *this* is what we have to hear?!"

However, putting the quality of the music aside, Wei Wuxian's musical cultivation was as flawless as ever. Dark resentment joined the clear spiritual power Lan Wangji was sending out, cooperating with it to attack the corpse on all sides. The headless corpse jumped forward again, and Lan Xichen finally returned to his senses. He grabbed Liebing and began to play as well.

The corpse froze, then slowly turned toward Lan Xichen. Although it was unable to see or hear, it could feel the spiritual power being given off.

'*It recognizes him?*' Lan Wangji wondered.

A whirlpool of energy formed around the corpse. It slashed and hacked away at the white, blue, and dark red lines, but its attempts at resisting were quickly shut down. Wei Wuxian's eyes glowed an even brighter red, and Lan Xichen's face fell into despair.

The fierce corpse made one final resistance before finally succumbing to their power. With a stagger, he fell to the ground, his body parts unlinking themselves and collapsing into a graceless pile on the dirt.

Now, finally, as the resentment in the air began to clean up, the watchers became able to think again.

“Xiongzhang?” Lan Wangji repeated, concerned.

“We might be wrong!” Nie Huaisang shouted, saying the words in a single breath. “We should… let’s wait to see what Wei-xiong has to say.”

In other words: ‘let’s not even consider the possibility until that’s the only option.’

Nodding once, Lan Wangji stepped back. He was beginning to form his own theories on the matter, and continuing to press now would be pointless. As Nie Huaisang had said, all would most likely be revealed soon enough.

Seeing that the corpse had finally been stopped, Lan Wangji put his guqin down and summoned back his sword. He and Wei Wuxian walked toward the body parts and began to separate them again into guqin pouches, sealing them away. The juniors twittered back and forth, bowing to Zewu-jun, but too high-energy to give anything more than an absent-minded tilt of their heads.

“Go rest,” Lan Wangji ordered at once, causing several of them to jump.

Frowning, Lan Jingyi protested, “But, Hanguang-jun, it’s not nine yet.”

“I understand,” Lan Sizhui said instead, tugging the confused Lan Jingyi away from the scene. With an enviable grace, he directed the other Lan juniors back toward the fireplace, giving one last bow to the three seniors as he went.

Right as Wei Wuxian was about to put the left hand into a pouch, he heard Lan Xichen call out, “Please, wait a moment.”

Both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji paused.

Somehow, it seemed as though the simulated Lan Xichen’s face was even more ashen than the real one’s. With Nie Huaisang’s reaction on top of that, Lan Wangji and Wen Ruohan could be fairly certain they knew what was going on.

Their eyes fell on Nie Mingjue, who stood in uncharacteristic stillness, staring at he collapsed body parts in a hopeless, dawning acceptance.

‘*The future isn’t quite as nice as you thought it would be, is it?*’ Wen Ruohan wondered, grinning coldly.

And no one seemed to be more aware of that than the simulated Lan Xichen.

“Please… wait a moment. Let me see the corpse.”

Holding the body parts out, Wei Wuxian asked, “Zewu-jun, do you know who this person is?”

Although Lan Xichen opened his mouth, no sound came out. He seemed unable to respond. However, on his right, Lan Wangji answered for him with a single nod.

“I see; then I also know who it is,” Wei Wuxian hummed. “This is Chifeng-zun, isn’t it?”

“What?!” Madam Yu gasped out, turning to stare at him. Although she had noticed his, Lan Xichen’s, and Nie Huaisang’s strange reactions, this was a little hard to swallow.

A corpse this powerful was someone among them?

(His soul had been *shattered?!*)

In the silence that progressed, Wei Wuxian’s thoughts filled in the uninformed: ‘*Earlier, when we were ‘playing hide and seek,’ there was a movement the corpse kept repeating. He would form his hand into a loose fist, then slash his arm through the air as if brandishing a weapon. At first, I thought he might have been a swordsman, but in all my years I’ve never seen someone use a sword that way — without any thought put into the grace of it. Even an assassin would have some agility amidst the cruelty. But, if he wasn’t holding a sword, but a hefty saber with a strong killing intent, then everything would make sense.*’

His frown deepened.

‘*Furthermore, despite the scars, this corpse doesn’t have anything resembling a birthmark or similar indicators. It’s no wonder even Nie Huaisang wasn’t able to recognize the legs when we picked them up from the saber hall-*’

A bitter laugh escaped through the oppressive silence.

‘*It’s ‘no wonder?”* Nie Huaisang mentally repeated. ‘*Is that supposed to justify it?! He was right there — my other self literally saw him and just… didn’t recognize him?! What kind of an excuse is that?*’

No matter how much people whispered that Nie Huaisang was useless in comparison to his brother, he had never paid them a second thought. He didn’t *want* to be good at fighting; he didn’t *want* to risk his life battling monsters.

But maybe, if he’d spent a little more time learning, he wouldn’t have been so incompetent as to somehow allow his Da-ge’s corpse to turn out like *this.*

(His *soul* was *shattered*.)

If Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji hadn’t been sent on this mission — if they hadn’t been skilled enough to track down the pieces and show them to Lan Xichen — how long would Nie Mingjue have spent torn apart like this? *Why* was he like this? Having the sabers fight corpses for the rest of time was bad enough, but how could his brother’s actual body end up this way?

If it hadn’t been for the unknown shadows leading Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji to all these pieces-

His thoughts stopped there.

Those shadowed figures, working against the grave robber, had been sneaky, unassuming, and deeply motivated to get Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun to find the pieces. On the other hand, Nie Mingjue had been disapproving of their tactics.

Which hopefully meant Nie Huaisang had nothing to do with them.

~~A tiny part of him was starting to doubt that though.~~

~~After all, for a brief moment there, Nie Huaisang could have sworn his other self looked at the legs Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had found with a strangely sorrowful expression.~~

"Zewu-jun, Hanguang-jun told you about what we saw during the journey, right? Mo Village, the grave digger, Yi City, and all that?" Wei Wuxian asked, then, upon seeing Lan Xichen nod, continued, "Then Hanguang-jun probably told you this already, but the mist-faced man who tried to take the corpse away in the Chang Clan's cemetery knew the Lan Sect's style of swordsmanship like the back of his hand. There can only be two possibilities: one, he's from the Lan Sect and has been practicing the moves from a young age, or two, he's not from the Lan Sect, but he's really familiar with your sect's moves. He might have dueled with your sect's members quite a bit, or might be intelligent enough to remember the moves so long as he's seen them."

Wei Wuxian's observations continued, and many of the watchers paid close attention. A few, however, were still too stunned by the previous revelation to pay it much mind. Among them, the least affected was surprisingly Nie Mingjue himself.

At least, that was how it seemed.

"Are you alright?" a voice asked from his left. Glancing over, Nie Mingjue saw Wen Qing staring at him with an analytical blankness, which slowly transitioned into solemn understanding.

"I mean… sure," he crossed his arms, looking down on the simulation coldly. "It's a surprise, but we were already told I was dead. What more is there?"

The single raised eyebrow Wen Qing sent his way more than answered that question. Feeling unusually scolded, Nie Mingjue looked away. Then again, he supposed that, of everyone here, she had the most right to ask. Contained though her reaction may have been, the agony she felt upon learning what had happened to her brother had been obvious to everyone.

"...You might not have much privacy here, but trying to suppress everything your feeling won't go well," the doctor scolded. "Don't be an idiot."

"I'm not-"

"Just consider what I said," she advised, turning her attention back to the simulation and quite clearly ending that conversation. Sect Leader Nie huffed, annoyed at her insistence on the matter (and maybe, just maybe, knowing that she was right).

Silently, Nie Mingjue glanced back at his brother. Huaisang was still frozen in place, a complicated expression on his face. It was difficult to read even for Nie Mingjue, but the overlaying distress was clear.

Fine; Wen Qing wanted him to accept his emotions? He would show her he had nothing to hide.

Sect Leader Nie stepped next to Nie Huaisang, as close as he could get to a hug in the no touch zone, and the younger brother instantly accepted the offer and stepped inside the illusionary form. No one commented on the slight shakes and trembles occurring inside. One person, however, didn't even try to hide their watching gaze.

Wen Ruohan observed the interaction that had gone down between his niece and Sect Leader Nie, frowning minutely. Unlike his changing opinion of Wei Wuxian, the Chief Cultivator's feelings regarding Nie Mingjue had stayed exactly the same: respectfully powerful, but not so much that he could be considered anything more than an nuisance. The fervent hatred the man had of his sect had been quite amusing for some time, and made him all the easier to manipulate too.

It seemed that last point wouldn't be the case for long, however.

Meanwhile, maintaining the attention of the other watchers, Wei Wuxian had continued his explanation: "The grave robber fought for the corpse because he didn't want others to realize Chifeng-zun had been cut up. If Chifeng-zun's corpse is pieced back together, the situation would be difficult for them. This is someone who knows the secret of the Nie Sect's saber hall, is close to the Gusu Lan Sect, and likely has a rather complicated history… with Chifeng-zun."

"Ah, that's right," Madam Yu muttered to herself. "There were *three* sworn brothers, weren't there?"

Madam Jin instantly scowled.

"At the Nie Sect's burial hall, Jin Ling experienced quite a bit of malice from the corpse's resentful energy. And now, while I was stalling it, it was shockingly easy to keep its attention. The only thing he and I have in common… is that the blood of the Jin Sect runs in our veins."

Lan Wangji pursed his lips but nodded in agreement, having noticed the same.

"He would not have done this," Lan Xichen insisted without hesitation.

"Right! Let's not jump to conclusions!" Jin Zixuan agreed, eyes wide with desperation.

"A-Xuan?" Madam Jin asked, her frown being replaced by confusion.

Fighting to not wilt under everyone's collective gazes, the red-faced Jin Zixuan rushed out with, "I… the future's Zewu-jun knows him best. Meng… Jin Guangyao isn't the only possibility."

“It can’t be him,” the simulated Lan Xichen added on. “The incents you’re describing — investigating the corpse parts and encountering the grave digger — all happened within the past month. During this month, he’s been discussing matters with me every single night. We were planning for the discussion conference occurring at the LanlingJin Sect next month just a few days ago. He could not have gone so far away and made it back in time; the grave digger is someone else.”

Hearing that, the real Lan Xichen breathed out a sigh of relief. The revelation of Nie Mingjue’s fate was already taxing enough. If he had to discover that it was the result of a betrayal on top of that, he wasn’t sure he would be able to handle it.

“Don’t worry, Da-ge,” he said. “I’m sure Wangji and Wei-gongzi will find the person responsible soon enough.”

“Are you sure it isn’t him?” Wen Ruohan asked aloud. “After all, that *traitor* managed to fool even me.”

“And saved the rest of the cultivation world in the process!” Jin Zixuan hissed back, barely noticing who he was speaking to. “He’s… he’s a member of the Jin Clan! He’s done so many things as Chief Cultivator! He-”

He was someone who Jin Zixuan’s parents both discarded without a second thought. Who they’d thrown down the stairs of Koi Tower, and sent him back to who knew where. Jin Zixuan didn’t dislike his parents or anything, but, slowly…

He might be starting to disagree with a few of their choices. And, while he wouldn’t do something as idiotic as publically disagreeing with his Sect Leader, trying to fix a few of his parents’ mistakes couldn’t hurt either.

(But that would only be possible if Jin Guangyao was indeed uninvolved.)

But Wei Wuxian didn’t agree:

“Could Jin Guangyao have used a teleportation talisman?” he speculated.

Lan Xichen shook his head: “One must cultivate that technique in order to use it. It is rather difficult to cultivate, and he has never shown any signs of having that ability. Likewise, one must expend large quantities of spiritual power to use the technique, but we went night hunting just a few days ago. His performance was excellent. I am certain that he did not use the talisman.”

His voice was gentle, yet certain.

Nonetheless, Hanguang-jun pointed out, “He did not have to go himself.”

Lan Xichen shook his head again.

“Sect Leader Lan, you know he’s the most suspicious person, don’t you?” Wei Wuxian asked, raising an eyebrow. “You’re just refusing to admit it.”

The bonfire crackled loudly behind him.

And Wen Ruohan huffed a small laugh at the accusation.

The fire cast constantly-changing shadows upon the faces of the three cultivators, making the night appear even stranger than before. In the otherwise-silent abandoned garden, Lan Xichen's emotions were easy to see.

"...I understand that there are reasons for the world to hold many misconceptions about him, but… I trust what I have seen throughout all these years. I trust that he is not that sort of person."

Here, Lan Xichen hesitated. Unlike his other self, he had not spent years defending Jin Guangyao from everyone who tried using his mother's status against him. He wasn't part of the reason Jin Guangyao had gotten to the position he had. He didn't actually *know* the Jin Sect Leader, and therefore was far less influenced by his own emotions on the matter. Neither guilt nor love were at play here, but he could see the unwavering trust his other self had in the man.

"...What do you think, Da-ge?" he asked. "My other-self seems completely certain."

Nodding once, Nie Mingjue agreed, "You trust him quite a bit. The evidence does point towards him, but… I guess there was a lot of evidence against Wei Wuxian too, at the beginning of the simulation. All we can do is hope that isn't the case."

Lan Wangji nodded in agreement, knowing full-well how this would affect his brother's other-self if it was proven true.

And it seemed Wei Wuxian shared that philosophy:

'*Well, it's not difficult to understand why Zewu-jun is defending him. To be honest, even I have a pretty positive impression of him. Perhaps because of his background, he's always treated others with kindness and humility. He's the sort of person who's never offended anyone, and can make everyone around him feel comfortable talking to him. And I barely know him; Zewu-jun's been friends with him for years.*'

But…

'*Chifeng-zun's death occurred precisely when Qinghe Nie's advances against the LanlingJin Sect on the matter of Xue Yang were reaching their peak. Who would have benefited the most from his death?*'

All at once, a dozen eyes turned Jin Guangshan's way.

"Wha — my other self isn't even alive anymore!" he protested at once. "How could I be involved with the gravedigger when I died years ago?"

Putting aside their personal opinions regarding the man, no one could deny that. They slowly looked away.

“The time of the discussion conference at Koi Tower came in the blink of an eye,” Jin Ling’s voice revealed, with no small amount of pride. That made sense, considering the conference was taking place at his home. However, for the more astute listeners, the slight trace of apprehension in Jin Ling’s voice raised a few eyebrows.

A small bit of tension filled Lan Wangji’s upright frame, and he mentally prepared himself for whatever was to come.

From here, Ouyang Zizhen took over: “Most sects’ residents are built in places of beautiful scenery, but the LanlingJin Sect’s Koi Tower sits in the busiest part of Lanling City.”

The scenery before them shifted to prove the claim, even if all of the present watchers were already aware of the fact.

“The main road used to visit the tower is a carriage path more than half a mile in length, and is only opened for events such as banquets or discussion conferences.”

Which they were at now. Sitting with each other as equals, Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and Lan Xichen all road up toward the blindingly bright tower before them. The golden carriage smoothly glided across the stone road, moving slowly so as to allow the Jin driver to point out the history behind each painting they passed on the way.

“That over there is the four most famous sections about the current sect leader, Jin Guangyao,” the woman explained. “They are called ‘Disclosure,’ ‘Assassination,’ ‘Oath,’ and ‘Kind Austerity,’ respectively.”

At the word ‘assassination,’ Wen Ruohan found himself frowning once again. Someone he took in — someone whose talent he’d recognized and *rewarded* — had turned their backs on him in such a manner.

(As soon as he got out of the simulation, he would find Meng Yao and-)

“The first one depicts Sect Leader Jin as a spy in the Wen camp, secretly disclosing information to our side,” the disciple proudly explained, unaware of the real Wen Ruohan’s darkening glare. “Then there’s Wen Ruohan’s assassination, the oath to become sworn brothers with the rest of the Vernerated Triad, and his rise to the position of Chief Cultivator.”

‘*Quite a talented painter,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*Although everything appears normal at first glace, a more detailed look at ‘Assassination’ shows that, even when his figure was executing the assassination, hair dripping blood, Jin Guangyao had the hint of a smile on his face.*’

With every word, Wen Ruohan’s fury grew.

(As well as Madam Yu and Nie Mingjue’s satisfaction.)

And then, following Jin Guangyao’s murals, stood Jin Zixuan’s.

Said boy flinched.

Normally, a sect leader would make the murals of those of the same generation as them inferior, so as to not be outclassed. Everyone understood that, and would accept it without opposition. However, even at a quick glance, it was clear that Jin Zixuan's murals were just as high quality as Jin Guangyao's, and just as plentiful too.

The handsome man in the paintings displayed both pride and vigor. If he had lived long enough to become Sect Leader, he may have had ones just like them.

'*Of course he would have those,*' was Madam Jin's initial reaction. '*A-Xuan was* — is — *the heir. It's only right for him to have paintings of at least the level of the son of a-*'

She cut herself off. Right as that last word was about to enter her mind, Wei Wuxian's face flashed before her instead.

'I guess, but what's wrong with servants?' Wei Wuxian had asked. 'I'm also the son of a servant, aren't I?'

But Wei Wuxian was special — an exception — and his parents had been happily married, much to Yu Ziyuan's dissatisfaction and disbelief. It was a completely different set of circumstances from a woman who got together with her *husband*. Jin Guangshan was a married man (and that was something every citizen of Lanling knew), and yet Jin Guangyao's mother had disobeyed every courtesy and gotten together with him anyways.

'*It's only natural that A-Xuan has those paintings. I wouldn't have allowed it to happen any other way.*'

(But then, why had she been so surprised when she saw it?)

And now Jin Guangyao was under suspicion of being responsible for Chifeng-zun's murder. Of all times, why was this when she was starting to have doubts?

Stuttering and blushing, without a trace of the decorum she had trained to train into him, Jin Zixuan said, 'My… my brother deserves our trust! For now, at least!'

Suddenly, a flash of white entered their sights.

It was Lan Wangji's ribbons, being given additional attention by the simulation at the moment that Wei Wuxian focused on him. On the carriage, the two sets of ribbons flowed freely, red and white dancing through the air as they traveled forward. Hanguang-jun was facing the road, watching where the carriage was going.

On the other hand, it seemed like Wei Wuxian couldn't take his eyes off the man before him.

A little squee left Jiang Yanli's lips, and Lan Xichen felt some of the tension slip away from him at the sight.

‘*A-Yao deserves a fair chance,*’ he thought, frowning again. ‘*But, if he is indeed responsible for what happened to Da-ge, I won’t let him get away with it.*’

If Lan Xichen’s future self had heard such a thought, he would have instantly paled.

Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, found his attention captivated by far more important matters.

“Hey, Lan Zhan,” he whispered, leaning close and speaking quietly enough that Lan Xichen could at least pretend not to hear. “Quite a fancy carriage, huh?”

He gestured to the gold engravings with a dramatic flourish, grinning widely when Lan Wangji’s blank expression somehow became even more blank (as he refused to show his honest feelings about said extravagance).

“I know, I know,” Wei Wuxian acknowledged. “But it still suits you better than going the complete opposite direction, doesn’t it? You might be able to make Little Apple cooperate, but having just us and the donkey makes you stick out like a sore thumb!”

“...I do not mind,” Hanguang-jun said in response.

Both the real and simulated Lan Xichens (the latter of whom was trying desperately to pretend to not be listening) seemed to glow with joy at the comment. The teenage Lan Wangji withheld a squeak.

(This was even worse than the teasing! It was equal levels of embarrassment, but he couldn’t bring himself to be mad about it! How unfair!)

As though having somewhat expected Lan Wangji’s response, Wei Wuxian was able to recover immediately and asked, “Hey, do you remember? Back when we were in the cold springs together?”

By the reddening of the real Lan Wangji’s ears, it was clear that he most certainly did.

“When you tried to steal the jade token?” Hanguang-jun asked, raising an eyebrow.

Laughing at the reminder, Wei Wuxian corrected, “No, no. Before that. At… after I got punished. We had both… we met up there.”

‘We had both gotten punished,’ wouldn’t have made sense for Mo Xuanyu to say, so Wei Wuxian had no choice but to correct it. Putting aside Lan Xichen, who might not be dangerous even if he did find out, the Jin coachman was most certainly not someone who had their trust. Luckily, Lan Wangji understood.

“I remember,” he said.

And he did:

‘How did you get here?’

'Zewu-jun told me to come!'

Nie Huaisang, slowly beginning to recover from the earlier shock, sent his 'er-ge' a discrete thumbs up.

'Honestly, Lan Zhan, you really impressed me back there,' Wei Wuxian admitted, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly, but full of genuine intent. 'I can't believe you punished yourself as well. Being as serious and stubborn as you were definitely isn't something I could do. You're so cool.'

A bright flush covered Lan Wangji's ears as his few remaining defenses caved in. He was slowly working up a resistance towards Wei Wuxian's flirting, but when it came to sincere, honest compliments?

He stood no chance.

And-

'*Hey, Lan-er-gongzi, let's be friends.*'

'*Yes. Yes,*' he thought. '*Yes.*'

A shine of gold flashed before their eyes as the memory disappeared, bringing them back to the Jin pathway.

"What about it?" Hanguang-jun asked, making eye contact once more.

"I told you a little about my parents then, didn't I?"

Lan Qiren couldn't quite hide a flinch.

'My parents died when I was four. You might think I remember them, but I don't. I don't even remember what my parents looked like.'

Feeling a sudden, unexplainable sourness in her throat, Madam Yu looked away.

'But there's one thing I do remember; I was riding a donkey with my mom beside me, and my dad was right in front of us. I think my mom cracked a joke, making my father laugh…'

"Maybe, someday… we'll have to reenact that."

Lan Wangji's eyes widened.

And with that, the watchers were pulled even deeper into the past. Lime-green leaves covered their vision, and a well-worn dusty path was laid out before them. None of the watchers could recognize this scenery, but they all knew who the trio of illusions before them were.

A donkey brayed loudly.

'Moooom,' a child's voice called out.

'What's the matter?' a woman's responded.

Jin Zixuan gasped; Jiang Yanli cooed; Jiang Cheng gaped; Lan Wangji felt his mind momentarily shut down.

And Yu Ziyuan immediately had to look away.

'Is A-Ying tired?' the woman continued. 'Come, Mom will carry you.'

'I don't want that,' the boy whined, walking slightly faster.

'Why don't you want me to?' the woman demanded at once. 'Mom really wants to carry you-'

'Waaaaah! Dad!" Little A-Ying cried out, reaching towards Wei Changze at once.

'Stop fooling around,' the former Jiang Sect member scolded. Nonetheless, he obediently stepped closer and pulled the young Wei Wuxian onto his back. From the side, Cangse watched with an undeniable fondness.

"What a joke," Madam Yu hissed, too quietly for anyone to hear. Madam Jin's expression also turned bitter for a moment, and she stared at the couple with a heavy gaze.

A moment later, they both sighed.

'*Am I really so pathetic that I'd be jealous of a dead woman?*' Madam Jin wondered. '*And A-Xuan might end up dead, but… at least he wasn't thrown into the Burial Mounds — wasn't eaten alive by his own corpses, considered a villain by the cultivation world at large.*'

(Her standards might have gotten a little warped by the simulation.)

Madam Yu, on the other hand, had a far more burning realization to make.

Back at Lotus Pier, just after the Wen Indoctrination Camp and the Xuanwu Cave, what was it she had said?

'Sect Leader Jiang, take a good look at your biological son! Jiang Cheng is your flesh and blood! Even if you don't like him because I'm his mother, he's still your son!' she had screeched. 'I'm sure you know the rumors. They say that after all these years, you still can't get over a certain someone and even treat her son as your own. Some people even think Wei Ying is your-'

'Yu Ziyuan!' Jiang Fengmian had shouted, furious at the insinuation.

Well of course she would think that. Look at Cangse Sanran! A beautiful woman; an amazing cultivator; a loving mother; ~~everything Yu Ziyuan was not.~~ Why wouldn't Jiang Fengmian have still been in love with her? Sect Leader Jiang's actions during the fall of Lotus Pier had

indeed proven that he cared more about Jiang Cheng than he did about Wei Wuxian — had proven that Wei Wuxian *wasn't* his son — but that didn't say anything about the mothers.

Why, looking at this, it was obvious which of the two of them Jiang Fengmian would love more.

('*And whose fault is that?*' a little voice hissed into her head.)

Meanwhile, excited by the piggy back ride, the three year old Wei Wuxian was tilting around wildly, trying to see everything he could from this high-up perch.

'Sit there properly,' Wei Changze told him.

From the side, Cangse Sanren called out, 'Eh? Wei-gongzi, is your son so precious that I can't even carry him?'

"She calls him 'Wei-gongzi?'" Wen Qing repeated, somewhat surprised. A moment later, though, she shook her head at her own foolishness. After all, since returning to life, Wei Wuxian had obviously come to find a tremendous amount of joy in the use of 'Hanguang-jun,' 'Lan-er-geg-e,' and 'Lan-er-gongzi,' hadn't he?

And Wei Changze knew full well exactly how true that was.

Huffing in amusement, the rogue cultivator shook his head: 'The last time you carried him, you put a fish in his clothes.'

'It was just a tiny fish!' she protested.

"A *fish*?!" Jiang Cheng gaped. "That… she-"

"Is most definitely A-Xian's mother," Jiang Yanli finished with a laugh. Hearing that, Yu Ziyuan's sour expression fell until it was simply a bitter emptiness.

'A-Die,' the tiny A-Ying called out.

Lan Wangji's heart stopped for a solid 2 seconds.

'Alright, come,' Wei Changze allowed, dropping his son onto the donkey.

'Aah! A-Die, I'm going to fall!' Wei Wuxian cried out, but continued laughing all throughout. 'Diiiiiiiiiiiie!'

His cries went ignored.

(Cangse Sanren, laughing on the side, certainly wasn't any help.)

'Don't move,' Wei Changze instructed, setting A-Ying upright again. 'Sit properly. You're not going to fall.'

And he was right. Even more excited than before, Wei Wuxian looked around at the surrounding forest from atop the donkey's back. With each step, the donkey tipped him slightly to the left or right, and the child delighted in exaggerating the motion until his father sent him a chiding look.

Nevertheless, his joy was obvious.

'Wow!' the boy gasped out, staring intently at a few water lilies floating in a river to the side.

'A-Ying!' Cangse Sanren called out. 'Are you super high up there?'

'High!' Wei Wuxian responded, bouncing a little in excitement.

Lan Xichen and Jiang Yanli both melted at the scene, while Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue felt years of stress vanish from their bones. Although none of them were biologically related to him, they had all activated on their 'older sibling' switch for him quite some time ago. Wei Wuxian was theirs, now.

And, in Nie Huaisang's humble opinion, was Lan Wangji's most of all.

(Throughout it all, it was getting quite hard to remember that the two had never actually met.)

'A-Ying, tell me, who's the better ride? Your dad, or this donkey?'

In front of them, Wei Changze shook his head fondly at his wife's question, unable to hide the smile that formed on his lips.

Had Jiang Fengmian ever looked at Yu Ziyuan like that? Had *anyone* ever looked at Yu Ziyuan like that?

Well of course not. She was just the Violet Spider; she couldn't be *perfect* like Cangse Sanren was! No wonder things had turned out the way they had. Jiang Cheng would order Jin Ling to bring his dog over so he could torture someone, while Wei Wuxian would teach the juniors to let go of their fear and cooperate with each other. How could anything else happen when Cangse Sanren was *just so perfect?!*

(Not once did she consider whether she could personally do anything to change this.)

Meanwhile:

Wei Wuxian sat, deep in thought in regards to his mother's question. He looked back and forth between the donkey and his father, analytical eyes judging everything appropriately. Finally:

'Dad's the best ride!' the boy declared.

Laughing, his mother instantly agreed, 'Of course!'

Wei Changze just sighed, the smile still present on his face.

“What a shame,” Wen Ruohan couldn’t help but mutter, his mouth dipping into a frown. It was truly unfortunate that the simulation had come too late for them to do anything to save Wei Wuxian’s parents. The Chief Cultivator didn’t care much about them individually, but…

The child Wei Wuxian from the other flashbacks they had seen was a boy who had spent years living on the streets, fighting for food. As carefree as he had seemed at Lotus Pier and the Cloud Recessess, he had remained all-too aware of the enormous debt he owed Jiang Fengmian.

(Which shouldn’t be a debt at all, in Wen Ruohan’s opinion. Considering how much the Jiang Sect got out of having the most talented disciple of the generation as their head disciple, it made absolutely no sense for them to continue to lord their ‘kind gesture’ over him. Jiang Fengmian might have claimed to have learned his lesson, but Wen Ruohan wasn’t stupid enough to believe that.)

He took a deep breath out, feeling his anger rising up within him again. If he had gotten Wei Wuxian — or, as a far more likely outcome, if Wei Wuxian’s parents had survived that night — how would the boy have turned out? Just as brilliant, dedicated, and inventive as ever, but thriving without the constant accusations of ‘showing off’ and ‘playing the hero’ thrust in his face?

Sighing to himself once more, Wen Ruohan dipped his head minutely. He might not have cared much about them while they were alive, but Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren had his respect for the boy they had tried to raise. He could honor their deaths for that, at the very least.

Wen Ruohan’s thoughts faded away right as the simulation returned to the main storyline. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji stared into each others eyes, the former leaning forward in his seat, and the latter seemingly completely oblivious to the world outside of the two of them.

Finally, Lan Xichen cleared his throat.

“Wangji, Mo-gongzi, we’re here.”

“Er-ge!” Nie Huaisang protested at once, a look of complete and utter betrayal on his face.

Rolling his eyes, Nie Mingjue pointed out, “Given the look that Jin disciple is sending them, I’m pretty sure Xichen waited as long as he possibly could before interrupting.”

“He should have waited longer!”

“Huaisang-”

“No, I agree, Da-ge,” Lan Xichen objected. “My other self was clearly grossly unaware of the nature of this exchange. If he had had the necessary context, I assure you I wouldn’t have made that choice.”

Jiang Cheng quietly groaned at the sickeningly sweet sentiment, while Jiang Yanli chuckled lightly.

About two meters away, a Jin disciple announced, "Lan Sect of Gusu, please enter here."

After another half-second pause, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji got up, walking in the direction the disciple pointed them towards. At the top of the stairs up Koi Tower was a wide, brick-paved square, bustling with people.

"...Wow," Jin Zixuan muttered. The other juniors were even more astonished than he was.

Humming in appreciation, Jin Guangshan observed, "It would appear we've expanded considerably. And remodeled too, if I'm not mistaken."

The extravagance here was even greater than the current Koi Tower.

Judging by the simulated Wei Wuxian's shock, it was greater than it had been thirteen years ago as well.

"Then… I guess we have A-Y… Jin Guangyao, to thank for this," Jin Zixuan muttered, unable to keep the disbelief out of his tone. His brother was Chief Cultivator, so some level of competence could be expected, but this was still a shock.

(Even Jin Zixuan might not be able to lead the Jin Sect this well.)

"...Let's hold off before we give any praise," Nie Huaisang suggested, keeping his voice too low for anyone but the nearby Jin Zixuan to hear. Although his face and voice were perfectly pleasant, the Jin heir couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more lurking underneath.

"...Hold off?" he repeated.

"If this 'Jin Guangyao' is actually responsible for what happened to my Da-ge, then who knows what exactly went down to make the Jin Sect progress this far," he mused lightly, tone juxtaposed against the nature of his words. "At the very least, I'd like to give those 'watchtowers' he's so famous for another look."

"Huh?" Jin Zixuan said again, still not comprehending. After all, what could be bad about the watchtowers?

Seeing the other's confusion, Nie Huaisang suddenly fumbled, "Well, I don't know really, I'm just… I really don't know!"

On the far side of the square from where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were, a gargantuan alabaster base sat over nine stairs that were intricately decorated with ruyi curvature — the picture of excess. At the top of that laid Koi Tower, a magnificent palace overlooking the ocean of Sparks Amidst Snow peonies below. The large white petals surrounding golden pestles were majestic enough on their own, but to see this many all at once?

“Very impressive,” Wen Ruohan acknowledge, and Jin Guangshan seemed to preen under the praise.

“Su Sect of Moling, please enter here!”

“Nie Sect of Qinghe, please come here!”

Sect Jiang of Yunmeng, please enter this way!”

As soon as he showed up, Jiang Cheng shot a sharp glance at them.

‘*Oh, please just shut up!*’ Jiang Cheng thought, not wanting to hear his future-self ruin his relationship with Wei Wuxian any further. Despite his sincere wish, however, his future self remained unable to heed his request.

Speaking in a resolutely indifferent tone, he greeted, “Zewu-jun. Hanguang-jun.”

Nodding in response, Lan Xichen returned, “Sect Leader Jiang.”

The two Jiang cultivators behind Jiang Cheng bowed deeply to the Lan brothers, but Jiang Cheng paid them no mind. He scanned over the trio, eyes resting on Wei Wuxian for just a second too long.

Then, turning his head to face the other Lan brother, Jiang Cheng commented, “Hanguang-jun, I’ve never seen you at one of Koi Tower’s discussion conferences before. Why the sudden interest?”

Neither of the Lan brothers replied, but it seemed as though Jiang Cheng hadn’t expected a response to begin with. He had already turned towards Wei Wuxian, and the indifference in his expression gave way to hate.

“If I remember correctly, don’t the two of you never take needless personnel while traveling? What’s the situation? Just a once in a blue moon occurrence?”

Burying his face in his hands, Jiang Cheng’s thoughts became an endless repetition of ‘*Shut up, shut up, shut up shutup-*’

“Now who is this most honorable cultivator? Could someone please introduce him to me?”

After seeing Wei Wuxian’s reaction to Fairy, ~~after *torturing him* with a dog,~~ there was no way Sect Leader Jiang wouldn’t know it was Wei Wuxian before him. If Jiang Cheng hadn’t known what his other self wanted to do to Wei Wuxian, he would have found the whole situation hilarious.

However, as it stood, the future Sect Leader Jiang might levy an accusation that could get Wei Wuxian executed-

No, no. The simulated Jiang Cheng had already done that quite a few times. However, because he’d apparently accused *countless people* of that without one of those accusations

being true, not even Jin Ling believed him.

As it was, however-

"Er-ge, why didn't you tell me beforehand that Wangji was going to come with you?" a voice asked from behind.

"A-Yao!" Jin Zixuan gaped.

"Thank the Heavens," Jiang Cheng sighed.

The owner of Koi Tower, Lianfang-zun, Jin Guangyao, stood before them. Lan Xichen returned his smile, while Lan Wangji gave a respectful nod. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, stood still, carefully observing the chief cultivator of all sects.

And, although no one called attention to it, Nie Huaisang was doing the exact same thing.

"Jin Guangyao was fairly attractive," Lan Jingyi read aloud, sounding as though he was being forced at knifepoint to read every word. "His skin was 'fair,' and he had a vermillion mark on his forehead. His pupils were 'distinct' against the whites of his eyes, appearing 'lively' but 'not frivolous-'"

"Jingyi, stop with the air quotes," Lan Sizhui scolded with the patience of someone who had been putting up with this for at least three hours.

"I didn't *do* anything-"

"I could hear them in your tone."

There was a brief silence, before the other Lan boy finally gave in:

"His features were rather clean, simultaneously making him appear attractive and ingenious. The shadow of a smile was always perched on the corner of his lips, revealing his clever character. Such a face was enough to earn the love of women, and yet wouldn't evoke the aversion of men. The elderly would think of him as 'sweet,' while the young would think of him as 'amicable' and 'honorable' and 'reliable-'"

"*Jingyi!*"

"Whatever, they'll be able to see most of this for themselves anyway!" Lan Jingyi huffed. "Da-da-duh-da-da, small figure, calm demeanor, a powerful aura of inviolability. Done."

Lan Qiren was absolutely never going to allow Lan Jingyi to read out loud in class until he had personally given the boy a few lessons on the subject.

Judging by Lan Sizhui's following sigh, the other boy would agree with him.

Meanwhile, Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao were catching up momentarily. Their joy was obvious to anyone watching, and the sheer level of comfort they had in each other

was enough to make several people look away.

A singe of guilt welled up in Lan Xichen at that, but he couldn't tell if it was due to his other-self trusting someone he shouldn't, or towards himself, for doubting someone who would obviously grow to mean so much to him.

But, looking to the side at Nie Mingjue, who was continuing to stand protectively next to Nie Huaisang, he couldn't find himself regretting his decision either.

Finally, the watchers looked down and noticed the small figure that had followed Jin Guangyao out, hiding behind him all the while. His copper eyes peeked out, making him resemble a terrified puppy shivering in the rain.

"A-Ling!" Jin Zixuan grinned, always excited to see his son.

Too scared to make eye contact with Jiang Cheng, Jin Ling hid even farther behind Jin Guangyao and mumbled, "Uncle."

"Oh? So you still know I'm your uncle?!" Jiang Cheng snapped, making Jin Ling wilt further.

"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli said, softly but reproachfully. Her brother faded at once, and she stopped there. It seemed the younger version of her brother, at least, understood what she was displeased about; there wasn't much more she could do.

(After all, Jiang Cheng took after their mother a little too well. In some ways, Jiang Yanli couldn't be surprised that he had ended up like this.)

Feeling Jin Ling tugging on his sleeve, Jin Guangyao immediately intervened: "Now, Sect Leader Jiang, there's no need for that. A-Ling realized his mistake some time ago. During the past few days, he's been so scared you'll punish him that he hasn't been eating well. Children just like to make mischief. I know no one loves him more than you. Let's not bother him about it so much."

Jumping at the opening, Jin Ling piped in, "Yes, yes! Uncle can prove it! My appetite's been bad these past few days!"

"Your appetite's been bad?" Jiang Cheng repeated, his glare showing no small amount of skepticism. "Looking at the health in your complexion, I'd say you haven't been missing too many meals!"

"Sect leader Jiang-" Jin Guangyao intervened again.

The more he saw, the more desperately Jin Zixuan hoped that Wei Wuxian's deduction was wrong, and Jin Guangyao was an innocent party. After everything that Jin Guangshan had done — not to say that Jin Zixuan *disapproved* of his father's action; he just disagreed a little — Jin Zixuan knew the least he could do was offer aid to his half brothers. If Meng Yao was living in conditions even a tenth as bad as the ones Mo Xuanyu had been stuck in, then that was the least he could do.

At that moment, however, Jin Ling had finally worked up the courage to look beyond his uncles and towards the trio standing behind them. At once, he recognized black-robed man:

"Why are you here?!" he blurted out, astonishment more than obvious.

Tilting his head casually, Wei Wuxian grinned and responded, "To get a free meal!"

A quick chuckle left Wen Qing's lips before she cleared her throat a few times, barely managing to compose herself.

However, Wei Wuxian's response only made Jin Ling angrier: "How dare you still come?! Didn't I warn you-"

The Jin heir paused in his threat, feeling Jin Guangyao gently pat his head.

Seeing the unending composure with which the man was handling the situation, Lan Xichen could understand how his other self managed to be so comfortable around him. He hoped, once again, that such faith was not without merit.

(But, remembering every compliment Lan Jingyi had struggled to say, Lan Xichen couldn't quite keep down the growing dread that was beginning to form in his mind.)

Softly, pushing Jin Ling behind him, Jin Guangyao smiled: "Alright, why not? You're our guest now that you've come. I don't know all the details, but I am certain Koi Tower has enough food for one more guest."

He turned to Lan Xichen, giving his sworn brother a soft, personal smile.

"Er-ge, why don't you have a seat first? I'm going to check over there, and make arrangements for Wangji as well."

"There's no need to trouble yourself."

"How is this trouble? Er-ge, you don't have to be so polite now that you're at my place. Really."

At that moment, the disembodied voice of Lan Sizhui spoke (taking over for Lan Jingyi, who Sizhui apparently decided couldn't be trusted with such a task): "Jin Guangyao could remember the age, title, rank, and appearance of anyone after just one encounter. Even if a few years had passed, he'd be able to greet them without any fault. If he met someone twice, he'd be able to remember all their likes and dislikes, and therefore be able to cater to their needs."

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow, impressed.

(No wonder Meng Yao had gotten close enough to kill him. His support of people he found talented or useful was well known.)

“Since Hanguang-jun had come to Koi Tower without any advance notice, Jin Guangyao hadn’t yet arranged a table for him. However, he was more than capable of doing so, and thus rushed off to prepare.”

“Wow, he’s… really good at that,” Jin Zixuan observed, relaxing when Jiang Yanli gave him a comforting smile back. “Maybe later-”

“A-Xuan,” his mother hissed into his ear. “Don’t get any funny ideas before we know everything.”

Jin Zixuan flinched at the sudden words, spinning to face his mother, but hesitating before whispering back, “I know that. But A-Niang, we’re… bothers?”

A scowl crossed her face and she hissed. “Don’t describe that son of a-”

Both of them paused, feeling a heavy look directed at them. They glanced over, and saw Lan Wangji standing in silent disapproval. Before the simulation, Lan Qiren would not have dared to allow his nephew to glare at someone from an older generation, regardless of what he personally thought. After everything he had seen, however….

He stepped back, and, as if having already known that would be the case, Lan Wangji’s stare continued. There was a tense silence. Madam Jin had nothing she could say in response, for, the moment she stopped to think about it, she had to acknowledge that Lan Wangji was right. She turned away, falling silent once more.

(Jin Guangshan, who had stayed out of the whole exchange, privately thought it was ridiculous for a factual statement to make them all react so strongly.)

The trio followed Jin Guangyao into the Glamor Hall, strolling down a long, red carpet. Beside the numerous sandalwood tables were fair-faced maids, adorned with hoops, jades, and genuine smiles. Even their figures were similar to each other; as they all stood side by side, they created quite a captivating appearance. Even Wei Wuxian had to stare at them for a while once they came into view.

An ugly, bitter taste filled Lan Wangji’s heart. Although his outward expression didn’t change whatsoever, the more observant watchers were able to notice him scratching at his chair’s wooden armrest grumpily.

(Now, suddenly, he was able to understand why his other-self had felt a need to kick a rock several segments ago.)

However, a moment later, a flash of white caught Wei Wuxian’s eye, and his attention was once again captured by the second jade sitting to his left.

Seeing that faithful adoration — and the two weren’t even *together yet* — a proud, overjoyed aura filled Madam Jin’s body, and the annoyance she had felt earlier was instantly washed away. Both Nie Huaisang and Jiang Yanli giggled slightly.

One of the maids poured Wei Wuxian a glass of liquor. Seeing that, he smiled once and nodded at her:

“Thanks.”

She froze.

“Huh?” Jiang Cheng glared. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

If that *maid* thought she was too good for his shixiong-

‘*Oh, that’s right,*’ Wei Wuxian suddenly realized, looking around and seeing the absurd number of faces focused on him and him alone. ‘*Right, right. This is Koi Tower, where Mo Xuanyu harassed somebody from his own sect and got kicked out. Who could have expected him to return so ostentatiously, as if he had no shame. He even slipped into a high ranking seat alongside the Twin Jades of Lan….*’

Shifting to the side, Wei Wuxian whispered, “Hanguang-jun. Hanguang-jun!”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t leave me,” Wei Wuxian begged. “There’s probably a lot of people here who know about Mo Xuanyu. If somebody decides they want to talk about the good ol’ days with me, I’ll have to keep on playing the fool and spouting nonsense. I would end up making you lose face.”

A million thoughts flashed through Lan Wangji’s head at once. ‘*I wouldn’t mind,*’ and ‘*That’s more than fine,*’ reigned prominently among them, but one thought stood out above all others:

‘*Please don’t leave me,’ Wei Wuxian had said.*

‘Don’t leave,’ as in Wei Wuxian wanted him to stay; he liked when he was there. It had been obvious through his actions beforehand, especially with the way Wei Wuxian had come back after running into Jiang Cheng, but, compared to what their relationship was beforehand….

‘Huh? Oh no! Those pictures were really great! How could you just tear them up?’

‘Get lost.’

‘What? Get lost? I can’t believe you’d say that! Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan. They say you’re cultured and elegant, always well behaved. But look at you now, goodness-’

‘GET LOST!’

They had been only kids then (technically older than Lan Wangji was now, but still). It made sense for them to act this way. However, when they were older-

The Wens had attacked. Lan Wangji’s home had been burned down, and the tension of everything within the indoctrination camp (the Xuanwu most of all) had been too much.

‘Um, Lan Zhan-’

‘Wei Ying, you really are… the kind of person I hate the most.’

*And then Wei Wuxian was th**ro**wn* i*n**to th**e* bu*r**ia**l m**ou**n*ds *and-*

‘Wei Ying…. Come back to Gusu with me.’

‘To Gusu?’ a pause, then, ‘I see. After all, your uncle despises people who cultivate the demonic path. You’re his most beloved disciple; of course you’re the same as him!’

“Wei Ying-’

“Who do you think you are?! I’m not afraid of you or the Gusu Lan Clan!’

After experiencing an endless fight in the burial mounds, it was no wonder Wei Wuxian had difficulty seeing others as anything but enemies out to devour him whole. However, none of that could have prepared Lan Wangji for what he saw.

For a brief moment, there had been something almost resembling hatred in Wei Wuxian’s eyes.

Which was why, now, there was one thing playing in his head over and over again:

‘*Please don’t leave me,’ Wei Wuxian begged.*

“You don’t need to ask,” Lan Wangji whispered, too quietly for anyone but himself to hear. “Yes, always. Without question.”

Luckily for Hanguang-jun’s dignity, the older version was much more composed than the younger. Calm as ever, he glanced Wei Wuxian’s way and gave his reply:

“All you have to do is not provoke others,” he said, sliding his alcohol glass across the elongated table towards Wei Wuxian.

“That’s easy enough,” Wei Wuxian responded, brimming with confidence.

“Why do I get the feeling that things are not going to end so easily?” Madam Yu wondered. Though, by this point, she was able to acknowledge that Wei Wuxian often managed to provoke her into punishing him simply by breathing, so perhaps she wasn’t in a position to judge.

At that moment, the Jin Sect’s announcer stepped forward.

“Sect Leader Jin and his wife, Madam Jin, have arrived!”

The doors opened wide, and the couple walked in. Lavish, gold-embroidered robes flowed softly as they stepped, the entire crowd falling silent at once as they observed the pair’s entrance. Although the woman seemed rather dignified, there was a trance of

innocence in her expression, and her graceful features almost appeared rather childlike. This was Qin Su.

Jin Guangshan felt that it was only to be expected of his son to land such an appealing bride. He gave an appreciative nod.

And, behind him, his other son stood frozen.

At the moment the announcer introduced the pair as "Sect Leader Jin" and "Madam Jin," Jin Zixuan had half-expected to see himself and Jiang Yanli walking down the hall. That's how it would have been — *should have* been.

Some small, tiny, suppressed part of Jin Zixuan couldn't help but feel wronged by it all.

(How dare that couple look so perfect, so happy, when they were stealing his and Jiang Yanli's places?)

He felt ashamed of himself immediately after. They had nothing to do with whatever had happened to him and his wife. And, in all honestly, it was even worse to blame them for being happy. After all, the only reason he and Jiang Yanli had any relationship troubles at all was because *Jin Zixuan* had kept scorning her at every advance. He had viewed her only as the boring girl he was going to spend the rest of his life trapped to, just like his parents were with each other. He had never once tried to get to know her — not until years had already gone by.

'*And besides, they're not so perfect after all. If Jin Guangyao is really the one who turned Nie Mingjue's corpse into a-*'

The Jin heir cut off that thought a moment later.

In front of everyone's eyes, the happy, idealistic couple walked forward, hand in hand.

What was wrong with him? That was an even worse thing to think! The future's Zewu-jun had the utmost trust in Jin Guangyao, and the future's Chifeng-zun had been sworn brothers with him? How could Jin Zixuan possibly take comfort in the fact that Jin Guangyao might have betrayed them both?!

'*A-Yao, please…*' he thought. '*Please have had nothing to do with this. I'm sorry for thinking that. I was wrong. I really, truly do want a brother like-*'

Well, not like Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin, considering how that had turned out. And not really like the twin jades or Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang either, as he was so different in personality from all of them that he couldn't imagine himself fitting in that dynamic. But-

'*I'll help you. I'll use my position to help you. I've been living as the heir of the Jin Sect all this time, while Mo Xuanyu was going through torture and who knows what was happening to you. I'll make it up to you both, I swear. So please just-*'

Please don't have had anything to do with this.

Once again, it was Lan Sizhui's voice that took over:

"Qin Su and Jin Guangyao had been the representation of loving couples in the cultivation world for the past two years, holding a mutual respect for each other. Everyone knew that Qin Su had been born in the Laoling Qin Sect, a subsidiary clan of the Lanling Jin. Qin Cangye, the leader of the Laoling Qin Sect, happened to be a subordinate of Jin Guangshan, and had followed him faithfully for years. Although Jin Guangyao was Jin Guangshan's son, the two were originally ill-suited for each other-"

Three, simultaneous snorts echoed from the other three juniors of the future, and there was a quiet, mocking "Oh, 'originally?!'" from Jingyi.

"-given Jin Guangyao's mother's status. Qin Cangye opposed the union. However, during the Sunshot Campaign, Qin Su's life was saved by Jin Guangyao. She fell in love with him and never gave up, insisting that she wanted to be his wife. In the end, they finally reached the conclusion of their romantic story. Jin Guangyao didn't let her down either-"

The three snorts occurred once again.

"-Even though he held the important position of Chief Cultivator, his behavior was drastically different from his father's. He never took in any concubines, much less had a relationship with any other women."

"Well, at least he has that going for him," Madam Jin muttered, and, despite their now-ruptured friendship, Madam Yu nodded in agreement.

"It was indeed something many wives of Sect Leaders envied."

"...That does *sound* good," Lan Qiren began. However-

"The laughter of those future-juniors doesn't lend it much credibility, huh?" Nie Mingjue concluded.

Frowning, Jin Zixuan asked, "You don't think he cheated on her, do you?"

"But they seem so happy together," Jiang Yanli added on, not noticing her mother's slight flinch at those words. "Maybe… maybe he just was hiding something involving Sect Leader Nie from her. I can see how that would make it difficult for their relationship to be considered 'ideal,' after."

"I guess we'll have to see," Nie Huaisang sing-songed, his joyful tone not giving even the slightest hint as to his true feelings on the matter.

At that moment, Jin Guangyao and Madam Jin sat down, and Sect Leader Jin's voice rang out: "Today, I have invited you all here for the annual discussion conference. We are honored to have the prestigious clan members of the cultivation world here. We hold this banquet to welcome all of you."

A picture-perfect, ideal Chief Cultivator.

“I hereby toast-”

So long as…

“To a successful discussion conference!”

…it was real.

“To a successful discussion conference,” the gathered clans toasted back, and Wei Wuxian took a gleeful gulp of the alcohol Lan Wangji had handed over to him. Conversation began again, full of praise for the work of the Chief Cultivator.

The words were exaggerated and grandiose. And pathetically empty too.

Wen Ruohan knew full well that he had not been ‘betrayed’ by the other sects (considering he had attacked first), but he was well used to the manner of speaking sect leaders would have during conferences. They would form alliances with each other, and swear nothing would break them, but, once one became an enemy of the Wen Sect, the other would instantly jump ship and curse them to the end of time.

The praise being given to ~~that traitor~~ Jin Guangyao was no different. If he was truly involved in whatever had happened to Nie Mingjue, things would play out quite interestingly.

The banquet came and left, and soon the clans were splitting off into groups to be led to their chambers for the night. The moon was rising into the sky, but the candlelight reflecting off the golden palace made the room as bright as ever. Lan Xichen paused, staring at the walls absent-mindedly, and Jin Guangyao noticed at once. The Chief Cultivator stood up, walking over to him.

And there was concern in his expression. Whatever else, he appeared to genuinely care about Lan Xichen.

Nie Mingjue clenched his fists together.

‘*Maybe… if Meng Yao is innocent in all this,*’ he thought, a flew flecks of hope slowly beginning to rise in his heart. ‘*Maybe, in this world, we’ll be able to become martial brothers again. And Xichen-*’

Jin Guangyao reached out towards Lan Xichen.

And was immediately cut off by a large projectile slamming into him and screaming, “San-ge!!!! Saaaaaaaan-geeeeeee!!!!!!”

“Huaisang?!” Nie Mingjue asked, thrown by the whiplash of seeing his brother tearfully hugging the person who was suspected to have been involved in the damage to Nie Mingjue’s corpse.

(~~In the *destruction of his soul.*~~)

Having been thrown back by the force, Jin Guangyao had to re-adjust his hat before asking, "Huaisang? What's wrong? Let's calm down first."

Cheeks flushed with alcohol, Nie Huaisang wailed, "Oh, brother! What do I do?! Can you help me again?! I promise, this really is the last time!!!"

"Wasn't that situation dealt with by the people I brought for you?"

"The last situation has been handled, but now there's a new problem! Brother, what should I do? I would rather die than have to deal with this!!!"

The simulated Nie Huaisang's cries went on and on, and the watchers' mouths began to drop open one by one.

"Sect Leader — I mean, Nie-gongzi," Lan Qiren began, forgetting for a moment that the current Huaisang was still just heir. "Are you… begging him for *more* help?!"

Blinking twice, Nie Huaisang gave an embarrassed laugh and confessed, "It sure looks like that, huh?"

"Wha-"

Jin Zixuan's quiet, confused 'what' was instantly cut off by the famed teacher, who shouted, "You — don't treat this like a strange incident to be observed. That's your future-self there! How many times have I told you that you need to focus in class. If you had simply listened to all of my lessons this wouldn't be happening! I know you never really wanted to be Sect Leader, but that's hardly an excuse! When we leave the simulation-"

Lan Qiren's rant continued on and on, and Nie Huaisang (a certified master of pretending to listen to someone while actually zoning out), nodded at all the right places.

Meanwhile, the simulated Nie Huaisang's cries continued on and on, and his attempt at explaining the new problem he was facing soon became so complicated that even Jin Guangyao couldn't understand.

And the real Nie Huaisang focused his attention on that.

'*Do I really not know?*' he wondered, still nodding along whenever Lan Qiren paused in his rant to take in a breath of air. '*Back when they found the corpse's — Da-ge's — legs in the ancestral burial mounds, my other self claimed to know nothing about it. But, if I'm spending this much time with Jin Guangyao… if I was that close to Da-ge's legs all this time….*'

There was nothing Nie Huaisang could see from his own behavior that explicitly raised suspicion. If he genuinely trusted and relied on Jin Guangyao ("San-ge," his brother's sworn brother), then this was pretty much how he would behave. And sure, Nie Huaisang was certain he'd be *capable* of solving whatever issue was plaguing the Nie Sect on his own, but why would he if he could just get the Chief Cultivator to do it for him? If Jin Guangyao was really innocent, and Nie Huaisang was really ignorant of the corpse's origins, then everything would be fine.

But if that's not the case….

'*I should watch my future-self's actions a bit more closely,*' he decided. Little did he know, at that precise moment, Wen Ruohan's thoughts were exactly the same.

By now, the future Nie Huaisang's explanation had gotten so tangled and complicated that no information could be gleamed from it anymore. It appeared as though it was something that couldn't be explained easily, so Jin Guangyao raised a hand, stopping Nie Huaisang's tearful explanation momentarily.

"A-Su, you can go back first," he said, turning to his wife. "Huaisang, let's find somewhere to sit down. There's no need to hurry…."

The sobbing Nie Huaisang clutched onto Jin Guangyao's arm as he was led outside, and, upon Lan Xichen coming within grabbing distance, clutched onto Sect Leader Lan as well, dragging both the sworn brothers outside.

Clearing her throat, Qin Su saluted Lan Wangji, adding, "Hanguang-jun, I don't think you've come to one of Lanling's discussion conferences for quite some time. I apologize if the reception was inadequate in any way."

Lan Wangji simply nodded in response.

And that was another interesting thing to note, in Wen Ruohan's eyes. Unlike Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji was a member of the main clan of a sect. Whatever his feelings about the Jin Sect, it was quite strange for him to not go to any discussion conferences. And it wasn't as though he was resting during that time either.

'Second Master Lan,' the future Jiang Cheng spoke with a sneer. 'You live up to your reputation to appear wherever chaos is. I never imagined that you would show up in such a remote place.'

Uninterested in political power, Lan Wangji went around solving any case he came across, and developed an impeccable reputation as a result. The cultivation world as a whole was more favorably-regarded thanks to his existence, and the Lan Clan specifically had bolstered their current reputation using his actions, despite how little Lan Wangji cared for politics. It wasn't as though Lan Wangji could ever be separated from the Lan Clan, but….

The annoyance he had felt for the Jiang Clan upon learning how horribly they had managed Wei Wuxian was still burning just as strong as ever, regardless of Jiang Fengmian's pathetic attempts at fixing the mess outside. Wen Ruohan had said earlier that simply sending Wei Wuxian away from the Jiang Clan would be enough for him, but, after everything he had seen since then, one thing had become perfectly clear:

There was no one better for Wei Wuxian than Lan Wangji, and no one better for Lan Wangji than Wei Wuxian.

If Wei Wuxian was brought to the Wen Sect, and Lan Wangji happened to marry in, then *both* of the future's strongest players would be under his influence. It would help the Wen Sect

enormously, and, more importantly, would allow both of them to become anything they wanted to be. Leaving Wei Wuxian with the Jiang Sect was a waste of his potential; keeping Lan Wangji away from Wei Wuxian was a waste altogether. The solution was simple.

However, right before leaving behind that train of thought, Wen Ruohan found his gaze narrowing in on the unusually-quiet Nie heir, giving him a once-over. He had no proof so far, but, given the observations Nie Huaisang had made while watching the simulation, the boy was far more intelligent than he appeared. If that was the case, then it seemed unlikely that he truly didn't know anything about his brother's death.

(And if that was even remotely true, then he was a snake in the grass that would put even Jin Guangyao to shame.)

(Wen Ruohan would need to watch him very, very carefully.)

While Wen Ruohan's thoughts were occupied, Qin Su and said her goodbyes and left with her maid. That allowed Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji to finally have a moment to speak privately with each other, something necessary considering how many secrets they were carrying.

So Wei Wuxian did just that:

"The way everyone at Koi Tower looks at me is so strange! Just what did Mo Xuanyu do? Publicly show his love while naked? What's so special about that? The people of Lanling must really be innocent if that's the case."

Blushing at the dirty joke, Jiang Cheng gave a long, exaggerated groan.

When Lan Wangji merely shook his head at Wei Wuxian's nonsense, Wei Wuxian continued, "Hanguang-jun, I'm gonna go ask someone. Watch Jiang Cheng for me. It's best if he doesn't find me."

And just like that, Jiang Cheng's playfully annoyed act stopped dead in its tracks. He straightened up, frowning awkwardly at the ground while his sister rushed to his side.

"If he does start to leave, hold him back for a bit, will you?"

"...Do not go too far," Lan Wangji requested.

'*Even if he does, he'll always find his way back to you,*' Madam Jin thought, then frowned. '*Though, really, what did Mo Xuanyu do? I can't believe he's done anything to deserve-*'

'To be treated the way he was by the Mos' she would have continued, but the hypocrisy in that thought was blatant enough that even she couldn't ignore it. After all, the Mo Xuanyu in her world had been brought away from the Mos at a much younger age, but that was because of Wei Wuxian. The young Patriarch had objected to his treatment at the hands of that family.

Madam Jin, who had lived in the lap of luxury in Koi Tower, hadn't even known about him. No one would risk telling her, because they all knew how she treated her husband's bastard children.

‘*It’s still Guangshan’s fault, first and foremost!*’ she insisted. ‘*It’s his responsibility. It should be his job to deal with them.*’

And just look at what those unruly brats had done! One of them had summoned back the Yiling Patriarch (who was actually a good person, but Mo Xuanyu hadn’t known that), and the other was under suspicion of being involved in the destruction of Sect Leader Nie’s soul! She was right in thinking they couldn’t be trusted.

~~But, as she glanced back at her once-friend Yu Ziyuan, she couldn’t help but remember thinking that if anyone else had been in Wei Wuxian’s position, they would have snapped a long time ago.~~

While she had been considering that, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji agreed that they would, at the very least, meet back in their room that night. Now the Yiling Patriarch was walking around, gazing over the crowd as if searching for someone, but failing to find them each time. He walked through the golden halls, then out to the garden, and still he couldn’t find what he was looking for. Finally he passed by an intricately laid-out rock garden, and a voice called out to him:

“Hey!”

“A-Ling, don’t be rude,” Jiang Yanli quietly scolded, but Wei Wuxian was pleased.

‘*Found him,*’ he thought.

Then-

“What do you mean, ‘hey?’” Wei Wuxian asked in a hurt, feeble tone. “How rude. Weren’t we all lovey-dovey when we parted? We meet again and you’re as cold and heartless as ever. Now I’m sad.”

“Oh, shut up!” Jin Ling protested, shivering as if the words made goosebumps run up his arms. “Who’s lovey-dovey with you?! Didn’t I already warn you not to mess with our sect?! Why have you come back?”

Shrugging once, Wei Wuxian answered, “Honestly I’ve just been following Hanguang-jun. I’m this close to making him grab a rope and tie me to his body!”

“Liar, liar, liar,” grumbled Jiang Cheng, bitter about the (rightful) lack of trust his own future self had been given, even if he understood why Wei Wuxian wouldn’t want to tell Jin Ling they were suspicious of Jin Guangyao, Jin LIng’s beloved uncle.

“Well, it wasn’t entirely a lie… the rope part might be true,” Nie Huaisang pointed out, making Lan Wangji’s ears turn redder than rubies and causing Jiang Cheng to grumpily sink down further into his chair.

“Anyways,” Wei Wuxian continued, “when have I ever messed with your sect? You mean your uncle? Sect Leader Jiang is the one messing with me, alright.”

“Shut up! My uncle’s only suspicious of you! Don’t talk nonsense! Don’t think I don’t know you haven’t given up and still want to…” he trailed off, as though unable to finish.

“A-Ling?” Jiang Yanli muttered quietly, concern taking over. However, just like always, there was nothing she could do to the simulation. Her future self wasn’t even alive anymore; the Madam of the Jin Sect was Qin Su. She seemed to be a wonderful person, but Jiang Yanli couldn’t expect her to treat Jin Ling like her own son.

Once again, frustration about not knowing the truth behind her death welled up within her.

Right as Jin Ling seemed about ready to speak again, there were a few shouts in the distance. About half a dozen boys wearing the Lanling Jin Sect’s uniform jumped out, and Jin Ling stopped talking at once.

Jin Zixuan had a bad feeling about this.

The boys approached, and their leader, a fifteen year old boy with a wider physique than Jin Ling, stepped forward and said, “I thought I saw wrong. So it really is him.”

Blinking in confusion, Wei Wuxian pointed to himself and asked, “Me?”

“Who else?! Mo Xuanyu, to think you still have the gall to return!”

Frowning, Jin Ling interrupted, “Jin Chan, why did you come? What’s going on here is none of your business.”

The other boy gave a mocking laugh.

Seeing this, Wei Wuxian’s thoughts filled the few still-confused watchers in: ‘*I see. These are probably the kids from Jin Ling’s generation. And, looking at how they’re talking to each other, this group doesn't seem to be on good terms with Jin Ling.*’

Finally, Jin Chan responded, “It’s none of my business, but it is yours? Why do you care about what I do?”

Taking that as their que, four of the boys began to approach Wei Wuxian, only to be cut off when Jin Ling stepped protectively in front of him. Despite his harsh words earlier, Jin Ling was ready to defend Wei Wuxian if need be.

A proud grin worked its way onto Jin Zixuan’s face.

“Stop messing around!” Jin Ling ordered.

“Messing around? What’s wrong with teaching a lesson to an indecent disciple of our sect?”

Jin Ling snorted: “Wake up! He was kicked out a long time ago. He isn’t our sect’s disciple no matter how you look at it!”

“So what?”

More than one person did a double take at Jin Chan’s audacity. They were almost infuriated on Wei Wuxian’s behalf.

(Or they would be, if this kid actually posed any semblance of a threat to the Yiling Patriarch. Instead, they were just a little amused.)

Jin Ling, on the other hand, didn’t have that same luxury:

“‘So what?’ Have you forgotten who he came with today?! You want to teach him a lesson? You’ll have to go through Hanguang-jun first!”

Hearing the name ‘Hanguang-jun,’ the boys faltered momentarily, growing slightly nervous. Even though Lan Wangji wasn’t present, none of them would dare to claim that they weren’t scared of him at all.

Lan Qiren was so proud.

After a few more beats of silence, Jin Chan finally responded, “Ha. Jin Ling, what is this? Didn’t you also hate him? What changed?”

“How do you still have so much to say? Does whether or not I hate him matter to you?!”

Jin Chan laughed and pointed out, “He shamelessly harassed Lianfang-zun, and you’re still defending him?!”

Wei Wuxian did a double take.

And the watchers did one as well.

‘*Harassed? Harassed who? Lianfang-zun?*’ Wei Wuxian’s normally-nimble mind slowly repeated. ‘*Who is Lianfang-zun again? Jin Guangyao? You mean… Mo Xuanyu harassed Jin Guangyao?*’

“Huh?!” Nie Mingjue gaped, forgetting for a moment exactly what they were investigating Jin Guangyao of. “That little — how dare he?! If he went too far-”

A protective fury rose up.

(Just like Lan Xichen didn’t know Jin Guangyao well enough to be protective of him, Nie Mingjue didn’t know him well enough to hate him. Right now, ‘Jin Guangyao’ was just a possible suspect, who they vaguely knew might become their sworn brother some day. As a result, when confronted with this new information, Nie Mingjue’s mind had focused more on the ‘sworn brother’ part than the ‘suspect’ one, and righteous anger flooded through him accordingly.)

Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, just seemed bewildered:

‘*Ah, Mo Xuanyu, Mo Xuanyu. It’s one thing for you to stare at and bother someone else, but why did you have to…*’ he couldn’t even finish, burying his head in his hands and shaking his head in disbelief.

“Aren’t they half-brothers?” Lan Xichen asked, speaking quietly. “I see… that explains the extent of the disgust directed Mo Xuanyu’s way.”

And it explained why Mo Xuanyu had been kicked out of the sect. Although Jin Zixuan didn’t want his half-brother Mo Xuanyu to have done that — hoped desperately that the child ‘A-Yu’ outside the simulation would be proven innocent — part of him subconsciously relaxed. He had wondered why Jin Guangyao hadn’t done anything to save Mo Xuanyu from the horrible circumstances he was living in. If there was an explanation for this (just like there had been an explanation for all of Wei Wuxian’s actions thus far), then maybe, possibly, his imagined future of the three of them working together could come to pass, once Mo Xuanyu was made aware that he couldn’t do something like that again.

~~Maybe Jin Zixuan could have some brothers of his own.~~

However, by this time, Jin Zixuan’s son had allowed his temper to get riled up just a bit too far.

“If you want to fight, then let’s have a fight! I’m not scared of you!”

“Oh, A-Ling!” Jiang Yanli breathed out, nervousness rising.

“Sure! Why not?” one of the other boys cackled. “You’re just going to call your dog to come save you anyways!”

“I can beat you even if I don’t call Fairy!” Jin Ling growled, rolling his sleeves up and storming forward. However, despite his confident words, it didn’t take long for the other boys to surround him. Jin Ling had a slight upper hand in technique, but, as punches flew at him from all sides, he began to struggle quite a bit.

“Hit him!” Wei Wuxian cheered. “Left! On your left!”

“A-Xian, help him!” Jiang Yanli protested. “Oh, A-Ling-”

Jin Ling barely managed to block a kick to his side, and skidded back a few steps.

“Take them down, A-Ling!” Jin Zixuan shouted. “Block!”

Jiang Cheng and Nie Mingjue joined him in the cheering, but Jin Zixuan was the only one who noticed Jiang Yanli’s reaction to it. Despite not wanting to turn his attention away from the conflict his son was trapped in, Jin Zixuan nonetheless directed some of his attention at his fiance.

“Are you alright, A-Li?” he asked, the new nickname coming out naturally, rather than forced as it had been before.

“Ah, yes, of course,” she nodded at once, but the tension in her stance told a different story. Jin Zixuan stood and waited for a bit, and, as the silence stretched on, allowed Jiang Yanli to slowly work up the courage to continue.

She squeezed her hands together, fidgeting nervously.

“I just… I’m afraid I don’t like watching him fight. After the statue and the Nie Sect’s Burial Grounds… I just feel a little uncomfortable watching, sorry.”

“Well,” Jin Zixuan stuttered, having essentially 0 experience with comforting people. “Um, at least he’s only fighting people this time. His life isn’t in danger or anything. It’s a little worse than sparing, but it’s basically the same. And I mean… combat is part of being a cultivator. It’s a good experience for him, since he can’t *not* be a cultivator.”

“I…. Why not?” Jiang Yanli asked back, and Jin Zixuan did a double take.

“A-Ling, you — ah….” Wei Wuxian winced and covered his eyes with his hand, seeing that the fight was not going Jin Ling’s way.

“Well, he’s a sect heir,” Jin Zixuan pointed out, not quite sure how to explain something that, to him, went without saying. The words did little to help Jiang Yanli however, who only seemed to grow more displeased as she heard them. Jin Zixuan had a point of course; for this culture, at this time, there was essentially no question that Jin Ling would become a cultivator. Even *Nie Huaisang* had become a cultivator, despite his many protests. Normally, even Jiang Yanli wouldn’t have questioned it.

But that was before the simulation.

“A-Xian’s parents died while night-hunting,” Jiang Yanli said, softly. “Look at what happened to Xiao Xingchen, when he tried to do what was right while night hunting. And now, every time A-Ling seems to go out, he ends up half way to death because he isn’t prepared to take on what comes his way.”

“Well, we’ll… we’ll make sure he same more support. In fact, I’d bet we could just ask Wei Wuxian. He would be happy to help out. If we’re there, we can keep Jin Ling safe. And besides, resentment won’t stop forming just because we want it do. Someone has to do stop it-”

“But why does it have to be you?! Why do you need to be the ones to step forward and take action? Why do you all need to be the ones who put your lives in danger? I understand that the events we’ve seen in the simulation were a war, they were the exception, but think of everything that happened. You, A-Cheng, A-Xian, A-Ling… you’re always going out there, and you’re always in danger because of it. A-Xian was thrown into the Burial Mounds-”

She cut off, the memories overwhelming her.

(A few curious glances turned their way, attracted by the whisper-shouted conversation, but a deadly glare from Madam Yu warned them off. Despite that, however, she said nothing to her daughter herself.)

(If the simulation had taught her anything, it was that when she got involved, everything just got worse.)

"...But, what then?" Jin Zixuan asked. "What else would we do?"

"Just… stop going out on Night Hunts. Stop getting into fights. Let someone else take care of it."

Normally, Jiang Yanli would never say this. For all that she hesitated to confront her family when a disagreement occurred, her kindness was undoubtable, and leaving the world's civilians to fend for themselves wasn't a choice she would make. She herself had worked in the war, even if as a backstage helper.

(But that was all before it had been her son in constant danger.)

"Why should he have to get involved, anyway? What's the point? Why can't you and A-Ling and A-Cheng just give up cultivation and live peacefully," she spun around, facing her fiance head on. "A-Xuan, please. Stop cultivating; stop going out. We don't know how you die, but if you just wouldn't get involved in these things-"

"I — we can't just stop! Cultivation is everything to us!"

"Why not? What good does being dead do you?!"

"Well — you don't even cultivate! How would you understand?!"

The moment he said that, Jin Zixuan flinched and covered his own mouth in horror. He hadn't meant to say that, but, just like with Jiang Yanli, the stress of everything they had seen so far in the simulation — event after event without a moment of privacy to process it — had spilled over uncontrollably.

'*Zixuan-xiong, who do you think looks the best?'*

'Do you even need to ask? He's engaged. He would have to pick his fiance.'

'He is? What sect is she from? She must be extremely talented.'

'Drop it,' he had said in response.

Jiang Yanli's weak cultivation, her somewhat-average looks, and her meek attitude had always been used by everyone as evidence to justify their reactions. And that boy's response had been the same:

'*Huh?' he asked. 'So it's that plain Jiang Yanli. I suppose she's a bit unsuitable.'*

But Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli had actually spoken since then. Jin Zixuan had realized how much more to her there was, and had fallen for her for real. They had actually gotten together — chosen to get together, instead of being forced into it.

This was the first time they had disagreed with each other since becoming an actual couple, and, although being able to get through that was a factor in every healthy relationship, neither of them really knew what to do.

"I… sorry, I didn't mean-"

"No, no," Jiang Yanli said at once, stepping back. "You're right, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking rationally."

"No, I… I just…."

They both hesitated, then looked away.

While that had been happening, the simulation had gone on. Those who had no interest in the relationship drama of two teenagers (as well as those who had been scared away by Madam Yu) had watched as Jin Ling fought valiantly for two minutes before he was knocked two meters back towards where 'Mo Xuanyu' stood.

"Why are you still just standing there?!" Jin Ling had shouted, enraged at Wei Wuxian's passive reaction. He dismissed him a moment later, raising his fist for another attack-

Only to freeze when Wei Wuxian grabbed his arm.

"Wha — hey!"

But, before Jin Ling could get a full word in, Wei Wuxian had twisted his arm behind him and kicked the back of his knee, sending the Jin heir to the ground.

It took more effort than it should have for Wen Ruohan to keep his composure and not laugh.

'*What's he up to now?*' Jiang Cheng wondered, paying heed to his mother's glare and trying to ignore the discussion between his sister and her fiance (though, secretly, he kept a careful ear on it, just in case).

"Have you learned it?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Huh?!"

'*He really is just a teacher at heart,*' Lan Qiren thought (watching, out of the corner of his eye, as his nephew fell even more in love). '*He could have easily dealt with those children himself, but instead he wants to do it like this.*'

It was hard to tell what would happen at Lotus Pier post-simulation now that Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian had changed so much, Lan Qiren's earlier offer to take Wei Wuxian in for them had most certainly not been revoked. Given what he had done with Wen Ning, even the fifteen year old Wei Wuxian would surely take to teaching like a fish to water.

However, not understanding what was happening, Jin Ling growled, "Do you want to die?!"

“Pretentious tricks,” Jin Chan told his companions, growling in annoyance. “Get him!”

A smirking pretty boy, a determined short one, and a glaring large one sprinted forward at once. Watching their approach, Wei Wuxian stood up and brushed his robes briefly. When Jin Ling looked up at him from his spot on the ground, he received a teasing grin in return.

“Watch carefully now~”

With a twirling side step, Wei Wuxian danced around the first young man, caught his arm, and performed what he had just done to Jin Ling once more. The Jin heir gaped.

And Lan Wangji was trying very hard to not let anything show on his face.

“Wow,” Wen Qing muttered quietly, and the second jade wholeheartedly agreed.

The second went down in essentially the same way, and the third, having seen the two previous victims, defended from that attack, only to end up tripped over Wei Wuxian’s foot and meeting the same fate.

Beating three teenagers was certainly not the most impressive thing they had seen Wei Wuxian do, but the sheer ease with which he accomplished the task — crippled cultivation or not — led to a few impressed whistled.

Lan Wangji, for one, would honestly be perfectly happy to watch Wei Wuxian do that all day.

(Lan Xichen was finding his brother’s barely-suppressed reaction to be one of the greatest things he had ever seen. All in all, this was turning out to be quite a good segment.)

(If Jin Guangyao ended up being innocent, maybe it would even stay that way.)

“Have you learned it, Jin Ling?” Wei Wuxian asked. Jin Ling’s eyes widened, and realization kicked in.

“Yes,” he answered, nodding without hesitation.

The fourth member of the group ran forward, first raised, and Wei Wuxian stepped aside, clearing the way for his Shijie’s son. Jin Ling stepped forward. A moment later, the other boy was thrown to the ground.

Jin Chan attacked last, furious over the humiliation his group had suffered. Jin Ling knocked his punch to the side then ducked to the ground, sweeping a leg out and knocking Jin Chan’s legs out from under him. The brat fell to the floor.

Jiang Cheng gave a loud whoop of approval, and Wen Qing nodded once in congratulations.

Despite the minor argument Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan had just had, when Wei Wuxian had stepped aside to allow their son to take over, neither of them had been able to look away.

The boys coughed from their positions on the floor, the wind knocked out of them, and Jin Ling stood tall.

Lan Qiren was definitely going to offer Wei Wuxian an opportunity to teach if he was able to.

"You-" another cough wracked Jin Chan's frame. "You'll pay for this! Let's go."

"I'm not afraid of you!" Jin Ling declared, smirking proudly as he watched their retreating backs.

'*With just a few words and demonstrations from Wei Wuxian, the outcome of the battle completely changed.*'

Recalling once again the extent to which Madam Yu had tried to stifle Wei Wuxian's influence in the Jiang sect, Wen Ruohan became even more certain that it would be a waste to leave him there. His intentions were significantly less noble than Lan Qiren's — a personal insistence on helping the talented succeed, rather than a general desire to help improve all his students — but the effect was the same nonetheless.

The question of what would happen to Wei Wuxian after the simulation ended was just as uncertain as ever.

"You look happy," Wei Wuxian observed. "Was it your first time winning against them?"

Giving a proud huff, Jin Ling explained, "I always win one on one, but they always come at me in groups."

'*Hey, why did you guys push me?!' the civilian child, playing at being Wei Wuxian, shouted angrily. 'I was all of you against just me. That's not fair!*'

Jin Zixuan frowned. There was still so, so much they didn't know about what had happened thirteen years ago. They didn't know how Wei Wuxian had died, how Jiang Yanli had died, how Jin Zixuan had died, or how Wei Wuxian became 'the enemy of the cultivation world.' However, as time went on, and Wei Wuxian worked unendingly to help Jin Zixuan's son in any way he could, one thought came to the forefront of the Jin heir's mind:

'*Please… please let what happened not have been my fault.*'

And then, almost unconsciously, he found his eyes drifting towards his father.

(The largely disinterested expression on the man's face did not do much to alleviate his son's concerns.)

While Jin Zixuan's thoughts had been taking him deeper and deeper into his subconsciousness, Wei Wuxian had leaned over, resting his arm casually on Jin Ling's shoulder.

'*I want to offer to get him some people to back him up too, but, from what I've seen, he always seems to fight alone,*' Wei Wuxian thought, frowning slightly.

And, no matter how much Jiang Cheng wanted to deny that, he couldn't.

'*He's got those other future-juniors now, though,*' he thought. '*The Lans and the Ouyang boy. Partly because of Wei Wuxian, I guess, but still.*'

Erasing his frown instantly, Wei Wuxian grinned and leaned even closer.

"Want to learn more tricks from me?" he asked. "This was the first time those kids had seen that trick, but they'll figure it out soon enough. You want more help? I guarantee you'll win the next fight. How about it?"

A swirl of emotions passed through Jin Ling's expression, and, after a beat of silence, he instead responded, "Why are you like this? Uncle Jin Guangyao always tells me not to fight, but… you're encouraging me to fight."

Jiang Yanli jumped slightly, hearing her own words, even if told through someone else, said back to her by her son.

"He's told you not to? And instead do what? Get along with the others nicely?"

"Pretty much."

Jiang Yanli nodded in agreement, still wishing desperately that that could be the case.

However, Wei Wuxian simply shook his head at that and said, "Don't listen to him. Let me tell you — when you grow older, you'll find out that there are an infinite number of people you'll want to beat up, but you'll have to force yourself to play with them nicely. So, since you're still young, go beat up all the people you want!"

"Huh?!" several people gaped.

"'You'll have to play with them nicely?'" Madam Yu repeated. "Didn't you wipe out a decent fraction of the Cultivation World in the Nightless City?"

"Indeed," Jin Guangshan nodded. "And our children were part of that group too."

Many people flinched at that reminder.

However, several people couldn't help but think that, if that was what Wei Wuxian thought being an adult was like, the battle at Nightless City might have not been a sudden moment of insanity, as some of them had thought.

(It might have been a long time in coming, instead.)

Then-

"Are you Wei Ying?"

"Eh?" Nie Huaisang jumped, momentarily startled out of his 'what-to-do-about-Jin-Guangyao' brainstorming session.

Similarly shocked, Wei Wuxian blinked at Jin Ling twice before giving a warm smile and asked, "What do you think?"

Not denial, but not acceptance.

A nearby creek pulled the surrounding leaves downstream.

And every watcher seemed to hold their breath.

(For all the people Wei Wuxian had reportedly murdered, Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli seemed to be the only two he truly felt guilty about. His reactions had been quite telling.)

(Jin Ling's response would be even more-so.)

"...Nevermind," the boy said at last. "I doubt you'd have the guts to lie to me. Anyways, stop bothering Uncle Guangyao!"

Laughing, Wei Wuxian called out to the leaving Jin Ling with, "Don't worry. I've long since moved on from him!"

Lan Wangji ~~most certainly would never have~~ squeaked.

"During the days I was gone from Koi tower, I thought seriously about this. At long last, I finally decided Lianfang-zun was neither my type nor someone who suited me," Wei Wuxian confessed, clutching at his chest dramatically.

Jin Ling backed away.

As did Jiang Cheng, who shivered at Wei Wuxian's cringe-worthy act.

But the Yiling Patriarch continued nonetheless:

"In the past, I couldn't understand my own heart. But, now that I've met Hanguang-jun, I'm certain… I'm now incapable of leaving him. I don't want anyone aside from Hanguang-jun — huh? Jin Ling, why are you leaving?! I haven't finished yet! Jin Ling? Jin Ling!"

'Get lost!' Lan Wangji had shouted.

'Wei Ying, you really are… the kind of person I hate the most.

'Wei Ying, there is always a price to pay for practicing evil. There has never been an exception,' and, 'Some things are beyond your control!'

'Everything *is within my control!*

'As for any changes to my mind… what would a stranger know about that?'

"Thank you," Lan Wangji whispered, speaking too quietly for anyone else to hear as he brought his hands together in salute to the heavens. "Thank you, for giving us another

chance."

And, in some ways, for giving them a third: this vision of the future would change Lan Wangji's actions for sure.

'*I promise to make full use of it,*' he swore.

Then Jin Ling, whose walk away had stalled as he listened to Wei Wuxian go on and on, sudden jumped to attention.

"You — Hanguang-jun?" he asked, as if suddenly realizing the presence of someone. "I-I'll take my leave now!"

He bowed, then sprinted away.

"Jin Ling?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Really, 'Hanguang-jun?' Who on Earth do you think you're fooling?"

As far as Wei Wuxian was concerned, this was Jin Ling's attempt at payback for all the times Wei Wuxian had pretended to see Hanguang-jun to scare Jin Ling away. The Yiling Patriarch laughed at the boy's adorable attempt. However, a moment later, a body covered in pure white robes stepped beside him.

He froze.

'*Oh, this will be good,*' Madam Jin thought, and her heart fluttered with a strange joy. A-Li and A-Xuan's relationship was her priority, of course, but, with all the focus Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun's relationship had gotten, how could she possibly *not* value it?

~~'*See Guangshan? There are* two *men in this relationship wholly and completely faithful to each other — and that's before they're even actually together! How can you see them do this, and still not think that what you do is wrong?*~~

"Um… I-"

"'Don't worry,'" a calm voice repeated. "'I've long since moved on from him.'"

As the simulated Wei Wuxian jerked to a stop, the real Lan Wangji felt his ears turn darker than he had ever thought possible.

(Teasing someone else was something 'Lan Qiren's favorite student' would never do, and yet Hanguang-jun seemed to be an absolute master at it.)

"A-ah," Wei Wuxian squeaked. "Lan Zhan, how long have you been here?"

A beat passed between them, before Wei Wuxian, shameless as ever, recovered from his initial shock.

"Hanguang-jun, did you know? Mo Xuanyu was kicked out of Koi Tower because he harassed Jin Guangyao! That's why everyone was looking at me so weirdly! Neither you

nor Zewu-jun knew about this; you didn't even know who Mo Xuanyu was! This explains why. Mo Xuanyu has Jin Guangshan's blood. If Jin Guangshan didn't want such a son, he would have never taken him in. If it was as simple as harassing someone from the sect, Mo Xuanyu would have gotten away with just a few scoldings — it wouldn't have been enough to get him kicked out. But if the one he harassed was Jin Guangyao, then things are different. Not only he is Lianfang-zun, but he's also Mo Xuanyu's step brother. What a scandal."

Madam Jin sighed as she was faced with yet another political mess being thrust upon the Jin Sect, and Jin Guangshan couldn't disagree. Although he may appreciate the fairer sex quite a bit, the idea of two *siblings* getting together — half siblings or not — was absurd! It most certainly wouldn't happen under his watch.

'*When I met Jin Guangyao at the square, he interacted with me as if nothing had happened. He spoke so politely I almost thought he didn't know who Mo Xuanyu was. I can't help but approve of his skill,*' Wei Wuxian thought.

Jin Zixuan nodded in agreement. He was Sect heir (he *wanted* to become Sect Leader, even if he had never considered another option), but that didn't mean Jin Guangyao couldn't help. Jin Zixuan would find some position for him, or make one, if there wasn't one already. They could be essentially equals, in this world. So long as Jin Guangyao wasn't involved in what happened to Nie Mingjue, it would be great.

~~Jin Zixuan would repair the damage caused by his father's mistakes.~~

'*On the other hand, Jin Ling didn't hide his disgust at all. I guess what he was showing wasn't just because Mo Xuanyu was a cut sleeve, but because the one Mo Xuanyu harassed was his own uncle.*'

Although Jiang Yanli still didn't approve of many of the things her son had said, this revelation did change a good deal of the context. A small smile crossed her face.

It seemed Jin Ling cared quite strongly about Jin Guangyao. She really, really hoped it would work out.

Then, Wei Wuxian sighed.

"What's wrong?" Lan Wangji asked at once, picking up on the change in mood immediately.

"Well… Jin Ling is always alone, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said. "He doesn't even have someone to fight by his side. Have you noticed that every time Jin Ling goes out to night hunt, he's always alone? Don't tell me that Jiang Cheng always accompanies him. His own uncle doesn't count!"

Although he tried not to show it on the outside, part of Jiang Cheng tensed at those words. Not only were they shameless to hear from a person who was at least involved in the deaths of Jin Ling's parents, but they were a little too true for his tastes.

(In more ways than one.)

'Back when Wei Wuxian first came to Lotus Pier, and I had to get rid of my dogs, A-Die told me that Wei Wuxian and I would become 'good friends," Jiang Cheng recalled. '*And we did! And I have lots of other friends at Yumeng, so Jin Ling couldn't have learned this from me. He spent most of his time at Koi Tower, so he would have learned most of his behavior from Jin Guangyao-*'

Though, between Jiang Cheng and Jin Guangyao, it was quite clear who Jin Ling had ended up most like in terms of temperament.

'-But it's not like Wei Wuxian was just my friend because he owed us. That's not what it was about — is about. We're still friends, and I'm sure my older self has plenty of friends too. I just….'

He froze, finally noticing the concerned glance Lan Wangji was directing his way.

"What?" he hissed, trying desperately to keep down the humiliated blush rising up his cheeks.

"Are you alright?" the oh-so-perfect second jade of Lan asked, speaking quietly enough to not alert the other watchers.

Growling, Jiang Cheng whisper-shouted, "I'm fine! A-Jie and Jin Zixuan aren't going to die in our world, so this isn't going to happen anyways. I don't need your pity, you-"

Thief.

Luckily, Jiang Cheng was able to cut himself off before he said that last word. Wei Wuxian wasn't just his friend because of the debt; whatever happened between them in the future had ruined their relationship, but that hadn't happened yet. Lan Wangji hadn't stolen Wei Wuxian away ~~yet~~.

And then, of course, proving that he and Wei Wuxian were the only ones who could possibly match each other, Lan Wangji simply nodded, moving past Jiang Cheng's rudeness without another word. He remained standing nearby though, ready to offer help if Jiang Cheng needed any (considering Nie Huaisang was caught up in worrying about his brother, and Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli were preoccupied with thoughts on their recent disagreement).

Jiang Cheng wanted to laugh. At this rate, Lan Wangji really would take Wei Wuxian away again. How could he not when he was so mature and talented and amazing ~~at making Jiang Cheng feel guilty.~~

The Jiang heir frowned, disliking the feeling rising up in him again.

While that conversation occurred, Wei Wuxian continued to explain his own concerns to the simulated Lan Wangji:

"Jin Ling's about fifteen already, yet there's nobody his age following him around. When we were young-" Wei Wuxian cut off, seeing Lan Wangji's brows lift slightly, and

amended, "Alright, *me*. It was only me. Still, when I was young, wasn't I completely different from this?"

"That was you. Not everyone is like you," Hanguang-jun pointed out.

"But all children are at least a little like that when there are lots of people, right? Hanguang-jun, doesn't it seem like Jin Ling has no friends in his sect? I don't know about the Yunmeng Jiang Sect, but it doesn't seem like anyone in the Jin Sect wants to play with him. Doesn't Jin Guangyao have a son or a daughter who's close in age to him?"

The traces of lightheartedness leaving his expression, Hanguang-jun responded, "Jin Guangyao used to have a son. The child was murdered, and passed away at a young age."

Madam Jin sucked in a breath.

Her son was alive (was standing right next to her, in fact), but the horror she had felt the moment the simulation predicted his death was not something she could forget. This bastard-child, who stole her son's position as sect leader and might have been involved in Nie Mingjue's death-

Well, even she wouldn't claim he deserved that.

"Wasn't he the young master of Koi Tower? How could someone have taken his life?"

"The observation towers."

"Hm?"

Sizhui's disembodied voice took over, abridging the explanation: "The story the Jin Sect had released to the public was tragic. When the lookout towers were being built, Jin Guangyao not only faced a large amount of opposition, but also displeased quite a few sects. One of the opposing Sect Leaders lost an argument with him and went into a murderous rage, killing Jin Guangyao and Qin Su's only son. The boy had been an ideal child, and the couple had loved him dearly-"

There was a muffled scoff in the background.

"-Filled with resentment, Jin Guangyao tore down the opposing sect as revenge. Qin Su was overcome with grief, and had not been able to bear another child since then."

At those words, Wen Qing couldn't help but recall the fury that had been painted across Wei Wuxian's face when he finally managed to track down Wen Chao. 'Filled with resentment' was a fitting enough description.

(However, corpse or not, her brother cared very deeply about Wei Wuxian. Whatever Wei Wuxian had done afterwords, it was not hunting down the entire sect. Curiosity burned within her once again.)

Wei Wuxian hummed, considering what he had been told before responding, "With Jin Ling's temperment, he manages to offend someone every time he opens his mouth. Your Sect's Lan Jingyi calls him 'Young Mistress' — well, he's right. Many times over the past few months, if the two of us hadn't been there to help him, he would have lost his life."

Both Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli jumped at the blunt words, and the latter's nervousness rose even further. Jiang Cheng just grumbled again, losing himself to his thoughts once more.

And his annoyance doubled in magnitude when Wei Wuxian continued, "Jiang Cheng has no idea how to teach children. Jin Guangyao, on the other hand…."

Sighing once more, Wei Wuxian pressed his fingers against his temple, fighting off the mental strain. Lan Wangji paused, waiting patiently as Wei Wuxian recovered, and providing comfort with his simple presence.

"...Nevermind," Wei Wuxian said at last. "Let's just go inside."

There was a cut forward in the simulation, and the two of them were back in their guest room. As with all rooms in Koi Tower, the guest room was flooded with luxuries and delicacies. Although Hanguang-jun's arrival had been unexpected, Jin Guangyao managed to prepare a spacious and expertly decorated room, full of ornate carvings and detailed embroidery.

What attracted Wei Wuxian's attention was the exquisite liquor cups placed in the center of the room, the white porcelain reflecting the light like a shell.

All at once, Lan Wangji's righteous determination to find out whether Jin Guangyao was involved in the corpse was overwhelmed by its strongest resistance yet: if they didn't immediately go to investigate, maybe he and Wei Wuxian could share a drink again.

Alcohol was against the rules.

They were busy.

People's lives might be on the line.

But Wei Wuxian had been so happy the last time Hanguang-jun had joined him for a drink.

Luckily, Lan Wangji was able to quickly shake himself out of that temptation and put his priorities back in the proper order.

Night had fallen, and stars were high in the sky. Realizing what time it was, Wei Wuxian moved to the next part of his plan. He pulled out one of the drawers and grabbed a piece of paper and a pair of bronze scissors. With that, he cut out a small figure resembling a person. It was about as tall as an adult's finger, and had wide sleeves that flapped in the breeze like butterfly wings. Observing his creation, he smiled proudly.

"...Is this," Wen Ruohan trailed off. "...A Yunmeng technique?"

“Absolutely not,” Madam Yu responded at once. “I haven’t the faintest clue what he’s up to this time. A-Cheng, A-Li?”

The siblings shook their heads in equal bafflement.

Picking up a brush pen, he painted a few strokes.

‘*A talisman?*’ Wen Ruohan wondered next. ‘*But… why that shape?*’

Although he wasn’t consciously aware of it, the Chief Cultivator’s main source of fascination with the simulation was getting to see Wei Wuxian’s inventions first hand. To someone who valued talent as much as Wen Ruohan, there was almost nothing as exciting as getting to see such a genius at work.

And each time it happened, his investment in Wei Wuxian grew.

Holding it out for observation one last time, Wei Wuxian nodded to himself, satisfied with what he had done. He set the paper down, took one last gulp of liquor, then sat down on the bed and relaxed. His body seemed to fall unconscious instantaneously, and he might have fallen onto the floor if Lan Wangji hadn’t grabbed him at once. The Second Jade carefully laid him down.

One second passed, then two.

The paperman twitched.

Nie Huaisang yelped at the sudden movement, having been so caught up in his own Jin Guangyao-based thoughts that he’d only been watching the simulation with a quarter of his mind. To Nie Huaisang’s utter horror, Nie Mingjue had to quickly cover up laugh at that.

‘*How unfair, Da-ge! I’m using the little brainpower I have to try to think of a way to save you, and the first bits of amusement you show since we found out the body might be yours is at* my *expense?! How is that right?!*’

The Nie Heir pouted at the unfairness of it all.

Meanwhile, the other watchers had been left in a captivated silence as the paperman stood up all on its own. It then flapped its arms rapidly, and the wide sleeves sent air rushing under it.

Moving like a drunk butterfly, it fluttered wobbly over to Lan Wangji’s shoulder. When Hanguang-jun went to grab it, it jumped off his hand, bumping its head against his lips.

Jiang Yanli sucked in a massive gasp of air, and Nie Huaisang, whose attention had been directed towards the simulation again, suddenly screamed in delight.

“Did you see that?” he asked, swirling to face his brother. “Da-ge! Da-ge! Did you see that?!”

Nie Mingjue slowly nodded once, eyes wide in disbelief.

The redness found in Hanguang-juns ears could only be matched by that of his real self's. Using two fingers, the simulated Second Jade caught the piece of paper.

"Do not fool around," he scolded. The paperman wrapped around his finger in response.

Considering that their real bodies had already kissed, this scene should really not be affecting Lan Wangji the way it was.

(Unfortunately, telling himself that didn't do much to help.)

"...You must be careful," Lan Wangji requested. His voice was so quiet — so soft — that many of the watchers wondered how they could have ever thought Hanguang-jun's voice was emotionless. Although they still had difficulty reading his expressions, his worry was clear.

The paperman Wei Wuxian gave an affirmative salute.

'*How adorable,*' Madam Jin thought, then glanced over at her son and his fiance. She couldn't exactly maintain their relationship *for* them, and this wasn't even a big disagreement, but she did hope they would have a chance to discuss it soon.

Honestly, it was like they couldn't last a day together. If her son *dared* to callously hurt Jiang Yanli's feelings again, she would show him something that would make even the Yiling Patriarch step back in fear.

By now, the paperman had successfully fluttered over to the door. It turned itself sideways, slipped through easily, then rushed too fast and fell down on the way out.

"This doesn't bode well," Jiang Cheng muttered.

Perhaps knowing how confusing this would be, Ouyang Zizhen's voice jumped in to explain: "This was a technique called Paper Metamorphosis. Although it was quite useful, there were also many restrictions. There was a strict time limit, and, if even the slightest scratch ended up on the paperman, the soul would receive a similar degree of harm."

"Harm?!" Lan Qiren demanded at once, standing upright.

Jin Guangshan, who had originally though the technique seemed amazingly useful for stealth, quickly recalibrated his interest in it.

Bit by bit, Wei Wuxian traveled through Koi Tower. He rode on leaves, and slipped under doors and tables, even pretending to be an ordinary piece of paper at times. At one point, he heard a cry and paused.

"Er-ge, San-ge… what do I do now?" someone sniffled. "Please, please! You have to help me!"

‘*Am I really asking Jin Guangyao for help?*’ Nie Huaisang frowned at his other-self’s actions. ‘*I lost track of Da-ge’s body. How could I do that?! Do I really not know about it, or is Jin Guangyao really innocent and I’ve confirmed that myself?!*’

Too little time had been spent with the future Huaisang for him to know. However, one thought lingered at the edge of his mind:

‘Well, I guess there is another possibility-’

‘*Here it is,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, and, behind the paperman, the blue form of Mo Xuanyu’s body took shape. Just like when Wei Wuxian had used empathy on A-Qing, the spirits were adding in a depiction of the reactions of Wei Wuxian’s soul.

The illusionary Wei Wuxian frowned at the Blossoming Hall, the building where every Jin Sect Leader resided.

Once again, a feeling of ‘that should be my room but it isn’t’ overcame Jin Zixuan. He sighed, knowing that wasn’t the right response to have.

The number of things weighing on his mind throughout this segment were getting hard for even him to keep track of.

Wei Wuxian fluttered in.

It was magnificent.

Putting aside the beauty of the room itself, there was one thing that would immediately attract a visitor’s eye: the walls were covered with a series of paintings depicting spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Landing on a desk covered in annotated notes, the paperman observed them slowly.

All three Lan frowned, and the first jade even took a step closer to get a better look:

“That looks like-”

‘*Amazing,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, momentarily growing distracted from his task. ‘*The colors and brushstrokes are gentle, yet the landscapes appear vast. It looks like thousands of miles could extend beyond the paper; this artist’s skill is comparable to Lan Xichen’s.*’

A moment later, a new realization came over him.

‘*Wait, I think these* were *made by Lan Xichen!*’

“...He keeps your paintings in his office?” Nie Mingjue asked, blinking a few times in disbelief.

“It… appears so,” Lan Xichen acknowledged. Although he had already known how close he and Jin Guangyao were from their future-selves’ interactions together, this was something else. It wasn’t a public persona done for meeting with other people; this was something Jin Guangyao hadn’t intended for anyone else to see.

Both Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue made eye contact.

'*If it's like this then… maybe A-Yao… isn't involved.*'

They could hope so, at the very least.

Leaving the paintings, Wei Wuxian flew around the room some more, looking for anything that seemed out of place. On the desk, among the stacks of orderly papers, there was a haphazardly placed paperweight atop an open envelope. The paperman flew closer to investigate.

Although there was nothing written on the envelope, it was thick enough to have obviously been filled. However, try as he might, Wei Wuxian's paper hands were not strong enough to move the weight. He shoved, kicked and pushed as hard as he could, but the envelope remained still.

Suddenly, the door opened.

Nie Huaisang tensed.

'*Come on, Wei-xiong. You can do this,*' he mentally cheered. '*Figure out what happened to Da-ge! Tell me who's responsible! You can't get caught now!*'

Luckily, Wei Wuxian managed to scurry under the desk before he was seen. The door creaked open.

And the one who entered was Qin Su.

'*Madam Jin?*' Jiang Yanli thought, looking at her to-be sister in law. '*Is she okay? She looks…*'

'Sick' would probably be the best term to describe that. Her face was pale, drained of all blood, and she breathed heavily as though she were on the verge of collapsing. The blue form depicting Wei Wuxian frowned when he saw her expression.

Glancing at Jin Zixuan for a half-second, Jiang Yanli thought, '*Maybe… I hope not, but given the focus this is getting, maybe she and Jin Guangyao had an argument. They were called an 'ideal couple,' but I suppose no relationship is entirely without conflict.*'

She glanced back at Jin Zixuan momentarily.

Now that she had gotten a moment to cool down, Jiang Yanli supposed that, while she was still worried about her son, Jin Zixuan had a point too. She didn't exactly have another plan for Jin Ling, and it wasn't like being powerless was safer than having cultivation. After all, Jin Zixuan might have died "by Wei Wuxian's hands," but she had too.

She frowned, intertwining her fingers together.

Keeping a hand on the wall for balance, Qin Su slowly made her way over to the desk Wei Wuxian had just been on. She stared at the letter under the paperweight and

reached out to grab it, only to pull back at the last second. Under the candlelight, Wei Wuxian could see her lips tremble.

Suddenly, she screamed. As if it a sudden fit of emotion, she threw the envelop onto the ground and backed away from it — acting as if its very presence was poisonous to her.

Madam Jin frowned, then directed a glance her husband's way. If Jin Guangyao had done anything like what Jin Guangshan had always done….

"A-Su, what are you doing?"

Madam Qin flinched.

Jin Guangyao stood behind her, smiling, but concerned. Instantly, Qin Su reached down and snatched the envelope.

"...What's in your hand?" the Chief Cultivator asked.

His voice was calm, as though he was just inquiring about a trivial matter; as though he didn't see the terror on Qin Su's face.

"You don't look to well," he observed. "What's wrong?"

Trembling nervously, Jiang Yanli slowly knit her hands together. Seeing that, Jin Zixuan moved to step closer in support, hesitated, then took a deep breath and approached regardless. He knew Jiang Yanli and he had disagreed about Jin Ling, but they weren't *mad* at each other. He had to do something.

Gripping the letter tightly nearly enough to tear it, Qin Su said, "...I met with someone today."

"Who?"

"...That person told me a few things, and gave me this letter," she said, ignoring his question.

Laughing slightly at the apparent extremeness of his wife's reaction, Jin Guangyao said, "Who did you meet with? Are you really going to believe whatever people tell you?"

"It couldn't have been a lie. Definitely not."

The desperation in her eyes *burned*.

Wei Wuxian tilted his head in curiosity.

Then-

"Are the things written here true?"

"...A-Su, if you don't let me see the letter, how will I be able to answer that?"

“Fine! Read it!” she shoved the letter into his hands, fury coating her features.

Well accustomed to past women looking at him like that, Jin Guangshan rubbed his temples tiredly. For all that he didn’t care much for his younger son, he had to admit some pity in regards to this; he too knew what it was like to have a wife be irrationally angry at you.

And, calm as ever, Jin Guangyao stepped further into the light. Holding the letter out, he scanned the words. Despite that, his expression didn’t change at all.

“Well?!” his wife demanded, and, contrary to him, wore a hurricane of emotions clearly on her face. “Speak! Speak to me! Tell me none of this is true! Tell me it’s a lie!”

Looking up confidently, Jin Guangyao responded, “None of this is true; it’s all lies. These are false charges.”

“You’re lying!” she insisted instead. “Things have gotten this far and you’re still lying to me — well, I don’t believe it!”

Sighing, Jin Guangyao countered, “A-Su, I told you exactly what you asked for. Yet, now that I’ve said so, you refuse to believe me. This is quite troubling.”

“Oh my God!” she cut him off. “You… you’re….”

“A-Su, be reasonable. I-”

Before he could get another word in, Qin Su threw the letter onto the ground and sobbed into her hands, shouting “Oh Heavens! Oh Heavens, Oh Heavens! How could you?! You… you really — you’re horrifying. How could you?! How could you?!”

With every word, it became clearer and clearer to the watchers that something big was going on. However, in regards to what that ‘thing’ was, even the most intelligent among them were hopelessly lost.

The tension in the room grew.

Madam Qin stumbled back, then sudden turned around and brought a hand to her mouth, feeling bile rise up in her throat. She gagged, heaving even further, falling to her knees.

All at once, Lan Wangji recalled what had happened to Wei Wuxian, when, during the victory celebration, he remembered what he had eaten in the Burial Mounds. The situations were slightly different, but, if whatever Qin Su had learned was causing such a severe reaction, then they would need to watch carefully.

“Xiongzhang,” Lan Wangji spoke softly. “We should… hold off on making any plans regarding Jin Guangyao until we understand more.”

“Right, I…” Lan Xichen trailed off, and resignation formed on his face. “I know.”

Watching this, Wei Wuxian’s thoughts raced.

‘*Just what was in that letter? Has Jin Guangyao dismembered someone-*’

Many eyes turned towards Nie Mingjue.

‘*But everyone already knows Jin Guangyao killed countless people during the Sunshot Campaign. There are quite a few lives her father has taken as well.*’

Wen Qing frowned, wondered how many of those lives were people she knew personally.

‘*Could it have been the thing with Mo Xuanyu? No, it’s impossible for Jin Guangyao to feel any attraction towards Mo Xuanyu. Kicking Mo Xuanyu out of Koi Tower was probably his doing.*’

Jin Zixuan flinched at that, then looked away. Even without knowing what was in the letter, he could already feel his imagined future with ~~A-Yao~~ Meng Yao collapsing before his eyes.

What was in that letter?

This time, it was Jiang Yanli who noticed her fiance’s concern, and it was Jin Zixuan who relaxed as she laid her hand next to his, as close as the simulation’s no-touch rule would allow.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “For what I said. I’ll make sure A-Ling is safe, I promise.”

For a moment, Jiang Yanli opened her mouth, intending to tell him that she didn’t mind. A moment later, however, she closed it. What she was feeling was certainly nothing compared to what Qin Su was feeling, but calling it ‘nothing’ didn’t feel right either.

Slowly, hesitantly, she sent him a smile.

“I… I forgive you,” she said. “I’m sorry too.”

Jin Zixuan smiled back.

While that was going on, Wei Wuxian continued suggesting and rejecting a whole assortment of reasons, finally concluding, ‘*Anyways, in all those possibilities, there’s nothing so extreme that it would make Qin Su react like this. I’m not especially familiar with Qin Su, but we’ve met a few times in the past, being descendents of prominent clans. She was the beloved daughter of Qin Cangye. Her personality was naive, but she lived a comfortable life and was taught excellent manners. She’d never act is such a mad, violent way.*’

So what was happening?

Slowly, Jin Guangyao bent down to grab the letter, then held it over the lotus-branched candle stand. The ashes fell to the ground.

“...A-Su, we’ve been husband and wife for so many years. We’ve always respected each other, and lived in harmony. As a husband, I’d like to think that I treat you well. Your actions right now have really hurt me.”

His wife gagged once more.

“You’ve definitely treated me well. Very well,” she forced out. “But I wish we’d never met! No wonder you never… ever since… ever since then…. You did such a thing — why don’t you just kill me?!”

Madam Yu’s mouth dropped open as the gravity of what Qin Su was feeling became clear.

“What on earth-”

“A-Su, before you learned of this, didn’t we live perfectly fine? You only started to feel uncomfortable after finding out. It isn’t physical at all; it can’t hurt you. The only thing that’s been damaged is your mind-”

“Then tell me the truth! How did A-Song really die?!”

“A-Song?” Jiang Yanli repeated. “Their son?”

Not for the first time since the simulation had started, it occurred to Madam Yu that, in terms of marriage, she really didn’t have anything to complain about.

“A-Song? Why are you asking me about him? Didn’t you learn what happened a long time ago? A-Song was killed, and I destroyed those who killed him as revenge. What do you think I could have done? You’d rather believe an unknown person than me? He was my son.”

Something seemed to snap inside of Qin Su.

“It’s because he was your son that this is so horrifying!” she screamed, pulling at her own hair. “You won’t hesitate even to do things like this! What wouldn’t you do?! And now you want me to trust you again?!”

“Stop thinking about it,” the now unnervingly-calm voice advised. “If someone told you this, there’s nothing preventing them from telling other people as well.”

He touched her shoulder lightly, then knelt down to whisper in her ear.

“Tell me, who did you meet with today? If there was one letter, then there can be a second, and a third. Who gave you this letter? Please A-Su, I’m begging you. We’ve loved each other for so many years. Tell me who it is.”

“Don’t,” Lan Xichen whispered, staring at Jin Guangyao with wide, horrified eyes.

Luckily, as naive as she might have seemed at times, Qin Su would never trust Jin Guangyao again. Her hand shot out, slapping his arm away as she sobbed.

“...Am I truly that disgusting?” Jin Guangyao asked, frowning. Looking at just that, one would be inclined to feel pity towards him. However-

“You’re not human,” Qin Su hissed back. “You’re insane!”

With a regret-filled warmth, Jin Guangyao looked down at Qin Su and said, "A-Su, back then, I really didn't have another choice. I had wanted to keep you in the dark about it your whole life. I didn't want you to know about it. Now, though, that plan has been entirely ruined by whoever spoke to you. You think I'm dirty; you think I'm disgusting-"

"Stop talking! Stop talking stop talking stop talking! Stop reminding me!!! I wish I had never met you! I wish that I wasn't related to you at all! Why did you approach me in the first place?!"

"I know you won't believe anything I say now, but know that I sincerely meant all the feelings I've shown you all this time."

"You're still lying!"

"I'm speaking the truth. I've always remembered that you never said anything about my background or my mother. I'll be grateful for that until the end of my life. I wanted to respect you; cherish you; love you. But you must know why A-Song had to die. If we had let him grow up, you and I-"

Qin Su slapped him, making his head snap to the side.

Even without knowing the context of the situation, Madam Yu and Madam Jin nodded in agreement with the action. No matter how good at appearing remorseful Jin Guangyao seemed, the fact remained that he had kept something from his wife. If he lied to her for years about something she would have desperately wanted to know — if he had such little respect for he that he thought he had to filter out the information she, a grown woman, had access to — then he would get no mercy from them.

(Most especially if it was about her son.)

Huffing desperately as emotions overwhelmed her, Qin Su bit out, "And who was the one who caused all of that? A tiger, no matter how cruel, will never devour its cubs! What is it that you won't do for this position?!"

Jin Guangyao frowned, but did not otherwise respond. He had allowed himself to be slapped.

Somehow, that seemed to just make Qin Su more distraught.

Then-

"Will you really not tell me who told you?"

"If I tell you, you'll just kill them to silence them, won't you?!"

Not a single watcher could look away.

A crimson mark in the shape of a handprint formed on Jin Guangyao's cheek.

“What are you talking about?” he said at last. “You must be feeling quite unwell, my dear.”

He stood up, and stepped close.

Two wide, fearful eyes stared up at him.

“Don’t come closer,” she whispered. “Don’t-”

His hand approached her cheek and wiped the tears away. He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, seemingly indifferent to the way she shook in fear. Then, reaching a hand out, Jin Guangyao grabbed Qin Su’s wrist and began to drag her off.

“Let go!”

“Your father has already left. I’ll send you out sometime soon as well, and you can join him and rest. Let’s finish this quickly; there are still quite a few guests outside. The Discussion conference is tomorrow you know.”

“Get your hands off her!” Madam Yu growled, and murder danced in Madam Jin’s eyes.

Laughing brokenly, Nie Mingjue bisbelievingly asked, “He’s *still* worried about the discussion conference?”

“Where… where is he taking her?” Lan Xichen wondered.

Fear welled up in Jin Zixuan, and, seeking comfort, he stepped even closer to Jiang Yanli, only to find her stepping towards him as well. They made eye contact with each other, then turned their fearful gazes upon the simulation once more.

“Let go!” Qin Su ordered again, making another attempt to escape. However, at that moment, Jin Guangyao moved his hand next to her head and did something out of the watchers’ sights. Qin Su suddenly stiffened, before collapsing into Jin Guangyao’s arms, unable to move a muscle. Picking up her unmoving form, he carried her away.

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli whispered. “A-Xian, go after them. Don’t let him take her!”

As though he could hear Jiang Yanli’s plea, the paperman Wei Wuxian did, suddenly reminding all the watchers that if his paper form somehow got crumpled or scratched, his soul would be destroyed.

“What a stupid technique,” Jiang Cheng grumbled angrily, nervousness rising.

Jin Guangyao walked across the room, moving further and further from the door, and ended up in front of a floor length mirror. Reaching forward, his pushed his hand until it seemed to go inside the glass, and then he stepped through.

Wei Wuxian leapt after.

Behind the copper mirror was a secret room, whose oil lamps lit immediately after. On the shelves were books, precious stones, weapons, and even a few torture tools.

In fact, Wen Ruohan was pretty sure he recognized some of those from his own collection.

It wouldn't be unusual for a Sect Leader to have a secret room. What was unusual, however, was the iron table in the center covered in black, dried up traces of something.

'*That would be a perfect place to cut someone open,*' Wei Wuxian thought.

Jiang Yanli and Lan Xichen paled considerably.

Qin Su was laid down on the table, and Jin Guangyao softly detangled a few knots in her hair.

"Don't be afraid. As it is, you're in no condition to be walking around right now. You should rest. You'll be able to come back as soon as you tell me who 'that person' is."

"Liar," Nie Mingjue hissed.

Suddenly, the blue form of Wei Wuxian's soul glanced to the side. One of the shelves was blocked by a curtain. Painted onto the curtain was a mess of blood-red runes.

'*A talisman of forbiddance,*' Wei Wuxian realized. '*And a powerful one, too.*'

He flew inside.

Jin Guangyao's head snapped back, as if he had noticed a movement.

Nie Huaisang's heart jumped, and, for the first time in quite a while, he slipped inside his Da-ge's chest to hide. Despite that, he made sure to keep his eyes peaking out.

He couldn't afford to miss anything.

After a few seconds, deciding that he was being paranoid, Jin Guangyao finally looked away. Behind the curtain, the paperman Wei Wuxian found a notes page with a large array painted in the center. He frowned, studying it closely, then allowed his eyes to widen.

'*That's my handwriting!*' he realized. '*These are my notes! 'Different from possession,' 'revenge,' 'forced contract' — these are my manuscripts on body possession! That means, this must be where Mo Xuanyu learned the technique!'*

Well, that answered one question.

And created a dozen more.

"A-Su, I need to tend to the guests. I'll come back to see you later."

Peeking out from the document he was hiding behind (a title deed for housing and land) the blue form representing Wei Wuxian watched as Jin Guangyao began to exit the room. Just before he left, however, the Chief Cultivator paused and turned back to the shelf where Wei Wuxian was. He approached.

Lan Wangji's heart rate doubled in speed, and the tension in his form tripled.

However, when Jin Guangyao pulled back the curtain, it wasn't Wei Wuxian he was looking at.

"Were you the one looking at me?" he wondered, addressing the question to the spherical object before him. He received no answer, but seemed to not have expected one. He paused for a second, and left the room a moment later. Upon confirming that the Chief Cultivator was gone, Wei Wuxian slowly began to sneak over.

The light raised in intensity, and, at long last, the watchers were able to see what Jin Guangyao had been looking at.

Nie Mingjue's decapitated head stared directly at them.

And the simulation drew to a close.

A moment of silence passed, the tension still filling the watchers leaving them unable to say anything for some time. Then, quietly, Nie Huaisang sighed:

"I hate being right."

"Lan Zhan."

"..."

"Laaaaaaaan Zhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!"

"Mn?"

"Which would you prefer: cliffs or forests?"

At long last, the (temporary) Chief Cultivator's quill froze, and Hanguang-jun turned his eyes down on his beloved husband. Two bright, silver eyes looked up, Wei Wuxian feeling perfectly at home laying his head across Lan Wangji's lap. Even in the dim candlelight under an already-set sun, the Yiling Patriarch's eyes seemed to glow like stars.

Finally, tearing his attention away from the figure below him, Lan Wangji answered, "Forests."

"Ah, I knew you would say that!" Wei Wuxian beamed. "Yes, indeed, forests are the best. How wise of you Hanguang-jun. If we can find a little clearing in the forest, then we shouldn't have anything to worry about. If we do it by *cliffs*, on the other hand, we'll

constantly need to be making sure none of the kids fall off. I don't know what I was thinking!"

Lan Wangji didn't need an explanation to know what Wei Wuxian was talking about:

"Pick the forest you want carefully," he said. "It could cause problems if our wedding were to be held too close to any sect other than Gusu's."

"I know, I know, but there are too many hills around here! We need a flat clearing, and I thought I knew a place that would work, but it turns out the geography around here has changed in the last twenty years. It looked like there was a landslide or something."

"Mn. Twelve years ago."

"Really? Huh."

For all that he knew he had been dead for thirteen years, it was still somewhat weird to be reminded of the passage of time like this. It didn't help that he'd been so busy lately. If he could just give his work to someone else, he'd have time to go relearn the land surrounding Gusu. Unfortunately, giving possibly dimension-destroying tools to someone else was "irresponsible" and "unwise," so Wei Wuxian had decided against it.

But how was he supposed to plan for the most important moment in his life while also trying to save his other-self from the past's Jin Guangshan and Wen Ruohan? Not to mention what Lan Xichen had asked him to do for Jin Guangyao (and possibly Xue Yang). This was why he told Lan Wangji they should just stick with their elopement!

(Though getting a fancy wedding fully funded by the Lan Sect sounded kinda fun too.)

"Ah, what I really need to do is find something to distract Nie Huaisang with," Wei Wuxian said. "I'm already doing what he wants me to; he doesn't have to watch over my shoulder to make sure I don't betray him. Seriously! And to think, my first time in the Cloud Recesses, I thought *you* were too strict and *he* was too relaxed."

Smiling lightly at the complaints, Lan Wangji calmly informed him, "You learned better, years later."

"I sure did! No way I'll ever make that mistake again!"

"Hm," Hanguang-jun agreed, then wondered, "Is there anything you can do to combine the two problems? Condense them to minimize the amount of work you have to do?"

"Ooh, is that a trick you learned from your oh-so-important Chief Cultivator missions?" Wei Wuxian wondered, grinning teasingly.

The look he got in response showed exactly how happy Lan Wangji was to be reminded of the position he was still stuck with. Now that Wei Wuxian thought about it, he should really make sure to force the rank of Chief Cultivator onto Nie Huaisang before the wedding happened. How was Lan Wangji supposed to relax, otherwise? It was going pretty well so far, with both Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian working to change the reputation of the Nie Sect

towards at least a minimal degree of competency, but it could still be going a lot faster. Maybe if-

“Wait, Lan Zhan, you’re a genius!” Wei Wuxian shouted, abruptly sitting up.

This time, Hanguang-jun hadn’t managed to follow Wei Wuxian’s train of thought. He tilted his head questioningly.

“Nie-xiong loves parties! He loves attending them, and he loves planning them. He kept asking me if he could contribute to our wedding, so I’ll just put him in charge! It’ll distract him, and he knows much more about the current era than I do. Besides, that’ll leave me time to work on the alternate dimension issue!”

“Hm. Would he agree to that?’

“No clue. Only one way to find out!”

As it turned out, after much deliberation regarding his other priorities and his knowledge that Wei Wuxian was just doing this as a distraction, Nie Huaisang did, in fact, agree to the suggestion. Having a chance to plan his favorite couple’s wedding was just too much to risk giving up. Besides, when he first came over to the Lan Sect just a short while ago, he had halfway assumed that wedding planning was what he was being called over to do. It took a few more twists and turns than he had intended, but the end result was mostly the same. He knew there was no one who could plan it better than him!

After getting the position, there was only one thing he could say:

“Ah, I love being right!”

Chapter End Notes

To anyone curious, the title is a reference to Puella Magi Madoka Magica. I don’t expect you all to get it, but I thought it was a little funny, so here we are. The dokey memory was from the Audio Drama Bonus Extra: Wei Wuxian’s Childhood. It didn’t really fit here, but I didn’t want to wait too long before including it. Hope you enjoyed!
:)

The Man of Quite a Few Too Many Faces

Chapter Notes

Once again, beta read by Tintin! Thanks so much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Well," Wen Ruohan began, tilting his head slightly in consideration, "I suppose I can't say I'm *surprised* by this revelation."

At least ten death glares were directed his way, but his underlying 'I told you so' was burning as strong as ever. After all, hadn't they seen first hand that Meng Yao had managed to betray even the Wen Sect? Was it really a surprise to see that he was still a snake in the grass?

For Lan Xichen, the answer was apparently 'yes.'

Lan Wangji silently moved closer to his brother, who was standing with the still somewhat shell-shocked Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang. It was one thing to know Nie Mingjue was dead. Given the Nie Sect's style of cultivation, Nie Mingjue had fully expected that to happen soon enough, and Nie Huaisang knew that, given Nie Mingjue's relationship with the Wen Sect, conflicts could break out at any time. That had been shocking, but was still understandable.

Having his own sworn brother keep the decapitated head displayed like a *trophy* was another thing entirely.

"Da-ge, are-" Lan Xichen began, before cutting himself off abruptly. It had been one thing to use the term "da-ge" when all it did was increase the closeness between the two of them — a nod of acknowledgement towards what seemed to be the evolved relationship of their future-selves. Now, "da-ge" acknowledged that there were three people in that sworn brotherhood, and that it had not played out anywhere near as idealistically as they wanted it to.

Realizing what thoughts had passed through Zewu-jun's brain, Wen Ruohan's aura seemed to flicker in amusement, making Nie Mingjue's glare at him double in intensity. Nie Huaisang, on the other hand, seemed concerningly closed off.

"What will we do with him?" the Nie heir asked.

Several people glanced over, surprised by how ~~blank~~ calm his voice seemed.

"I… we shouldn't decide that now," Lan Xichen said, his usual poise cracking under the anger and betrayal he felt churning within. "We'll wait a bit for when we know more and the news is less… sudden."

“Hm,” Nie Huaisang said, still not letting even a hint of emotion into his voice. His usual whining tone was gone, and even the loud sobbing Nie Mingjue had fully expected was nowhere to be found. Nie Mingjue had never thought there might come a time where he would miss that.

“...It’ll be fine,” he said at last, finally causing Nie Huaisang to look over at him. “Whatever happened was probably a result of him tricking me, considering the level of his cultivation. I just… won’t fall for it. I’ll be okay.”

Although Nie Huaisang smiled at that, none of his usual levity could be found: “Da-ge, I think you’re underestimating just how much someone can hide from you, if they really want to.”

Nie Mingjue wanted to protest that, and Lan Qiren was about to as well. Nie Huaisang wasn’t speaking logically; there was no evidence anywhere that Sect Leader Nie was unusually easy to trick. The Nie heir was surely just speaking out of grief. However, something about that tone stopped them. It didn’t sound like a theory; it sounded like a fact.

As in, ‘you don’t have the slightest idea just how many things *I’ve* hidden from you; how can I trust you with this?’

Which was ridiculous. Nie Huaisang wore his emotions on his sleeves, and had never so much as managed to find a convincing excuse to escape punishment. He had never been able to hide anything from his brother or Lan Qiren.

And yet, for some reason, both of them hesitated to say that.

Several seconds passed, and no one spoke a word.

Finally, after a bit of thought, Lan Wangji said, “We agreed to not punish people for actions they haven’t yet taken. Given that the real Meng Yao is only a little older than I am, I see no reason to change that plan.”

Especially so long as they still remained unable to punish the Wen Sect for its own transgressions. Madam Yu pursed her lips unhappily at the reminder, and Jiang Yanli had to close her eyes as memories flooded into her brain.

“In any case, you can rest assured, Sect Leader Nie,” Jin Guanghsan’s far-too-lighthearted voice declared. “That boy is certainly no son of mine. I don’t know how my other self could have possibly made the mistake of accepting him, but I most certainly won’t make the same error.”

Wen Ruohan was killed by Meng Yao, and Nie Mingjue’s head had been kept as a prize. The leaders of both sides of conflict between the great sects viewed Jin Guangshan’s son as an enemy. As far as he was concerned, this was an emergency that had to be dealt with immediately.

“Come to think of it, we were talking about how strange it was that Wei-gongzi would attack my son, weren’t we? And the information we have on my death seems… unreliable, at the

very least. Why, I'll bet this poisonous snake was involved in both incidents! And who knows what he's done to my wife-"

"Leave me out of this," Madam Jin snapped. "It seems your son has done horrible, awful things, but I want no part in this punishment of yours."

Sect Leader Jin wasn't the only one thrown for a loop. Madam Jin never passed by an opportunity to ridicule, insult, and punish her husband's other children. And, for once, it seemed like she had found one that genuinely deserved it.

(But she had seen first hand what Mo Xuanyu's living conditions had been, and had watched, disbelievingly, as Madam Yu hurled groundless accusation after accusation at Wei Wuxian.)

(*'You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anyone else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!'*)

She and Madam Yu had been as close as sisters, before the Jiang Madam had told Wei Wuxian he should have let Madam Jin's son die in that cave. Part of the scorn Madam Jin felt was because of how untrue everything Madam Yu said was. Jiang Fengmian *hadn't* betrayed Madam Yu; Wei Wuxian *wasn't* loved more than the man's son. That was what had begun to set her and Madam Yu apart, in Madam Jin's mind.

However-

However….

They didn't know exactly what Jin Guangyao had done, but it was clear by now that he was far from innocent. Wei Wuxian's own experiences had taught the watchers to hold off before making any serious decisions, but things were not boding well for the Meng Yao of their world.

Which meant he would be a perfect target for Madam Jin, if there was anything she wanted to get off her chest. He wasn't a good person — after all, she had seen first hand how he treated Qin Su.

But there had been some time, between the present day and this future, in which Meng Yao had been living at LanlingJin, and Madam Jin had been too.

~~What if there was something *she* had done that caused him to…~~

"...I have no objections to you punishing him for what he's done, Sect Leaders. Just… leave me out of it," she requested. If she had looked up, she would have seen her son staring at her, wide-eyed.

And hopeful.

"A-ah," her husband coughed. "Well, that's fine. It's all well and good. As I was saying, we might not punish him, but I'll be sure he doesn't have any opportunities to act against us. Our Wei-gongzi said that he and his future self had made a plan for dealing with future criminals,

right? Well, the Jin Sect will be sure to offer its full support when it comes to clearing up those messes. Xue Yang and Meng Yao will need to be handled as soon as possible."

"And Sect Leader Chang," Lan Wangji pointed out, recalling the leader who had laughed as Xue Yang's hand was destroyed by his cart.

"Yes, yes. Him too. We'll gather them up and ensure that they won't be able to cause harm to us again!"

There was nothing about the words being said that Nie Mingjue strongly disagreed with, but, somehow, the fact that it was Jin Guangshan saying them left him wanting to object. Then-

Click.

"Greetings, Sect Leaders, A-Cheng, A-Li," Jiang Fengmian's voice rang out.

"H-Hello, Sect Leaders and heirs! And A-Jie!" Wen Ning squeaked.

"A-Ning," Wen Qing smiled, relaxing at once. "Is everything alright?"

"Ah, yes! Sect Leader Jiang just wanted to check in on all of you. Um, Wei-gongzi isn't here right now, sorry. He's meeting with the future's Mo Xuanyu. They have a plan for improving the Pingxin Gateway, and are brainstorming together on it."

'*I suppose that makes sense,*' Wen Ruohan supposed, accepting the explanation after a bit of thought. '*The only thing better than one Wei Wuxian would be two.*'

The Nie brothers still seemed lost in thought, unable to talk, and the Lan and Jin heirs were quite silent too. Part of Wen Ruohan wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to try getting Jiang Fengmian to take action without having to deal with Nie Mingjue's interference, but the lack of information they had on the outside world made him hesitate.

"It… it seems there's still a little time before your next segment starts, so I can update you on the situation out here, if you would like," Jiang Fengmian offered.

"Go on," Madam Yu instructed.

"The Lan Sect has essentially resumed normal activities in terms of night hunts and business, so I don't think there are any issues there. Lan Ziming has been the representative of the elders for the most part, and Sect Leader Lan has been contacted, whenever an especially important decision needs to be made."

All three Lans tensed at that, but had no objections to give. Sect Leader Lan had interacted with the outside world so little in the past decade that it was a little hard to believe that he was qualified for that, but, on the other hand… none of them could forget that he had given his life to save the Cloud Recesses when the Wens burned it down.

They made eye contact with each other, then looked away.

“As for the Jin Sect, Jin Guangshan’s younger brother has taken control, and his son, Jin Zixun-gongzi, is the main diplomatic messenger with the other sects.”

Jin Zixuan barely withheld a groan at that. He liked his cousin just fine, but, after getting to spend some time with Lan Wangji, Jiang Cheng, Nie Huaisang, and Jiang Yanli instead, he found himself strangely annoyed by many of his memories of Jin Zixun.

He really, really hoped things were going okay.

Unaware of Jin Zixuan’s feelings, Jiang Fengmian smoothly continued, “The businesses LanlingJin interacts with are all fully operational, from what I can tell, but the Jin Sect has not fully resumed night hunting yet. Is there a message you would like me to pass along to them, Sect Leader Jin?”

“No, no, it’s quite alright,” Jin Guangshan said, having nothing to tell them. “Just let them keep doing what they are already doing.”

“Of course. As for the Nie Sect, Nie Zhonghui has taken control for now and has resumed the usual levels of night hunting and cultivation practice. The businesses have not been fully contacted however, and, last I heard, Qinghe’s usual tax collection was taking longer than expected to complete.”

“That’s fine,” Nie Mingjue said. “Zhonghui can handle it.”

“Alright. As for the Wen Sect, I’m afraid most of the details have been kept within Qishan, so there’s not much I can say. As far as I can tell, both night hunts and business have resumed as usual under Wen Xu-gongzi. Is there anything you would like me to tell them, Sect Leader Wen?”

“...When you have a chance, tell Chao-er to not forget my warning,” he instructed. “I keep my promises.”

“...Right. I’ll do that,” Jiang Fengmian said. “San-niang, you don’t need to worry, Yunmeng is doing fine. Ah, and A-Li, XiuMin visited Yunmeng not too long ago. Her family was transporting a new import of purple dye to us, and she left you a gift for when you wake up.”

“She did?” Jiang Yanli asked, lighting up at the offer. Her friend was constantly traveling due to her family’s business, so, although Jiang Yanli was sad to have missed to opportunity to meet with her, she couldn’t help but be touched by the gesture.

“I wasn’t allowed to see inside, but she promised it wouldn’t go bad, so you don’t need to worry about rushing out.”

Slowly, she nodded. Jiang Yanli honestly hadn’t expected her father to address her so personally — and certainly not before he spoke to Jiang Cheng. She and her father had a perfectly pleasant relationship, but it had never been about expressing affection. For him to do so immediately, and in front of the other sect leaders at that, left her blushing in an embarrassed happiness.

“Oh, and A-Cheng, the sect is considering a new sheath design for our swords. We’re getting a lot of suggestions submitted, but we thought, after we narrow it down to about two or three, we could let you have the final pick. Would-would that be okay?”

“Uh, yeah!” Jiang Cheng said, immediately blushing at the excitement that he had accidentally displayed. “I’ll… I’ll do that. When we get out.”

“Of course. There’s no rush,” Jiang Fengmian agreed.

Then, hesitantly, Wen Ning piped in, “Y-young Lady Jiang? Young Master Wei also wanted me too… wanted me too…”

“A-Ning, just say it,” Wen Qing advised sternly. “Holding off won’t help.”

“R-right, um… We-we noticed a few tear tracks on your outside body. Y-your father already told us you’re not in danger, but Wei-gongzi wasn’t sure how long his meeting with Mo Xuanyu would be. He said if he wasn’t back before Sect Leader Jiang and I contacted you he wanted me to tell you that… that ‘if anyone so much as looks at you the wrong way, I’ll be sure to handle it in a way no one will be able to stop!’ S-sorry, Young Master Jin, I just-”

“N-no, no. It’s fine,” Jin Zixuan said, shivering at the thought of making an enemy of the Yiling Patriarch. “Yeah… that was probably directed at me. That definitely sounds like the kind of thing he would say, and I… probably deserve it.”

“Yes, of course! I know I… huh?” Wen Ning asked, not fully believing what he had just heard.

A warm laugh rang out, and Jiang Fengmian said, “Wen Ning-gongzi, I told you, you and A-Xian don’t need to worry about Jin-gongzi. We’ve… seen many things, since the simulation began.”

That was putting it lightly. Though, if Jin Zixuan was being honest, perhaps the warning wasn’t so needless after all. Just in the last segment, he and Jiang Yanli had gotten into a disagreement over whether Jin Ling should be allowed to learn cultivation. Jin Zixuan would stand by his position, but he knew full well that he could have done a better job of talking about it with her.

‘*I’ll do better,* he promised himself. ‘*It won’t happen again.*’

Perhaps sensing her fiance’s guilt, Jiang Yanli moved her hand next to his as if to squeeze it (or, as close to that as the no-touch simulation would allow), and mouthed a small ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Me too,’ Jin Zixuan mouthed back.

“Well that’s… that’s good?” Wen Ning asked, as though unsure.

“It is good,” Wen Qing confirmed. “And you better be sure to take care of yourself and Wei Wuxian too, alright. I know you’re worried about us, but we’re fine. We can’t hurt each other

here."

"Yes! Sorry, A-Jie. I know I shouldn't speak like that. I'll do better, I promise!"

Wen Ning continued on and on, and Wen Qing frowned deeper. It had been surprising to her that Wen Ning would so openly speak what was essentially a threat to a sect heir. Wei Wuxian doing that was one thing — for all that he was fully aware of his position in society, that always flew out of the water when his shijie's honor was on the line — but Wen Ning?

Then again, Wen Ning had risked everything to save Wei Wuxian's life during the battle at Lotus Pier. Perhaps she shouldn't be surprised.

"...A-Ning," she said at last, glancing back at Wen Ruohan before continuing, "Has Wen Chao-gongzi done anything… suspicious lately?"

"Su-suspicious?"

Everyone waited for Wen Ruohan to object to the conversation.

However, instead, he and Wen Qing just made eye contact for a long while, before he nodded, accepting her silent request.

"I'm, uh, I'm not sure specifically of anything like that. Would you like me to go… check, somehow?"

"Not necessarily. You should stay safe, first and foremost."

"O-okay," he said, and, although they couldn't see him, everyone was certain he had blushed a happy pink at the concern.

However, Wen Qing wasn't done quite yet.

"A-Ning, you're not an idiot, so I know you know better than to trust what Wen Chao says without a second thought, but-" she glanced back at Wen Ruohan once more, and he continued to withhold all objections. "Just, if it comes down to it, I expect you to follow your own judgment over any orders given by Wen Chao and Wen Xu."

"I-I-I…" Wen Ning's voice rose ten pitches, disbelief quickly working in. However, none of the Sect Leaders — not even Wen Ruohan — voiced any disagreements. Wen Ning would have thought he misheard, but the seriousness in Jiang Fengmian's expression seemed to confirm it.

"Am I understood, A-Ning?!"

"Y-yes! I… I understand," he promised. "I just-"

But then, before Wen Ning could ask any clarifying questions, the watchers' connection to the outside world fizzled out, and the next segment began at once. The world darkened, and they had to blink a few times to adjust to the change in light.

Wen Qing glanced back at Wen Ruohan once more.

"...I don't see any reason why he shouldn't follow Xu-er's orders," he said at last.

(It appeared he had no objection to Wen Ning not following Wen Chao's.)

"I see. My mistake," Wen Qing said, completely unrepentant.

A small laugh of amusement came from Wen Ruohan, and the conversation ended there.

Slowly, the watchers' eyes adjusted to the darkness. Unsurprisingly, the first thing the watchers were able to see was the seemingly-mountainous head of Chifeng-zun, towering over the tiny paperman Wei Wuxian.

Nie Mingjue pursed his lips together at the sight, and Nie Huaisang felt his hands uncharacteristically clench into fists.

'*As I expected, I guess,*' Wei Wuxian supposed. '*Chifeng-zun, who seemed to go into almost invincible rages during the sunshot campaign, is sealed under layers upon layers in a cramped, dismal room, unable to even see the light.*'

Lan Xichen turned away abruptly, barely able to restrain himself at Wei Wuxian's blunt description.

(His other-self had displayed unwavering trust in Jin Guangyao. Intentionally or not, he had allowed this to continue.)

'*If I remove the seal on his head, Chifeng-zun's corpse will be able to sense it, and will come for it on its own.*'

Just as Wei Wuxian was thinking that, his paperman form leaned closer to inspect the head, and was suddenly pulled off the ground by an attractive force. He flew forward, slamming into and sticking to Nie Mingjue's forehead.

Unconsciously, Nie Mingjue rubbed his own head, half-expecting to find a wayward paperman stuck there.

The scene changed, and, although they were still in Koi tower, the watchers were now inside the room where Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian's unconscious body were. Hanguang-jun stared deeply at Wei Wuxian's face from where he sat beside him. A moment later, Lan Wangji's fingers twitched. Still gazing at Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji reached up and touched his own lips — just as lightly as the paperman's touch had been.

Where, normally, Nie Huaisang and Lan Xichen would have been the first to jump in excitement at this sight, they were now downcast and silent, staring instead at Nie Mingjue. They were sure they would remember this moment happily later, but, for now, they needed some time.

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian's hands jerked, then clenched into fists. Hanguang-jun's expression immediately hardened, and he lifted Wei Wuxian's head. Holding the Yiling Patriarch's face, Lan Wangji saw that, although Wei Wuxian's eyes were still shut, his brows had knit together and tension was filling his body.

The real Lan Wangji clenched his fists together at that, frowning deeply. Now, even though his other-self was in a room with Wei Wuxian, there still seemed to be nothing he could do.

'*Trust him,*' Lan Wangji told himself. '*Have faith. Wei Ying can take care of himself.*'

~~But he shouldn't have to.~~

A scent of blood filled the air.

Madam Yu jerked at that, and quite a few people stood up. Smell was one sense that the simulation had (thankfully) never bothered to display to them before. The only exception was when A-Qing had-

"I see. We're in a memory," Wen Qing realized, and Wen Ruohan nodded in agreement.

As if the memory's owner had just opened their eyes, light flooded into the simulation, and the glare of a blade shined directly in front of them — along with the disconnected body and head said blade had just severed. The flesh fell into a wet pile on the ground, red soaking through the once-white robes of the Wen Clan.

Neither of the two Wens present commented on this, though both of their expressions grew more stern.

(Wen Qing knew the Wen Clan had attacked first, and understood full well why the Sunshot Campaign fought back. That didn't change the fact that she *knew* these people, and she couldn't watch their deaths without showing some reaction.)

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian took in the world around him with wide eyes.

'*Chifeng-zun's resentment was so strong he forced me into empathy with him,*' he realized, a comically shocked look on his face.

Just like the last time Wei Wuxian had done empathy, a light blue form of Mo Xuanyu's body represented his soul. Wei Wuxian was seeing everything in first-person point of view (as if the memories were his own), but the watchers were allowed to see both Wei Wuxian's reactions and, separately, the blade's wielder.

Unsurprisingly, Nie Mingjue stood tall before them, his clothes covered in the blood of "Wen dogs."

"Grab the head," Nie Mingjue ordered. "Hang it up so those bastards can see it."

It was only then that Wen Ruohan took a closer look at the body below.

'*Xu-er,*' he realized. '*I see*....'

Unlike when the Jiangs or Lans had been forced to realize a member of their family would die, Wen Ruohan's expression barely twitched at the revelation. However, it didn't escape Wen Qing's notice that, upon making that realization, Wen Ruohan became surprisingly still, his gaze not twitching from his son.

'*Chao-er was just a failure. Xu-er, on the other hand… although he was pitifully lacking in ambition, he had never been a disappointment to the same degree,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*It would be a waste… to allow this to happen in our world.*'

Wei Wuxian helpfully added further context: '*If that was Wen Xu, then this must be the battle of Hejian. From what I remember, his head was cut off with a single strike and hung up in front of the troops, as a demonstration to the Wen Sect's cultivators. The rest of his corpse was cut to pieces by enraged Nie Sect cultivators, then ground up and smeared below the earth.*'

Hearing that, Wen Ruohan couldn't help but laugh: "But *Wei Wuxian* was the one at fault for disrespecting the dead?"

Nie Mingjue growled at the comment (and the speaker, most of all), but, try as he might, he couldn't protest; he had been thinking the exact same thing, after all.

In one last demonstration of those thoughts, the simulated Nie Mingjue kicked at the corpse on the ground. Then, he glanced back. The floor was littered with countless casualties, some in the once-white robes of the sun, and the rest in the black, beast-crested uniforms of the Nie. The last third were people not wearing any specific uniform, marking them as rogue cultivators or hired hands. Nie Mingjue scanned his surroundings, as if checking to see if any Wen-dogs had somehow managed to survive.

He saw nothing.

Suddenly, there was a clattering noise from a tile-roof house to his side.

With a slash of his saber, Nie Mingjue created a blade of wind that broke open the house's crude door, revealing a trembling mother and daughter, both panic-stricken in the chaos. The shabby house was completely bereft of possessions, leaving the only hiding place the two could find being a small section underneath a low table. As the young woman's eyes landed on Nie Mingjue — his blood soaked-robes and still-dripping blade — tears began to flow from her eyes.

Nie Huaisang watched this silently.

For all that he cried and screamed at length about how scary his brother was, he had never been genuinely terrified like this. He knew, better than he knew anything else in existence, that Nie Mingjue would never try to hurt him, but….

He couldn't really blame the woman either. With the scent of blood in the air still sickeningly strong, and the image Nie Mingjue made as he looked down on them, Nie Huaisang could, for the first time, understand what people had meant when they mentioned how scary Nie Mingjue was when he got genuinely angry.

However-

“Sect Leader?” a subordinate asked.

The mother’s face distorted in fright, so Nie Mingjue closed his eyes, quickly curbing his killing intent.

“It’s alright,” he said, slowly kneeling and setting his saber down. He stepped away from it, hands loose and unthreatening, and, at long last, the civilian woman relaxed.

She collapsed to the ground, sobbing in relief as she clutched her daughter tightly.

Despite it all, Nie Huaisang couldn’t stop a small smile from forming on his face.

That smile vanished as he recalled, once again, exactly where Nie Mingjue’s head had ended up. A cold light seemed to flash in his eyes.

Having confirmed that there was both no threat and that the women were fine, Nie Mingjue rejoined his army once more. Glancing around, he narrowed his eyes and turned to the subordinate beside him.

“Who was the cultivator who kept guard during the end of the last battlefield clean up?” he asked.

Blinking in surprise, the man hesitated for a moment before responding, “Uh… kept guard at the end? I-I don’t quite remember.”

“Tell me what you do remember,” Nie Mingjue ordered, frowning sternly.

“Uh, Sect Leader, I know,” another cultivator piped up. “The last to leave the battlefield was someone named Meng Yao.”

The Nie and Lan brothers instantly snapped to attention at that, and Jin Zixuan, still resting near Jiang Yanli, tensed at once, looking down to the ground.

Much like when they were watching memories at Yi City, they knew the inevitability of the tragic outcome. Try as he might, Jin Zixuan couldn’t stop a small amount of his brain from wishing they wouldn’t have to watch this.

‘*A-Yao,*’ he thought. ‘*What did you do?*’

Noticing the surprise Nie Mingjue showed upon hearing that name, Wei Wuxian added on, ‘*That makes sense. Only a few people were able to see it first hand, but, at this point, there’s almost no one who doesn’t know what happened the first time Jin Guangyao, then Meng Yao, came to Koi Tower. Jin Guangyao’s mother was renowned in one of Yunmeng’s brothels. Back then, she boasted a reputation of being one of the most talented prostitutes. It was said that she could play the guqin well and wrote excellent calligraphy. She was so well-educated that she could almost pass as the young mistress of a wealthy family.*’

In proof, evidence played out in front of the watchers. The now-deceased woman was shown in all her glory, as the simulation demonstrated what had once been.

'*Of course, no matter how great the resemblance, in the eyes of most people, a prostitute was just a prostitute. One day, Jin Guangshan visited Yunmeng. He wouldn't dare to miss the chance to meet such a famous prostitute-*'

Madam Jin scoffed at that, and Jin Zixuan wilted further into his chair.

'*Jin Guangshan lingered around her for a few days, and left, satisfied, after giving her a keepsake. After he got back, he naturally behaved the exact same way he had before, forgetting all about her.*'

And anger rose up in Madam Jin once again at that. It was only after a few seconds had gone by that she abruptly realized how illogical it was for her to be angry her husband had *forgotten* one of his whores. Of all things, that should have been the one silver lining to it all — that Meng Yao wasn't an immediate danger to her son's right of succession.

It *should have been.*

(For some reason, it wasn't.)

'*In comparison, Mo Xuanyu was rather favored,*' Wei Wuxian continued. '*At least with him, Jin Guangshan remembered that he had a son, and even brought him to Koi tower. Meng Yao, on the other hand, wasn't anywhere near as lucky. Just like with Madam Mo, after Meng Yao's mother gave birth to him, she waited patiently for Jin Guangshan to come and take her back. She taught Meng Yao with care, preparing him for his eventual entrance into the cultivation world. Yet, even after Meng Yao reached the age of ten, there was still no word from his father, and she began to grow dangerously ill.*'

There was no reason for Madam Jin to be angry about this. She should be grateful, if anything.

'*Before she passed away, she gave Meng Yao the keepsake Jin Guangshan had left with her, and instructed him to go to Koi Tower. Meng Yao packed up his belongings and left Yunmeng, arriving in Lanling after an arduous journey. When he reached Koi Tower he was blocked at the entrance, so he held up the keepsake and requested the Sect Leader be notified.*'

And Madam Jin remembered this moment all too clearly. She remembered the pain and jealousy and anguish she had felt.

(And yet, until the simulation, the pain she inflicted had completely slipped her mind.)

'*The keepsake Jin Guangshan had left was a pearl button. It wasn't anything special, and was often used as gifts for beautiful women, when Jin Guangshan traveled to flirt. He'd pretend the pretty object was a rare treasure, and fill the air with empty promises and vows. He gave and forgot about them as he pleased.*'

A scornful laugh escaped Madam Jin's throat.

Jin Guangshan jumped at the noise.

Years of living with her had made Jin Guangshan very sensitive to the changes in her mood, as the eruptions that followed after were never worth the struggle. Giving a nervous laugh, he rushed to do damage control.

"My Darling, really, you must know that they meant nothing to me," he promised. "Isn't that exactly what Wei-gongzi is saying? I have dozens of those pearls on hand at all times; I might as well be giving them to *pigs!*"

The Lans frowned disapprovingly at that, but, unlike Jin Guangshan, were not ignorant to the fact that those words seemed to only make Madam Jin angrier.

"I'm serious. It doesn't mean anything. A-Xuan is my only heir, and you are my only wife. Those other children aren't threats. In fact, given what Mo Xuanyu and Meng Yao end up doing, it's only become more clear to me how little I can trust them."

The chair's armrests Madam Jin was clutching began to tremble at her strength.

"Really. Those trinkets have no value whatsoever. I'd just as soon give them to a beggar. I can promise you, if Meng Yao approaches Koi Tower again, I'll do far worse than sending him flying down the stairs-"

Cracks began to form.

"I'll prove it to you! Ask for anything you want. I'll let you deal with those bastards however you please! You can whip them or cut them up or hang them out to dry; I couldn't care less if each and every one of them were to die-"

"I know!!" a tremendous shout broke through the sudden silence. "I know none of them mean anything to you. Just like I mean nothing!"

"What? No, no-"

"Don't you speak another word, Guangshan! I'm not stupid. I know you don't care about them at all, and the only reason you keep seeking them out is because you also don't care about me. You don't need to worry, though; I hold no respect for *you* either."

"W-what?"

"I'm saying that if I had to choose, I would rather you own up to the children you've created and bring them into the sect. No matter what issues that causes later on, it would be better than just *forgetting about them* the second they leave your sight!"

The silence that followed was more than a little awkward, but Madam Jin was done speaking about this. She turned away from her husband and marched toward where her son and Jiang Yanli were sitting. With her head held high, she sat down next to them, leaving Jin Guangshan alone, only a chair with a shattered armrest for company.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian had continued to narrate, but, as it had mostly been information the watchers already knew, there had been nothing to comment on. After all, it was no secret that Meng Yao had happened to arrive on Jin Zixuan's birthday, and that Madam Jin had darkened upon seeing the pearl the servant had brought over.

Jin Guangshan had crushed the pearl into dust and ordered the sender to be kicked out. Although Madam Jin and Jin Zixuan didn't necessarily support this action, they had done nothing to stop it either.

Thus, Meng Yao had been kicked. And he had rolled down, and down, and down the stairs, smashing against the hard stone at the bottom.

Madam Jin remained silent as she watched this unfold, unable to say a word when confronted with the truth.

At long last, the bleeding Meng Yao stood up. Without saying a word of protest, he dusted himself off, gathered up his things, and left Koi Tower in an instant.

Hesitantly, the watching Jin Zixuan reached out, as if wanting to grab Meng Yao and stop him from leaving. However, even without taking into consideration the actions of the future Jin Guangyao, that was impossible.

The simulated Meng Yao phased right through Jin Zixuan's hand, marching off without so much as a backward glance.

That part of the simulation faded away, and the watchers were returned to the Sunshot Campaign. It was a different setting than the battle they had just seen: now, Nie Mingjue stood atop an unnamed mountain region near Hejian. Wei Wuxian's blue form stood behind Nie Mingjue, floating a few feet off the ground with a solemn expression.

'*Right after the Sunshot Campaign began, Meng Yao joined Qinghe Nie's troops. I suppose that's where we are now.*'

Nie Huaisang hated every bit of this.

Nie Mingjue was walking up the mountain by foot. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a lightly-dressed boy leave the emerald forest, a bamboo tube in hand. It appeared the boy had just finished collecting some water, but, as if exhausted by the undertaking, his legs trembled with fatigue. Then, just as he was about to enter the cave where the others were, he paused and listened.

The watchers stepped closer, wishing they knew what was happening, but, as Nie Mingjue had been too far away to hear, there was nothing for them to pick up on.

In the end, bamboo tube still in hand, he turned around and walked in another direction. He found a relatively safe spot and sat down, eating his meal in silence. Cold wind brushed by, sending shivers down his spine.

A large shadow suddenly covered him.

Upon recognizing its source, Meng Yao stood up at once, bowing respectfully and greeting, "Sect Leader Nie."

"...Meng Yao?" Nie Mingjue asked, vaguely recognizing his face.

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you rest inside the cave like everyone else?" Nie Mingjue asked, right as another chilling blast of wind swept by.

Meng Yao opened his mouth to answer, then paused, smiling awkwardly. The lack of answer was answer enough. Nie Mingjue walked past him in the direction of the cave.

Now, finally, they could hear what was being said.

As soon as it was revealed, Lan Xichen's lips pursed in displeasure.

"It's true!"

"No way! Jin Guangshan's son?! How can Jin Guangshan's son be living the same way we do? Why doesn't he go find his dad? He'd be relieved of our misery with just a point of his dad's finger!"

"You think he doesn't want to go back? What do you think he was doing when he took that keepsake all the way from Yunmeng to Lanling?"

"He definitely chose wrong. Jin Guangshan's wife is scary."

Madam Jin huffed, but didn't disagree. After all, why would she object? She *wanted* to be scary.

(A part of her brain whispered that she wanted to be scary to Jin Guangshan; not necessarily to his sons.)

"Let's be honest, Jin Guangshan has so many illegitimate children, at least an entire stack of sons and daughters. Have you ever seen him accept any of them? Making such a scene was just asking to be embarrassed."

"Yup. Shouldn't hope for the hopeless. He got beaten to a pulp, but he only has himself to blame! He dug his own grave."

"What an idiot! With Jin Zixuan, why would Jin Guangshan ever think anything of another son?! Much less one from a prostitute mounted by thousands-"

Nie Mingjue could feel his own temper rapidly beginning to snap.

"Who knows whose seed he was! In my opinion, Jin Guangshan probably didn't dare to accept him because he also had doubts as to that!"

“My bet is that he doesn’t even remember whether he was ever with that specific woman!”

“I’m actually feeling quite thrilled Jin Guangshan’s seed has resigned himself to getting water for us!”

“Resigned?” another cackled. “Did you see how much energy he put into this?! Don’t you see how hard he’s working? He runs around every day trying to get into everyone’s good graces. He wants to accomplish something so that his dad will actually accept him.”

A flame of anger burned in Nie Mingjue’s heart.

The Lan brothers and Jin Zixuan nodded in agreement.

Nie Huaisang, on the other hand, couldn’t help but feel like his brother’s righteousness was leading him to make a very big mistake.

His hand immediately pressed onto the hilt of his saber. Meng Yao ran forward as if trying to stop him, but it was far too late; the saber had unsheathed, and a boulder in front of the cave came crashing down. The few dozen cultivators within the cave jumped to their feet and unsheathed their swords but faltered upon seeing who it was.

“Drinking the water he brought you while speaking such spiteful words?!” Nie Mingjue growled. “Did you join my forces to kill Wen-dogs, or to make idle talk?!”

The cultivators inside all flinched, but knew better than to try to argue back.

“You, follow me,” Nie Mingjue ordered, walking off. Although clearly confused, Meng Yao followed at his heels, head hung low.

“...Thank you, Sect Leader Nie,” he said at last.

“A proper man should carry himself with proud righteousness. There’s no need to care for the talk of those idlers.”

“Yes, sir,” he confirmed, though, based on his expression, he still held many doubts.

However, Nie Mingjue wasn’t finished yet:

“The more those people talk drivel behind your back, the harder you’ll have to work to leave them speechless. I’ve seen you on the battlefield. Every time, you’re at the center of the front lines and you stay behind afterward to clean up,” he commented. “Well done. Keep it up.”

Meng Yao did a double take, seemingly not believing his own ears, and stared disbelievingly at his commanding officer.

“Your swordwork is quite nimble, but not solid enough. More work is needed,” Nie Mingjue advised. It was the closest he got to encouragement, and everyone present

knew it.

“Sect Leader Nie, thank you for your advice,” Meng Yao bowed once more.

However, frowning, the incorporeal Wei Wuxian thought, ‘*From what I remember, his foundation was too weak to ever make his swordsmanship more solid. To compensate, he had to aim for quantity instead of quality, and learned every technique he could, from every sect that offered.*’

And of course his foundation was weak; he had started far too late. Nie Mingjue was used to working with the best of the best, but there were plenty of others significantly less fortunate.

He frowned to himself.

Now, it was Ouyang Zizhen’s voice that spoke, as the version in the far-future had more narration to give: “As time went on, Nie Mingjue began to take notice of Meng Yao more and more. They were both at the center of the conflict, with each battle being just as critical as the last, so Meng Yao’s relentless clearing of the battlefield was easy to notice. After a few battles had gone by, Nie Mingjue promoted Meng Yao to his deputy, and Meng Yao seized the opportunity. He performed every duty required of him to the utmost-”

“Oh, of course he did!” Lan Jingyi couldn’t help but interject. “How else was he going to earn Chifeng-zun’s trust?!”

Nie Mingjue seemed to flinch back at that, almost having forgotten that the Meng Yao before him would one day become the Jin Guangyao they had seen in the future. It was so difficult to remember — Meng Yao seemed so *earnest.*

And Nie Huaisang knew full well how much trouble his brother would have combining the two.

‘*Don’t worry, Da-ge,*’ he thought to himself. ‘*Even if you don’t remember, I definitely will.*’

“Would you shut up, Jingyi!” Jin Ling hissed. “Sizhui said Zizhen was going to read this part! You’re supposed to stay silent.”

“How am I supposed to stay silent while hearing about this?!”

“*Jingyi*,” Sizhui scolded.

Ouyang Zizhen’s snickering could be heard in the background.

Lan Qiren, once again, was forced to withhold a sigh.

As annoyed as the future’s juniors seemed to be about all this, the simulated Nie Mingjue couldn’t be juxtaposed further. As they were talking, the simulation had displayed a scene from the base camp: Meng Yao was practicing his sword techniques, making up for his late start by putting in ten times the effort anyone else would. And Nie Mingjue sat before him, watching with a smile on his face. He opened his mouth,

but the simulation did not add in the words he said. In response, Meng Yao nodded and did the technique again, raising his blade higher that time. No further explanation was needed; anyone would be able to see that Nie Mingjue was giving him some one-on-one training, in return for the exemplary service Meng Yao had offered.

Then, a battlefield appeared.

Nie Mingjue was as powerful and valiant as all the rumors implied, cutting down enemy soldiers one after another at a breakneck speed. Hower, to his back, another person was performing fairly well too. It was Meng Yao, using the technique Nie Mingjue had helped him with to deal as much damage as possible. He wasn't anywhere near as powerful as many other cultivators, but….

Nie Mingjue trusted him completely, and that was far more rare than any amount of power that could be gained.

Nie Huaisang stomped on the ground, not having any other way to release the ugly emotions swirling inside him.

~~Because Nie Mingjue had *trusted* Meng Yao, and Nie Huaisang could count on one hand the number of people his brother genuinely felt that way about.~~

Finally, Ouyang Zizhen (who had, at long last, managed to stop laughing enough to continue) said, "Unlike Nie Mingjue and Jin Guangyao's relationship in the future, their relationship at this point in time was quite positive. Nie Mingjue regarded him very highly."

The scene changed to Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao looking over a map in Nie Mingjue's office, planning out the next attack. It was just the two of them; Nie Mingjue's other officers were nowhere to be found. He felt that the value Meng Yao offered was worth more than all the others combined.

'*It's no wonder he did,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*Meng Yao sounds like the ideal subordinate.*'

And, as soon as he had that thought, it occurred to Wen Ruohan that the false sense of security Nie Mingjue had fallen into had undoubtedly been felt by the simulated Wen Ruohan as well. In fact, their feelings might have been almost identical.

~~As much as he hated to admit it, he and Sect Leader Nie were more alike than either of them wanted to be. They were symbols of power and the leaders of each side of the war. Violent, feared, and respected without question. They valued talent and ability above anything else, including bloodline. In some ways, it was no wonder the two of them had both fallen for the same trap, laid out by the same person.~~

~~(But as both of them would probably die before admitting any similarities to the other, Wen Ruohan decided to keep those thoughts to himself.)~~

At that moment, the position of the sun shifted. It was high in the sky: noon, a few days later.

“On that day, Heijin’s battleground welcomed a certain guest,” Zizhen explained.

A gust of wind swept by, sending a set of pure white robes fluttering elegantly.

‘*Xiongzhang,*’ Lan Wangji realized, eyes widening.

And indeed, Lan Xichen stood before them, approaching the waiting Nie Mingjue with a relieved smile on his face. Although neither Sect Leader could say as much in front of all their subordinates, it was clear to the watchers that both were carefully analyzing every inch of the other’s body in search of injuries. It was entirely possible that something like that would be kept out of official reports, in order to keep up the soldiers’ morale; they needed to confirm for themselves that the other was okay. Luckily, after a few seconds, they were both satisfied with their examinations, and relaxed at last.

“During the Sunshot Campaign, praise was endlessly directed towards the venerated triad,” Ouyang Zizhen continued, cheerily as ever. “Chifeng-zun swept past all obstacles, leaving not a trace of the… of, um….”

All the levity that had been in his voice seemed to vanish at once.

“Go on,” Lan Sizhui whispered, softly. “It’s… it’s okay.”

“R-right,” Zizhen cleared his throat. “Chifeng-zun swept past all obstacles, not leaving a trace of the — of the Wen-dogs after he finished with them. Tales of his unwavering blade filled the air with every additional head that fell to the ground.”

Wen Qing pursed her lips together.

So, it was the phrase ‘Wen-dogs’ that had bothered Zizhen? And he hadn’t continued until Lan Sizhui had given permission, downcast though it had been. The future 20 years from her time hadn’t *seemed* all that sympathetic towards the Wens.

(She closed her eyes for a moment, trying not to think about how many of the dead were people she knew.)

“On-on the other hand, it was different with Zewu-jun,” Ouyang Zizhen finally continued, his tone relaxing again as the words went on. “After the situation in the Gusu area had settled down, Lan Qiren-xiansheng was more than capable of defending it. Thus, Lan Xichen often traveled to aid others, saving lives from danger.”

A proud smile formed on Lan Qiren’s face, and both he and Lan Wangji have the lightly blushing Lan Xichen nods of acknowledgement.

“Over the course of the Sunshot Campaign, Lan Xichen managed to recover territory and aid in escapes countless times, until he was viewed as a ray of hope — a powerful trump card for the campaign.”

Nie Mingjue grinned at the words, and even Wen Qing couldn’t help giving a slight bow of respect.

(After all, she knew full well that the Wen had started this war. She had been against it from the beginning but had no power to stop it. The fact that Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen were working against the Wens wasn't something she could rebuke.)

(Nevertheless, both Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue froze when they saw her bow, forced to recall, momentarily, that the 'Wen-dogs' they were killing left and right weren't actually animals, despite what they were called.)

Meanwhile, the simulation continued on, showing Nie Mingjue leading Lan Xichen (and those the latter was escorting) to a spacious, brightly-lit hall. A few other cultivators were seated inside, and the blue wisps of Wei Wuxian's soul moved forward to observe Lan Xichen closely.

'*Their faces really do look alike,*' Wei Wuxian thought, humming lightly. '*Their demeanors are so different that anyone can tell them apart with a glance, but looking up close like this… they really are similar.*'

He glanced up at the empty sky.

'*I wonder what's happening to my body right now. The paperman got invaded by resentful energy; does that show on my body too? Will Lan Zhan notice something's wrong?*'

He frowned to himself, concerned.

"Awwww," Nie Huaisang whispered, making Lan Wangji instantly switch from being concerned to embarrassed. He had thought the revelations regarding Nie Mingjue had left Nie Huaisang too distracted for the other boy to comment on any of this, but, clearly, that effect had worn off.

"...It's a reasonable question," Lan Wangji protested.

"I doubt he'd care if it was anyone else watching over his body~"

When the Second Jade's ears flushed bright pink and he looked away, Nie Huaisang decided to declare it his own victory. Nie Mingjue relaxed at the sight, happy his brother had managed to calm down a bit now that some time had passed.

(Little did he know that time had merely turned Nie Huaisang's anger from a burning rage to a cool simmer. Even now, his mind was continuing to go over the situation, carefully thinking through everything he could do.)

(After all, outside the simulation, there was a version of Meng Yao that had no idea what the future would hold. He would require Nie Huaisang's *utmost* consideration.)

And, at that moment, the focus of most of Nie Huaisang's attention stepped forward, offering everyone teacups. As there was no way to bring servants onto the battlefield, most of those tasks had fallen to Nie Mingjue's deputy, Meng Yao.

Instantly recognizing the face of one of the cultivation world's most talked-about jokes, several people hesitated before grabbing their cups.

‘*That’s Jin Guangshan’s son, isn’t it? The son of a prostitute?*’

‘*Gross. Considering his background… do I really want to drink this?*’

Some pushed their cups to the side, and others took out white handkerchiefs, refusing to touch it directly. One sentiment was shared among those gathered:

‘*Someone like him is bound to be unclean.*’

Nie Mingjue growled at those words, and Wen Ruohan quietly scoffed. A moment later, they both did a mental double take, realizing that the person they were siding with was someone who would practically spit on their graves in the coming few segments — even after they had offered him their protection.

Even still, the two sect leaders couldn’t help but view the comments those cultivators had made as the height of stupidity.

(They couldn’t change their minds about this, even if it meant they had to stoop so low as to *agree* with each other.)

Unlike the real Nie Mingjue, whose attention would be focused where Wei Wuxian’s was, the simulated Sect Leader Nie remained wholly ignorant of what had just occurred, not glancing over from where he was speaking to Nie Zhonghui. As such, Meng Yao simply smiled, refusing to show the cultivators any weakness even as they spurned him one after another. He set down the very last cup, and the final recipient broke the chain.

“Thank you,” Lan Xichen said, taking the cup with both hands and making sure to meet Meng Yao’s eyes. He took a sip of the tea immediately after, before joining Nie Mingjue’s conversation with Nie Zhonghui. The cultivators who witnessed the scene shifted awkwardly, suddenly feeling uneasy.

‘*As they should*,’ both Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen thought, nearly regretting the feeling a moment later. Nie Mingjue gave an awkward cough, and Lan Xichen turned his gaze toward the floor. Although the First Jade strongly disapproved of the cultivators’ actions, he couldn’t help but feel as though thinking like that for Meng Yao was betraying Nie Mingjue.

However, he couldn’t fully regret his other-self’s actions, either.

Nie Mingjue had never been once for humor or levity, and that had only become more true after the war began. However, in front of Lan Xichen, his expression seemed to ease.

“How long is your stay?” he asked.

Smiling back with equal comfort, Lan Xichen responded, “Mingjue-xiong, I’ll have to impose on you tonight. I am leaving tomorrow morning to meet up with Wangji.”

“Where will that be?”

“Jianling.”

Frowning, Nie Mingjue asked, “Isn’t Jianling still in the hands of the Wen-dogs?”

Nie Mingjue glanced back and saw Wen Qing staring concerningly blankly.

“Not since a few days ago,” Lan Xichen revealed. “Currently, it is in the hands of the YunmengJiang Sect.”

Another sect leader at the table chimed in, “Sect Leader Nie, I don’t think you heard yet, but the Yunmeng Jiang Sect has grown quite powerful in that area.”

The Jiang siblings sucked in a breath of air, making eye contact with each other, then looking back at their mother to see the proud grin that had taken over her face..

However, another sect leader scoffed right after: “Of course it’s powerful. How could it not be, when Wei Wuxian alone can face millions! What would he have to be scared of? He can just sit there controlling his area, while we’re all off running for our lives. With such luck….”

There was an awkward silence both within the simulation and around the watchers as the resentment of Sect Leader Li was made clear.

‘*I suppose that’s where it all began,’* Wen Ruohan thought, sighing slightly to himself. ‘*I’m sure demonic cultivation brought awe at first, but as soon as that turned into jealousy, public opinion began to shift. Wen Zhuliu’s core melting hand brought about similar reactions, even before I started using it against other sects.’*

He very nearly growled in annoyance.

‘Weak fools who can only whine amongst themselves without doing anything. This is exactly why your sects would all be better served as branches of the Wen. I should never have left any of this in Chao-er’s hands.’

Even as his frustration mounted, not once did it occur to him that it would make far more sense to be annoyed at how Wei Wuxian was defeating *his* army, and then be pleased at the internal strife the “Sunshot Campaign” had.

Finally, one of the other sect leaders decided the silence had gone on long enough and changed the subject: “W-well, good thing that Zewu-jun and Hanguang-jun are helping everyone. Or else who knows how many sects of innocent cultivators would have fallen into the hands of the Wen-dogs.”

Nie Mingjue nodded once, then directed his attention at Lan Xichen again to ask, “Your brother’s over there?”

“He took a group there at the beginning of the month,” Lan Xichen confirmed.

“Your brother’s level of cultivation is quite high, so he should be more than enough by himself. Why are you going too?”

Before Lan Xichen could answer, the watchers were abruptly reminded of the blue wisps of Wei Wuxian's soul when he excitedly thought, '*Oh, good eye, Chifeng-zun! Lan Zhan's cultivation is definitely the best!! How astute of you!!!*'

Lan Xichen's jaw momentarily dropped open in shock, and Jiang Yanli gave a short squeal. Even Wen Ruohan got over his frustration temporarily and found himself chuckling in amusement.

"What the — it's not like he's talking about *you*!" Jiang Cheng pointed out. "Why on earth are you looking so bashful and happy?!"

"Ah, you have a lot to learn, my friend," Nie Huaisang told him, grinning gleefully at the fully-red face of Lan Wangji to the side of them. "No need to fear, Jiang-xiong. It will all make sense when you're older."

"Hey!"

On the other hand, Lan Xichen sighed, "It's a bit embarrassing to say, but after Wangji arrived he appears to have had a few conflicts with Yunmeng Jiang's Young Master Wei."

At those words, the blush vanished from Lan Wangji's face. He had forgotten, for a moment, how terrible his interactions with Wei Wuxian had been after 'the Yiling Patriarch' came back from the Burial Mounds.

He really felt like his own worst enemy sometimes.

"...What happened?"

Sect Leader Wu piped in, "I think Hanguang-jun objects to Wei Wuxian's methods because they're too unnatural. They say that Hanguang-jun denounced Wei Wuxian to his face, saying how he disgraced the corpses, how he was cruel and loves to kill, how he forgot his original intentions, and so on."

"Incorrect," Lan Wangji coldly objected, speaking up for the first time in a while. "That isn't it. I just… I want to help-"

"Wangji," Lan Xichen whispered softly. "It's okay. We know."

But the rumor mill clearly didn't:

"Really? But everyone who's talking about the battle of Jiangling describes Wei Wuxian in an incredible way. I'd love to see it for myself, if given the chance."

'*Hm…*' the simulated Wei Wuxian thought, his blue form floating closer to the one who had spoken. '*His story wasn't as bad as most people's. I've heard some people talk about how Lan Zhan and I continue to fight with each other even while we're on the battlefield killing Wen-dogs together. In reality, back then, we really weren't anywhere near as bad as the rumors say. There were just a few trivial clashes…*'

With ever word, the anger Lan Wangji had for his other self slowly began to deflate.

'*At the time, I kept going around digging up graves, and Lan Zhan expressed his disapproval, talking about how it wasn't a righteous path and harmed both body and mind. He even straight-up hindered me at times. And besides, we were diligently fighting the Wens every few days, so both of us were easily angered, and we often parted on bad terms. Though, listening to this now, it really does feel like a lifetime ago-'*

Wei Wuxian suddenly paused, and many of the watchers flinched.

'*Ah,*' he continued. '*I suppose it was a lifetime ago.*'

Jiang Yanli clenched her fists together at that, so both Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan tried to send her smiles. She made an attempt to smile back, but anyone would be able to see how shaky it was.

Then-

"You know, in my opinion, Hanguang-jun really doesn't need to do any of that. Even the living are nearly-dead right now, so why should we care about a couple of corpses?"

"Yes, we're on harsh times, right?" another agreed. "Sect Leader Jiang is right. In terms of evil, what could possibly be more evil than the Wen-dogs?! He's on our side anyways. It's fine so long as he's killing Wen-dogs."

'*Well, that isn't what any of you were saying when you brought the siege on me.*'

"Those hypocrites!" Jiang Cheng shouted. "This almost couldn't be further from what they say in the future!"

"What could have made them change their minds so much?" Jin Zixuan asked. "Right now, it seems like Lan Wangji-gongzi is more against Wei Wuxian than anyone else!"

"This is unbelievable," Lan Qiren agreed, frowning deeply.

Once again, Wen Ruohan quite strongly wished he had gotten Wei Wuxian on his side before this had all begun.

While they had been speaking, the simulated cultivators had finished their meeting, and were now being brought to their resting rooms by Meng Yao. Nie Mingjue had gone off in a different direction, grabbing a slender saber from his room instead. As he walked down the hallway to meet up with Lan Xichen again, he heard the First Jade's voice speak.

"What a coincidence. To think you joined Mingjue-xiong's forces and became his deputy."

"I've been blessed to have earned Chifeng-zun's approval," Meng Yao responded.

There was a bit of a pause, as though Lan Xichen was hesitating on whether to bring something up. Finally:

“These days, Lanling’s Sect Leader Jin has been having some difficulty managing the Langya area. As of right now, he’s trying to recruit more personnel.”

“I… Zewu-jun, you mean….”

“There’s no need to say anything. I remember you once told me that you hoped to earn a proper place in the Lanling Jin Sect, and to receive the approval of your father. Now that you have a position and a future under Mingjue-xiong, does your wish still stand?”

Nie Huaisang froze, listening carefully to every word. He knew how pivotal of a moment this would be and the choices it may lead Meng Yao to make in the coming years. Neither staying with the Nie nor going to the Jin seemed inherently bad now, but one didn’t simply ‘end up’ as Chief Cultivator-

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A dimension away and twenty years into the future, both Hanguang-jun and Sect Leader Nie Huaisang sneezed.

-which meant Jin Guangyao had undoubtedly put enormous amounts of work in to achieving that. Which was fine; Nie Huaisang had no problems with ambitious people, despite how little he wanted to be one himself. However-

“Yes,” Meng Yao declared at last. “I still wish for that.”

“I thought you might.”

However, right now, there was one thing the watchers were all wondering. They had just seen first hand how scornfully the public treated Meng Yao, regardless of the work he put in. The future, on the other hand, had been full of people supporting Jin Guangyao, as well as rumors regarding how much Nie Mingjue seemed to hate him. So, one question remained: was Meng Yao more like Xue Yang, or Wei Wuxian?

They still didn’t know everything about how the Yiling Patriarch met his end, but their confidence in his morality was strong enough for them to be certain it was at least not fully his fault. Inventing demonic cultivation had seemed completely inexcusable at first, but, bit by bit, it had become more than understandable.

Xue Yang had gone through terrible things too, but the actions he had taken afterward were in no way equal to the crimes committed against him. ‘It’s *my* finger versus *their* lives,’ he had argued, like a child who still didn’t understand how the world worked. His past had explained his actions, but had in no way excused them.

So, had Jin Guangyao ended up in the compromising position he did because there was something he desired that the watchers would need to stop, or was it due to a series of circumstances largely outside his control?

(Given the scorn with which the future's juniors spoke of Jin Guangyao, especially in comparison to their love for Wei Wuxian, Nie Huaisang was inclined to bet on the former.)

While Nie Huaisang's thoughts had been running rampant, the simulation had continued undeterred. Meng Yao had continued speaking:

"I want to, but I'm already Sect Leader Nie's deputy. I owe Sect Leader Nie a debt of gratitude. No matter what remains of my wish, I cannot leave Hejian."

"...You're right," Lan Xichen admitted at last. "Even if you want to leave, it would be a difficult thing to bring up. However, I believe that if you choose to ask, Mingjue-xiong would respect your decision. Should he be unwilling to let you leave, I will try to convince him-"

"Why wouldn't I let you leave?" Nie Mingjue interrupted, stepping into the room. Somewhat startled, Meng Yao stood up at once, only to sit down again when Nie Mingjue gestured for him to do so.

Meng Yao pursed his lips together, looking down at the table before him. He seemed unwilling to say a word. Then-

"I'll write you a letter of recommendation tomorrow," Nie Mingjue said.

"Sect Leader Nie?"

"Da-ge!" Lan Xichen brightened up, showing almost as much disbelieving hope as Meng Yao did. Nie Mingjue smiled back, and both he and Lan Xichen felt their spirits rise.

(Nie Huaisang knew that, right now, the two of them were starting to hope this was another Wei Wuxian case, rather than a Xue Yang case. Why else would Lan Xichen have unconsciously started using 'da-ge' again? He, on the other hand, wasn't so optimistic.)

"Take the letter to Langya," the simulated Sect Leader explained. "Find your father."

Disbelieving and nearly-gaping, Meng Yao stuttered out, "Sect Leader Nie, if you've heard everything, then you should have also heard me say that-"

"I didn't promote you because I wanted you to pay me back, I simply thought the position suited you, since you're capable enough and your conduct is to my liking. If you really want to pay me back, just kill a few more Wen-dogs on the battlefield!"

Hearing this, the usually-eloquent Meng Yao became well and truly speechless.

"See?" Lan Xichen asked. "I told you Mingjue-xiong would respect your decision."

Jin Zixuan grinned, turning to Nie Mingjue to say, "Thank you, Sect Leader Nie!"

"You're happy?" Madam Jin asked.

"Well, I mean… it's just — he's capable, and we're apparently having trouble and-"

“And you want to try having a brother?” Jiang Yanli whispered in his ear, making a fierce blush rise up his face (for more than one reason).

“W-well…”

“Sure,” Nie Mingjue shrugged. “If Meng Yao ends up… being an acceptable person, then we’ll make sure he’s sent to Lanling in this world as well.”

Jin Zixuan’s grin widened.

But even Jin Zixuan’s joy was nothing compared to the level of shock being experienced by Meng Yao. His eyes grew red and glistened as he took a deep breath.

“Sect Leader Nie… Zewu-jun… I-” he cut himself off, bowing his head. “I really don’t know what to say.”

“Then don’t say anything,” Nie Mingjue told him, setting the additional saber he was carrying in his hands down on the table.

Most of the watchers displayed visible confusion at the extra saber, finding it to be a strange thing to carry. Contrarily, Nie Mingjue scowled at it, Lan Xichen gained an amused grin, and Nie Huaisang wilted on the spot.

“Huaisang’s saber?” the simulated Sect Leader Lan guessed.

“Traitor!” Huaisang accused but joined in Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan’s laughter shortly after.

“Although I’m sure he’s safe under your sect’s care at Gusu, he can’t neglect his studies,” Nie Mingjue said. “Have someone supervise him when they’re free. The next time I see him, I want to evaluate his saber techniques and his understanding of scripture.”

As Lan Xichen tucked the saber away in his qiankun sleeve, he commented, “Huaisang was initially pleased to be excused from training, proudly telling everyone that he left his saber at home. Now, he has no more reason to slack off.”

The Nie heir flinched at the accusation, and Wen Ruohan sighed.

(He really couldn’t understand why someone so obviously intelligent would spend his whole life playing at being a fool. Even if he disliked the physical training, there was plenty else he could set that mind of his to. No matter how much he thought about it, Nie Huaisang seemed to remain a mystery.)

Meanwhile, Jin Guangshan was becoming increasingly nervous, getting a sneaking feeling that whatever the simulation was going to show next wouldn’t paint him in a good light.

Nie Mingjue lifted his gaze and saw Jin Guangyao watching Lan Xichen with a surprisingly genuine smile. The blank, empty one he showed to those who insulted him seemed like a far away dream, when compared to the one being displayed now. It

seemed a bit excessive, considering the limited number of interactions the two of them had.

Nie Mingjue leaned his head on his hand and asked, "Come to think of it, have the two of you met before?"

"We have," Meng Yao confirmed.

"Where? When?"

Smiling sadly, Lan Xichen shook his head and said, "I would rather not bring it up. It's the greatest disgrace of my life, so please don't probe further, Mingjue-xiong."

"Why would you worry about losing face in front of me?" Nie Mingjue wondered, before turning to his other guest and ordering, "Meng Yao, you tell me."

"Since Zewu-jun is unwilling to reveal it, I cannot say any more," the deputy declared unrepentantly.

Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan again fell into laughter at the shocked betrayal on Nie Mingjue's face and even Wen Qing seemed amused. They had noticed the same, of course, but they were sure it would be explained soon. Amusement traveled through most of the watchers. As Nie Mingjue grumbled to himself (with a strange air of lightheartedness, despite his chastising words), Nie Huaisang softly sighed to himself.

'*You meant a lot to my Da-ge, Meng Yao,*' he thought. '*And, from what I can tell, he meant a lot to you.*'

Conversation moved on, the trio talking business one moment and conducting idle chatter the next. They were all sitting relaxed and casual, a world away from how they had behaved while in the hall. Unlike before, where they were among colleagues, this appeared to be a meeting between friends.

'*Let's see if what you got out of that betrayal of yours was worth losing all of this.*'

Wei Wuxian was similarly shocked by the levity in the discussion, but his attention was far more focused on the Lan present than the other two.

'*Their relationship is pretty good, right now. Why is Lan Zhan so bad at making conversation when Zewu-jun is so chatty?*'

Lan Wangji jumped, not having expected the sudden address. Lan Xichen couldn't quite hide his chuckle at that:

"You see, Wangji?" he whispered, leaning close. "Even when you have nothing to do with what's going on, his thoughts can't help but go to you."

Lan Qiren sent Lan Xichen a reproachful glare, but it was completely worth it when the first jade got to see his brother flush scarlet from his head to his toes.

‘*Well, he’s okay the way he is,*’ Wei Wuxian decided. ‘*Yeah, it’s fine if he keeps his mouth shut. I talk more than enough for the two of us, so he can just listen and acknowledge me with his ‘mn’s. That’s nice too. What do you call…*’

Wei Wuxian’s thoughts continued on and on, deviating completely from the conversation he probably should be focusing on. As the not-yet-Venerated Triad drifted from one subject to another, the Yiling Patriarch’s mind remained solely focused on exactly one thing.

And Lan Wangji’s ears darkened more and more as time went on.

(He wondered if Wei Wuxian knew that *his* thoughts were singularly directed in much the same way.)

Someone cleared their throat.

“A few days later, Meng Yao left Hejian for Langye with a letter of recommendation from Nie Mingjue,” Lan Jingyi declared, sounding mistrustful and scathing as he did. “After he left, Nie Mingjue went through a chain of new deputies, but Senior Wei couldn’t help but feel as if each replacement was always somehow half a beat slower. Meng Yao was a ‘rare talent’ — according to the blind-”

“*Jingyi!*”

“Meng Yao was resourceful and quick witted,” Lan Jingyi said in one breath, not wanting to face anymore of Lan Sizhui’s disapproval. “He was able to understand what was left unsaid, complete a task in its entirety even when only a fraction of it was described to him. Always efficient, never sloppy — it was hard to not compare the work of others when you’d grown used to someone like him.

“After some time, the Jin Clan of Lanling, which had already been struggling to hold the line at Langye, was nearly at its breaking point. Lan Xichen happened to be assisting another afflicted area, so *Jin Guangshan* sought help from Hejian instead. Nie Mingjue answered the call.”

Sect Leader Jin and his son both pretended they hadn’t noticed the scathing emphasis given to his name.

In the center of a busy camp, Nie Mingjue and Jin Guangshan could be seen bowing in greeting to each other.

“I really can’t thank you enough, Sect Leader Nie,” Jin Guangshan said, the unusual amounts of stress clearly weighing on him. “Without your help, I’m sure the outcome of today’s battle would have been quite different.”

“Hm,” Nie Mingjue acknowledged curtly. “Sect Leader Jin, how has Meng Yao been doing nowadays?”

Hearing the name, Sect Leader Jin paused and asked, "Meng Yao? Sect Leader Nie, I don't mean any offense, but who is he again?"

Jin Zixuan jumped at the harsh revelation, paling in apprehension, and Lan Xichen, whose other self had encouraged Meng Yao, felt his heart rate increase twofold. All the watchers and the simulated Nie Mingjue knew for a fact that Jin Guangshan wouldn't be able to forget an incident that had sparked so many rumors, and yet the man had lied to their faces without flinching. Nie Mingjue seemed to take the news worst of all.

'*Did something happen to him? When Wei Wuxian disappeared during the war, he ended up thrown into the Burial Mounds. I'm sure what happened to Meng Yao wasn't anywhere near as bad, but…*' he clenched his hands into fists and cursed. '*I shouldn't have let him go. I knew what Jin Guangshan was like, but I didn't even try to warn him about-*'

"Enough," a quiet but stern voice declared.

Nie Mingjue glanced to the side and saw Wen Qing standing there. The Wen doctor was staring straight ahead, eyes focused on the simulation and taking in every detail. Finally, she continued:

"There was nothing else you could have been expected to do. He chose to go to Lanling, even after what happened to him the first time he tried. He's smart; he knew full-well what he was getting into. You tried helping him get what he wanted. You couldn't have known anything would happen."

"...I know that," Nie Mingjue protested.

"Of course you do," Wen Qing agreed, somehow making Nie Mingjue feel like he had just lost.

(Unbeknownst to him, Wen Qing had said those words partly for herself. After all, if she was right about a certain theory of hers, Wei Wuxian had been caught by Wen Chao without his core — lacking his only form of protection because *she* had cut it out. It was Wen Chao's fault, first and foremost, but she couldn't claim to be uninvolved either. That said, she had no way of predicting what would come next, so she knew better than to blame herself relentlessly.)

Unfortunately, unlike the incorporeal watchers, the simulated Nie Mingjue couldn't remain lost in his thoughts. *He* had to actually respond to the man who had just lied so brazenly to him a few seconds after offering thanks.

"...Meng Yao was my deputy in the past. I wrote a letter of recommendation for him to bring."

"Really? But I've never seen such a person or the letter. Oh dear. If I had known Sect Leader Nie had sent over his deputy, I definitely would have received him well. Perhaps he got into an accident during his journey."

As cruel as it seemed, Jin Zixuan dearly, dearly hoped so. If Meng Yao had gotten into an accident or gotten captured, then Jin Guangshan hadn't intentionally sent him away. If Meng Yao was captured on the way by Wens, then Madam Jin's anger wasn't a factor in all this. If Meng Yao had never arrived at Lanling at all, then it wasn't Jin Zixuan's fault things had turned out this way.

'*...What kind of brother am I, to* hope *something like that happened to him?*'

The Jin heir fell silent, unable to resist sending Nie Huaisang a mental apology. No matter how little he wanted it to be true, he couldn't help but feel like his position as Jin Guangshan's rightful son had played a factor in the fate of Nie Mingjue's head.

Funny. He used to be so proud of having that position.

Meanwhile, Nie Mingjue had decided enough was enough. He turned on his heel and walked away.

Despite asking other sect members about Meng Yao's whereabouts, he continued to not receive a clear answer. Frustrated, he marched into a forest, hoping to clear his head for a while.

The forest was quiet and secluded. A battle had just occurred, and the area quite clearly hadn't been cleaned up yet. Corpses littered the pathway, wearing the uniforms of the Wen and Jin Sects.

Jiang Yanli paled at the sight, unable to keep images from the Massacre of Lotus Pier out of her mind, and Jin Zixuan had to force himself to watch. He refused to look away and potentially miss realizing someone he knew had ended up dead.

There was a noise from in front.

Nie Mingjue put his hand on the hilt of his saber and approached cautiously. Through the branches and leaves, he saw Meng Yao standing amid piles of corpses.

Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen relaxed at once, but Nie Huaisang only became more tense. The latter reaction was proven correct a moment later:

Sect Leader Nie took a step closer, and the watchers were able to see Meng Yao twist his wrist, pulling a long sword out of a cultivator's chest.

His expression was absolutely calm. A pleased smile appeared as he flicked the blood off his sword. He moved carefully, not allowing even a drop to land on his clothes. The sword wasn't his own; it had an emblem of fire on the hilt, meaning it belonged to the Wens. The attack that had gotten the cultivator was also a Wen's. And that made sense, considering the victim was a member of the Lanling Jin Sect.

Except the corpse was far too fresh to have died anything except seconds ago, and all the Wens had long since retreated from this area.

Without saying a word, Nie Mingjue unsheathed his saber. A sharp ring pierced through the air.

At the familiar sound, Meng Yao immediately spun around. The second he laid eyes on Nie Mingjue, his soul seemed to evaporate on the spot.

"...Sect Leader Nie?" he asked.

He only received a cold glare in response. His saber seemed to glow red as qi enveloped it, glinting with the shade of blood.

On the side, Wei Wuxian's blue, wispy form thought, '*I can feel the disappointment and hatred within him. I see. I had been wondering what would happen.*'

The real Nie Mingjue clicked his tongue, but, thanks to the glimpse they had gotten of the future, was far less surprised than his other self had been.

Meng Yao had spent years working for Sect Leader Nie, and knew him better than anyone else. He instantly dropped his sword.

"Wait! Sect Leader Nie, I can explain! Please, wait. I can explain!"

"What do you need to explain?!"

Meng Yao threw himself on the ground at once, practically crawling closer as he insisted, "I had no other choice! I had no choice!"

Lan Qiren's face became stern.

"No other choice?" he repeated. No choice meant there was nothing he could have reasonably done to get a different outcome. As difficult as it would have been to believe at first, Wei Wuxian had genuinely had no other choice when it came to inventing demonic cultivation.

But the calm expression that had been on Meng Yao's face was-

"What do you mean you had no other choice?!" Nie Mingjue shouted. "What did I say when I sent you here?!"

Nearly groveling at Nie Mingjue's feet, Meng Yao continued, "Sect Leader Nie! Sect Leader Nie, just listen to me! I-I did join the LanlingJin Sect's forces. This was my superior. During my time here, he always despised me. He often humiliated me and beat me-"

"So you killed him?!" Nie Mingjue snarled back.

"No, no! Not because of this. What humiliation can I not put up with? What could I not endure, if it was only beatings and scoldings? But every time we took over one of the Wen Sect's strongholds, I strategized with every last drop of my energy. I fought as hard as I could. And yet, with just a few brushstrokes, time and time again he'd make it all his own doing, saying it had nothing to do with me!"

And there was the ambition Nie Huaisang was looking for. Ambition wasn't inherently a bad thing (even if Nie Huaisang had none of it himself), but it would take a lot for someone with Meng Yao's background to end up as Chief Cultivator.

Idly, the Nie heir wondered how often that ambition would push Meng Yao into a situation in which he had "no choice" but to respond.

"This isn't the first time," Meng Yao continued. "It was every time. Every single time! I tried to reason with him, but he couldn't care less! I turned to others, but nobody was willing to hear me out!"

Nie Mingjue slammed his hand against his armrest and cursed again.

"You should have just come back to the Nie Sect," he hissed.

"And just now he called my mother a — he called my mother a… I reached my limit. This.. it only happened since I was outraged and thrown into insanity the instant he said that!"

However, neither version of Nie Mingjue could believe that.

"You're lying!" the simulated version accused. "You reached your limit and were momentarily outraged?! Would someone experiencing that have killed a person with the expression you had? Would they purposefully pick a deserted forest that had just experienced a battle?! Would they use a sword from the Wen Sect — use Wen techniques?! You've clearly been carefully planning this out!"

If it had just been killing his superior officer, maybe things could have been salvaged. Nie Mingjue would be disappointed in Meng Yao, but maybe it could have been justified. Perhaps, they could have moved past this.

However, when confronted, Meng Yao had immediately spilled out a nearly-perfect lie, making himself into the victim. There was no way Nie Mingjue could trust him after that, and any respect had had left for the other had vanished in an instant.

Nie Huaisang was so, so pleased.

However, Meng Yao insisted, "I'm telling the truth! Each and every word!"

"Even if it *was* true, you still shouldn't have killed him! It was only for a few trivial achievements! Do you really care about glory that much?!"

"'Trivial achievements?'" Meng Yao repeated, voice shaking as he spoke. "What do you mean, 'a few trivial achievements?' Chifeng-zun, do you have any idea how much work I put into getting those trivial achievements?! How much I suffered?! Without that glory, I have nothing!"

There were a few rings of truth in there, Nie Huaisang thought. Given the way Meng Yao had been treated by the other Nie cultivators at first, it made sense that he'd fiercely hoard every

victory he could get. In that way, he was the complete opposite of Nie Huaisang: to have anything, he would need to prove himself time and time again. But-

'*How much glory do you feel like you need, and how far are you willing to go to get it?'*

The simulated Nie Mingjue stared down, a mix of disbelief and growing hate on his face, and observed the tears shining in Meng Yao's eyes with a thick wall of mistrust. His memories came forward, and the calm, business-like expression that had been on Meng Yao's face as he killed the man blocked out every other thought in his mind.

The contrast was stark.

"...Meng Yao, let me ask you something…. The first time I saw you, did you purposefully put on a pitiful act, so that I'd come to your rescue?"

"What?" Lan Xichen asked, stunned by the mere suggestion. "No… no, that couldn't have been-"

"If I hadn't stepped in, would you have done what you did today and killed those people?"

The Lan heir appeared to have been struck silent. In Gusu, honesty was one of the most valued concepts. There were exceptions, of course, and people did break the rules sometimes, but a carefully-orchestrated plan like this wasn't something he could have ever considered.

Lan Wangji pursed his lips together as well, but remained silent for the time being.

Similarly, there was a pause between the simulated figures before them. Nie Mingjue's question had cast a heavy weight over the conversation, and Meng Yao knew he had to choose his next words carefully. He swallowed and opened his mouth to speak-

"Don't lie to me!" Nie Mingjue shouted before Meng Yao could even get a single word in.

With a quiver, Meng Yao snapped his mouth shut again. The fingers of his right hand dug into the dirt.

"...Da-ge," Lan Xichen muttered quietly. "This is…."

"Yeah. I know," Nie Mingjue responded. He didn't regret what his other-self was doing, especially not while knowing how the future had turned out, but he could tell as easily as anyone else that his other-self wasn't thinking rationally. If it had been a stranger he caught acting like this, he may have been just as insistent on punishment, but the tone he would have used would have been completely different.

The simulated Nie Mingjue *had* trusted Meng Yao, and the betrayal he was feeling was clouding his mind. What Meng Yao had done couldn't simply be overlooked, but Nie Mingjue was more than compromised on the matter.

After a while, Nie Mingjue resheathed his sword.

"...I won't do anything to you," he said at last.

Meng Yao looked up.

"Go confess what you did to the LanlingJin Sect. Receive your punishment there. Let them deal with it however they see fit."

He was still thinking clearly enough to know he wasn't being fully logical. So he removed himself from the situation, allowing the people actually responsible to handle it.

"Thank you, Sect Leader Nie!" Jin Guangshan said at once. "I can't apologize enough that you had to see that, especially when you were doing so much to help my Sect already. I can assure you, that son of a whore will be punished accordingly."

"But Father-"

"*Zixuan*," Jin Guangshan said scoldingly, cutting his son off. "Look at what he's done. You can't possibly want to claim that boy as your brother now. Just think of where Chifeng-zun's head ended up!"

Jin Zixuan's gaze fell at that.

"...Chifeng-zun," Meng Yao spoke at last. "I can't go there now. Not when I've come so far-"

"You chose the wrong path. Deal with the consequences yourself."

"You're sending me to my death."

"If your words are true, that won't happen," Nie Mingjue assured him.

At least, the simulated Nie Mingjue did.

The real one paused, glanced to his left at the confused, uncertain Lan Xichen, then to the right at the grinning Jin Guangshan. Sect Leader Jin was staring directly at him, hoping to move past any bad blood this had created between them.

'You're sending me to my death,' Meng Yao had said.

"Don't worry, Sect Leader Nie," Jin Guangshan repeated. "What he has committed is a grave crime — especially since it disturbed you while you were already so busy. The Jin Sect will not let this stand!

Though, of course, we won't kill him. I'm sure he thinks making up a ruse like that is his only chance of escaping punishment."

A mocking laugh left Jin Guangshan's throat at his son's foolish attempt.

Wei Wuxian stared at the corpse before him, delicately resting a hand on Wen Ning's shoulder as he said, 'The Sects agreed to force me to hand you and the Stygian Tiger Seal over to

them. I tried to destroy the amulet before I died, and you… it was said you'd been turned into ashes by the LanlingJin Sect.'

He felt along the chains on Wen Ning's wrists, and anger overtook his face.

'Of course. They were trying as hard as they could to restore the damaged pieces of the Stygian Tiger Seal. Why wouldn't they salivate at the thought of having the ghost general as well?'

And then-

'After Xiao Xingchen discovered the truth, he went across three provinces to find Xue Yang, who was still happily picking fights with others. Taking advantage of the discussion conference happening at Koi Tower, Xiao Xingchen brought him over and demanded severe punishment. With his straightforward list of evidence, most sects didn't have any problems with that. The only exception was the LanlingJin Sect.'

Because Xue Yang had been the sect's guest disciple so that the seal could be put back together.

Nie Mingjue's other self had interfered, insisting on a punishment. So they had promised to do so.

However: 'The LanlingJin Sect was indeed the Sect with the thickest face. Although, in Koi Tower, it promised all the Sects that Xue Yang would be executed, when it left Nie Mingjue's sight it immediately changed Xue Yang's death sentence to life imprisonment.'

And if the Jin Sect could lie about that-

'My Darling, really, you must know that they meant nothing to me,' Jin Guangshan had promised less than an hour ago. 'Isn't that exactly what Wei-gongzi is saying? I have dozens of those pearls on hand at all times; I might as well be giving them to pigs!'

The simulated Nie Mingjue had been so confident that Jin Guangyao would receive a fair trial. After all, if the facts of the matter were clear, then regardless of Meng Yao's parentage, the Jin Sect surely wouldn't allow their judgment to be swayed.

Surely they would be fair. They were one of the five great sects, after all.

(Because that assurance had worked *so well* with the Wens.)

All the while, Meng Yao continued to insist that he couldn't go before the Jin Sect — that any such trial would be a death sentence for him. And all the while, Nie Mingjue insisted that the Jin Sect would be fair.

(Maybe, just maybe, Meng Yao had a slight point there.)

"Go!" Nie Mingjue ordered. "Reflect on your actions. Turn over a new leaf."

"...My father hasn't seen me yet," Meng Yao whispered.

Refused to see him; had done everything in his power to ignore him.

Both Jin Zixuan and Nie Mingjue flinched.

“I haven’t even met him yet. They’re going to kill me.”

But Nie Mingjue insisted, his gaze stern and unwavering, until Meng Yao finally breathed out a shallow, “I understand.”

“Stand up,” Sect Leader Nie ordered.

Although his body shook, deprived of all energy, Meng Yao forced himself to his feet. He staggered forward, then stumbled, on the verge of falling. Nie Mingjue reacted at once and steadied him.

There was still a level of affection there, despite everything.

“Thank you, Sect Leader Nie,” Meng Yao murmured.

After nodding once, Nie Mingjue turned around. He had found the person he was looking for, and so, so much more. He wanted nothing more to do here. However, right as he was leaving, Meng Yao spoke again.

“Really… I just can’t.”

Nie Mingjue whirled around and froze a moment later. The instant Nie Mingjue had turned his back to him, Meng Yao had gotten a sword into his hand. The blade was pointed at himself.

“Sect Leader Nie, I’m… unworthy of your kindness,” he said, and his face fell into despair. The blade stabbed straight through his stomach and out his back, impaling him instantly.

“Meng Yao!”

“A-Yao!”

Jin Zixuan and Lan Xichen’s cries filled the air.

Meng Yao collapsed into a pool of blood, and his own rapidly began to join it. Nie Mingjue froze for a split-second, too shocked to react, then ran forward at once and knelt down next to him.

“Meng Yao, what do you think you’re doing?!” he shouted, reaching forward to lift the other man. He cradled him close, sending qi into the other’s body.

Eyes wide, Lan Xichen bit his tongue to keep himself still, too shocked to remember the future while Meng Yao was bleeding out before him.

All the blood had left Meng Yao’s face, and he sent Nie Mingjue a weak look.

“Sect Leader Nie, I-”

Before he could finish, his head drooped. Nie Mingjue gritted his teeth, sending even more energy into Meng Yao’s body, being careful to avoid the blade of the sword all the while.

Then, abruptly, he felt a cold stream of energy at his stomach, and he lost the ability to move.

‘*Ah, I thought so,*’ Wei Wuxian frowned. ‘*Meng Yao injured himself in a way that wouldn’t touch his vital organs. I bet Nie Mingjue never expected Meng Yao would harm him.*’

And indeed, he hadn’t.

As Meng Yao pulled the sword out of his own stomach and stood up, there, for once, was no anger in Nie Mingjue’s expression. Instead, the only thing that could be seen was pure, unadulterated shock. He had seen Meng Yao kill his superior officer, and had seen him lie without hesitation, but the idea that his former deputy would ever act against him was ludicrous.

Or at least, it had been.

‘*Naive fool,*’ Wen Ruohan thought scornfully, before sighing to himself a moment later. ‘*Then again, considering what happens to me, I suppose I’m not one to talk.*’

He and Nie Mingjue had both seen Meng Yao’s skill, and had both trusted him in turn.

And time and time again, had been betrayed by that man.

Putting pressure on the wound, Meng Yao fled, completely ignoring his promise to face justice for what he had done. Nie Mingjue, on the other hand, remained kneeling as he had been when he first tried to help Meng Yao.

Right before Meng Yao disappeared from sight, he hesitated, then looked back. A half second passed, and the hesitation on his face tapered off into a sad acceptance. Bringing his heels together, he gave Nie Mingjue a formal bow, before fleeing the premises.

“What?” Nie Mingjue asked, gazing at the simulation in obvious confusion. “I… why would he-”

“I guess he does have at least a little respect for you,” Nie Huaisang quietly muttered, making Nie Mingjue pause and turn his brother’s way. “Not that it meant much in the end.”

Nie Mingjue growled, “If he respects me so much, then why-”

He tried to finish his question, but no sound came out. He knew full well why.

Meng Yao hadn’t met Jin Guangshan yet, but he apparently knew how the Jin Sect handled matters of justice much better than the simulated Nie Mingjue did. He cursed himself. He

wished he had known — he *should have known* — but he couldn't forgive what Meng Yao had just done either.

'*Was every sign of vulnerability I've seen from him so far just an act to get what he wanted? A lie to bring him a bit of the honor he apparently values more than human lives? And… and more importantly….*'

Qin Su's words, which Nie Mingjue had interpreted as her paranoia taking over after a single horrifying realization, suddenly seemed much more relevant:

'Then tell me the truth! How did A-Song really die?'

'A-Song? Why are you asking me about him? Didn't you learn what happened a long time ago? A-Song was killed, and I destroyed those who killed him as revenge. What do you think I could have done? You'd rather believe an unknown person than me? He was my son.'

'It's because he was your son that this is so horrifying!' she screamed, pulling on her own hair. 'You won't hesitate even to do things like this! What wouldn't you do? And now you want me to trust you again?!'

Nie Mingjue still didn't know exactly what had been revealed to Qin Su, but, after watching this, he felt like he could understand her a lot more than before.

'*You killed your superior. You imprisoned your wife. You might have even killed your son,*' Nie Mingjue thought, gritting his teeth as his current helplessness sunk in. '*You can value your father's approval, you can value glory, you can value power, but… like Qin Su said, what* wouldn't *you do?*'

The Jin Sect, Nie Mingjue could see now, would probably not have been fair to Meng Yao. However, no matter what explanation Meng Yao made or what justification he gave, Nie Mingjue would never be able to trust him again.

~~Although, a small part of him did wonder whether Meng Yao had considered doing more to Nie Mingjue. It would be much harder to cover up, but letting a witness live… perhaps not everything Meng Yao had shown him was fake.~~

There was a time skip forward to a few days later. Nie Mingjue had long since regained the ability to move, but the anger in his stance hadn't diminished at all.

"Chifeng-zun became prone to flying into terrible fits of rage," Ouyang Zizhen explained. "He was especially fierce whenever he went to battle against the Wen Sect."

'*For the reserved and aloof Sect Leader Nie, it was exceedingly rare for him to find someone whose work ethic, morals, and character he could accept, and even rarer for him to find someone he could genuinely trust,*' Wei Wuxian's thoughts continued as Nie Mingjue mercilessly cut down Wen after Wen. '*This kind of reaction is only natural.*'

"His rage didn't die down one bit, even when Zewu-jun arrived, finally having time to assist in Langya."

The future Lan Xichen appeared on screen, recognizing the fury in Nie Mingjue's eyes immediately.

"Mingjue-xiong, what a temper you seem to be in," he observed. "Where's Meng Yao? Usually he would come and douse your flames-"

"Don't mention his name in my presence!" Nie Mingjue shouted back.

'*Well, I'm glad Da-ge doesn't trust that snake anymore,*' Nie Huaisang thought, but frowned. '*I can't imagine all this anger is reacting well with our cultivation. He died of a qi deviation, didn't he? I guess I can see why.*'

Nie Huaisang now knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would *never* allow Meng Yao to live near his brother.

Right as Nie Huaisang came to that conclusion, the simulated Nie Mingjue had finished explaining what had happened to Lan Xichen. He neither embellished nor neglected a single detail, being as frank and serious as possible. However….

"How could that be?" Lan Xichen asked. "Maybe there was a misunderstanding?"

"How could it be a misunderstanding?! I caught him in the act! He should start praying for his life!" Nie Mingjue slammed his fists against the table, toppling the cups on it with the following tremor.

"...How on earth did they end up as sworn brothers?" Jiang Cheng asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

Although the past hour had been a constant stream of harsh realities, Jin Zixuan hadn't fully given up hope yet: "Well… we do know that they do end up sworn brothers. M-maybe Sect Leader Nie discovers something that changes his mind?"

"How could that be?" Jin Guangshan scoffed. "That boy truly displays his low birth at every turn."

Quite a few people sent the Jin Sect Leader annoyed glares at those words, and he backed off instantly at the disapproval, clearing his throat and awkwardly looking away. One voice, however, was notably silent.

Despite all past history indicating otherwise, Madam Jin for once had nothing to say that would indicate she agreed with her husbands words.

On the other hand, after managing to calm Nie Mingjue down again, the simulated Lan Xichen had a suggestion: "Judging from his words, the person he killed had definitely done him wrong. That said, he should not have taken that man's life either. We are in harsh times… it is quite difficult to determine who was genuinely at fault."

'*Determining that would have been a lot easier if he hadn't run away,*' Nie Mingjue thought, then paused. '*Though… I'm not sure I'd trust the Jin Sect to be able to direct blame appropriately.*'

What Meng Yao had done was wrong, and had broken Nie Mingjue's trust until the end of time. No one would argue that Meng Yao should be allowed to kill *anyone* who slighted him, and allowing him to get away with this would almost certainly mean his Jin superior officer would not be Meng Yao's last victim.

The Jin Sect wouldn't have been fair.

But Nie Mingjue couldn't just let that act go, either, so what should he have done?

"I wonder where he is now," Lan Xichen pondered.

"Well, he better hope I don't catch him," Nie Mingjue hissed. "If I do, I'll offer him as a sacrifice to my saber!"

Ouyang Zizhen cleared his throat and said, "As if those words were a prophecy, Lianfang-zun — er, is that too polite? And he wasn't called that yet, so I mean Sect Leader Jin — er-"

"*Meng* Yao," Lan Jingyi insisted, huffing scornfully.

"My uncle," Jin Ling interrupted, sounding just as unsure of that description as Zizhen had been of the others, "disappeared for the next few years. As if he was a stone at the bottom of the ocean, no one could find even a trace of him. Chifeng-zun loathed him to the same degree he had once valued him, and became angry whenever the name was mentioned. At least… for a time."

"Ooh, dramatic," Lan Jingyi whispered, only to yelp as Jin Ling, presumably, stomped on his foot.

However, this moment was far from enough to inject any levity into the watching cultivators. After all, some very important questions were going to be answered soon, and many had a sneaking feeling they wouldn't like the explanations given.

Suddenly darkness covered the world, and the blue illusionary Wei Wuxian clutched at his head, rubbing his temples as if trying to dispel an ache.

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji asked, moving close, then turning to look at Nie Mingjue. Wei Wuxian was in empathy; the only way he should be able to feel pain now was-

The simulated Nie Mingjue's eyes blinked open, and the watchers were finally able to see where he was. Through the heavy blurriness, they could just barely make out a number of figures laying on the cold, jet-black stone ground. Nie Mingjue's head had been injured, dried up stains of blood covering his cheek and eyelashes. A warm trickle of new blood moved down his face.

Wei Wuxian was astonished.

'*Chifeng-zun was extremely effective during the Sunshot Campaign, winning nearly every battle he was a part of. The enemy couldn't even approach him, much less injure him this badly! What sort of situation is this?!*'

A small movement came from the left.

Wen Qing bit her lip when she realized the source of the movement had been a set of cultivators wearing the Wen Sect's robes. They were moving to a kneeling position, bowing as low as they could. Given the state Nie Mingjue was in….

A bone chilling pressure filled the air. Nie Mingjue looked up slightly, and could vaguely see a figure sitting on the throne before him. The blood in his eyes prevented him from seeing clearly who it was, but no one had any doubts as to the figure's identity.

The Wen doctor swallowed, concern rising up within her.

She knew her sect leader quite well, and Nie Mingjue's position did not look good.

The doors of the palace opened and someone entered. All the disciples present, regardless of rank, were kneeling before the Chief Cultivator, and yet the newcomer merely sent him a nod of salutation before heading in. He walked forward nonchalantly, then leaned close to the person in the chair to whisper something. They exchanged a few words before Wen Ruohan nodded and dismissed the other.

The newcomer was pleased.

With slow strides, he approached the staggering Nie Mingjue. Although his body had been attacked on all sides, Sect Leader Nie was forcing himself to remain standing, despite his trembling legs.

The newcomer laughed.

"Long time no see, Sect Leader Nie."

To no one's surprise, the newcomer was Meng Yao.

Jin Zixuan and Lan Xichen both sucked in gasps of air, trying to calm themselves down and focus on the simulation. They had no idea what was going to be shown, but it ranged through all sorts of outcomes. It looked bad, certainly, but Meng Yao was a spy on their side, so, surely, that meant he could at least somewhat be trusted.

(However, their suspicions left them growing more nervous by the second.)

(And they were far from alone in that.)

Beside them, the one person who should be happy with what was being shown was mysteriously dour.

Wen Ruohan frowned, observing Meng Yao's smile with cold eyes.

'For him to act so shamelessly in my presence… I probably valued him even more than I did Wen Zhuiliu,' Sect Leader Wen thought. '*If he was able to fool the cultivation world as a whole for years, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised he made such a good spy. Still….*'

It left a bad taste in his mouth.

'*I see,*' Wei Wuxian thought at last. '*I think I know when this is.*'

Nie Huaisang inched closer to Nie Mingjue, swallowing nervously.

'*Towards the end of the sunshot campaign, some information was leaked. When Nie Mingjue conducted a surprise attack on Yangquan, he instead ran into Wen Ruohan, who captured all the cultivators Nie Mingjue had and brought them to the Nightless City.*'

"Leaked?" Lan Xichen repeated. "But who…."

"There's too much we don't know," Lan Wangji pointed out. "For now, let's just watch."

At that moment, Meng Yao tilted his head in a strangely casual way, commenting, "I never expected to see *you* in a situation like this."

"Get lost!" Nie Mingjue snarled back.

Another laugh echoed, this one pitying and degrading all at once: "Do you still think you're the King of Hejian here? Look carefully — right now, you're in the Sun Palace."

"Sun Palace?" one of the nearby cultivators repeated. "Don't make me laugh. This is only a den for a bunch of Wen-dogs!"

'*Nie Wulin? What are you doing?!*' Nie Huaisang thought, eyes widening. Nie Mingjue, who had already recognized the speaker, also tensed when he spoke. Wen Ruohan surely wouldn't let such a comment go-

However, it wasn't Wen Ruohan who acted next.

Meng Yao's eyes changed at the comment, and he unsheathed his sword. A line of blood slit across the cultivator's neck, and he died without a sound. The other Nie cultivators wailed, screaming as they tried throwing themselves at Meng Yao.

"Wulin!" Nie Huaisang joined in, shocked by the sudden loss. With his own limited cultivation, Nie Huaisang hadn't even been able to notice the attack before Nie Wulin had been killed.

Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli, who had experienced similar feelings during the massacre of Lotus Pier, sent him a pitying look.

"You-" Nie Mingjue began.

"You Wen dog!" Nie Linqing, Nie Wulin's brother in law, shouted in rage. "You think you're so powerful… why don't you just try killing me as well!"

"Sure," Meng Yao agreed easily, and that next cultivator was dead a second later.

Nie Huaisang looked away, and Nie Mingjue slammed his fist against the armrest of his chair, shattering it into pieces.

“I… why… that *couldn’t* have been necessary,” Jin Zixuan muttered.

Hoping to subdue the despair growing within her fiance, Jiang Yanli quietly pointed out, “He… he’s a spy, right? So he has a-a character that he’s presenting to the Chief Cultivator. Maybe he… saw cruelty as a way to attract Sect Leader Wen’s eye. He’s just playing a part, perhaps?”

“Does anyone else have something to say?”

Everyone looked towards the calm, uncaring, almost *peaceful* smile on Meng Yao’s face.

“...He’s a *really* good actor, if that’s at all true,” Jiang Cheng muttered.

Then, Meng Yao snapped his fingers. At once, a pair of Wen cultivators came over and got to their knees, presenting a large box for him to observe. When Meng Yao opened the box, its contents were revealed.

“Baxia?!” Nie Mingjue realized, turning to glare at Wen Ruohan. “Your arrogance knows no bounds!”

“Get lost, Wen dog!” the simulated version shouted, though his anger was directed at Meng Yao alone.

Still smiling, Meng Yao pulled out the saber and ran his hands over it, teasing along the metal as he said, “Sect Leader Nie, I’ve already held Baxia quite a few times in the past. Don’t you think it’s a bit redundant to protest this now?”

“Take your hands off it!”

Because Meng Yao had held Baxia when Nie Mingjue *trusted him*. By mentioning that now, the extent to which their relationship had changed became all the more apparent.

‘*What a performer,*’ Wen Ruohan thought, admiring Meng Yao’s cruelty, then swiftly losing the smile on his face. ‘*I suppose that ability made him quite an effective spy.*’

As further proof of his talent for dramatics, Meng Yao then tilted the saber back and forth, weighing it with his hands: “Sect Leader Nie, I’d say your saber can count as a top tier spiritual weapon. However, compared to your father’s saber… it still seems somewhat inferior.”

Nie Mingjue froze.

“Why don’t we work together to guess how long it will take Sect Leader Wen to break this one?”

All the blood rushed to Nie Mingjue’s head at once, and the simulation turned red.

‘*There’s nothing Sect Leader Nie regrets as much as the death of his father,*’ Wei Wuxian recalled. ‘*He had only been a teenager back then. Someone gave Wen Ruohan a rare saber, and he was quite pleased. He went around showing it off, and everyone praised it without fail. Everyone knew how volatile his temper could be, so no one was willing to risk upsetting him. Unfortunately, one of his guests either had a grudge against Sect Leader Nie or wanted to gain attention through a unique answer, and so responded ‘Of course your saber is unparalleled, but I’m afraid there’s one person who would disagree. The Nie Sect is known for saber cultivation, how could Sect Leader Nie admit yours was superior?*’

Despite knowing this story better than he knew anything else, Nie Mingjue’s fists clenched tighter and tighter with every word. Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli, and Jin Zixuan sent Nie Huaisang pitying gazes, but the Nie heir seemed to become increasingly uncomfortable at the attention. Seeing that, Wen Qing cleared her throat and glared; everyone looked away a moment later.

‘*Thus, Sect Leader Wen called Nie Mingjue’s father over. Wen Ruohan held the saber for a while, looking it over, then replied succinctly: ‘yes, this is quite a good saber.’ He slapped the saber a few times, then told Sect Leader Nie to take it back.*’

The simulation ever-so-helpfully displayed said scene before their eyes. The Wen Ruohan of a few years ago did just as Wei Wuxian described, and the watchers could feel a slight spark of energy enter the blade as he did.

‘*Ah, yes. I remember that,*’ Wen Ruohan thought. ‘*For such a renowned saber, it was pathetically easy to break. I would have expected more.*’

He glanced up, and saw Nie Mingjue gritting his teeth together.

‘*...Though, considering how much trouble the son ends up making, perhaps I should have been more thorough. If I wanted to destroy the Nie Sect, I should have done that. If I wanted to wait until the Wen Sect was stronger, I should have just left well enough alone.*’

He sighed to himself, regretting that decision for the first time in his life.

**Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian’s thoughts had continued with summarizing the events the watchers were already well-familiar with: ‘*At the time, nothing had seemed wrong with the saber. Not even the previous Sect Leader Nie suspected anything, though he was annoyed by Wen Ruohan’s commanding attitude. However, he joined a nighthunt a few days after he returned, and, mid-battle with a beast, his saber suddenly broke into pieces. He was severely injured by the horn of the beast, right before Nie Mingjue’s eyes.*

***‘Following that, Sect Leader Nie’s injuries didn’t manage to heal, and, after being ill for half a year, he left this world, either from anger or his illness. The Qinghe Nie Sect has detested the Wen Sect ever since.*’**

It was quite strange to Jiang Cheng, to hear this now. Nie Mingjue had always seemed so much older than him. Back when the man first became Sect Leader, Jiang Cheng had heard his father talking about the tragedy, and how frighteningly young Nie Mingjue had been at the time. However, even when he was just the Nie heir, Sect Leader Nie had always been

awe-inspiring and intimidating in equal measure. To the younger Jiang Cheng, Nie Mingjue had seemed more than old enough to assume his position.

(Until he watched the simulation, and saw his eighteen year old self become Sect Leader just as abruptly.)

(Jiang Fengmian's concerned talks with the Jiang elders following the event suddenly made much more sense.)

'*Meng Yao mentioning this now of all times, and right in front of Wen Ruohan, is about as cruel as one can get,*' Wei Wuxian concluded, and no one could object to that.

"Say, Sect Leader Nie, don't you think-"

However, before Meng Yao could finish, something unexpected happened. The chains binding Nie Mingjue were strained to the fullest as Nie Mingjue swung forward, landing an attack on Meng Yao. He flew back, coughing up blood.

Nie Huaisang's eyes lit up in satisfaction, and even Lan Xichen couldn't object.

The figure on the throne shifted, as though he wanted to move.

(To punish Meng Yao for his failure? Or to intervene on his behalf?)

They didn't get a chance to find out, because, seeing the same, Meng Yao immediately got up and kicked Nie Mingjue's chest. As the last of Nie Mingjue's strength had been used just before, he was thrown back and fell to the ground.

Wei Wuxian gaped, '*There were so many rumors about what happened that night, but I never thought I would get to see Lianfang-zun kick Chifeng-zun!*'

'*And you never will, Wei-xiong,*' Nie Huaisang promised, something cold flashing in his eyes. '*Not in our world, at least.*'

Having kicked Nie Mingjue to the ground, Meng Yao walked over and stomped on his chest, shouting, "How dare you act in such a way before Sect Leader Wen's eyes?!"

He swung his sword downwards, seemingly intending to cut Nie Mingjue in two. In a flash, however, Nie Mingjue clapped his hands together around the blade, halting the sword in its tracks and in fact shattering it from the sheer force. He kicked Meng Yao back, summoned Baxia, raised his blade, and-

A sudden force pulled him away from Meng Yao. Blood streaked across the floor as an invisible hand pulled him towards Sect Leader Wen's throne.

Wen Ruohan had just saved Meng Yao's life.

Tension filled the air, felt most strongly by Madam Yu and her children. They had very little knowledge of what Wen Ruohan was actually capable of, and, as Nie Mingjue created a blood trail a dozen meters long across the floor, no small amount of unease settled in.

Mid-flight, Nie Mingjue grabbed one of the nearby Wen disciples and threw him at Sect Leader Wen. There was a spike of energy. The disciple burst into pieces before making contact with Wen Ruohan, having outlived his use in the Sect Leader's eyes.

Wen Qing swallowed, but years of practice kept her from otherwise reacting.

In the time Wen Ruohan had dedicated to his own disciple, Nie Mingjue had prepared an attack. He swung his sword, sending a blue light rocketing towards Sect Leader Wen, and Meng Yao tensed at once.

"Sect Leader! Watch out!"

"No need!" the man laughed, his youthful voice showing no concern for the large number of Wen disciples Nie Mingjue's attack cut through. He had protected Meng Yao, but apparently couldn't care less about any of them.

'*Despicable,*' Lan Qiren thought, glancing over to see that the real Wen Ruohan was just as unbothered as his simulated self had been.

If he were to be asked about it, Wen Ruohan would have simply shrugged and said, '*Most of them were only there because they had proven themselves to be expendable. Good contributions should be rewarded, but lacking any simply means you're taking up valuable space.*'

(However, even he had to admit he was a little surprised by the sheer callousness with which his other-self acted. As far as he could remember, he had never done something quite this extreme to his own disciples.)

But there was no time to think it through further. Within the blink of an eye, Wen Ruohan appeared in front of Nie Mingjue and sent him crashing into one of the hall's golden pillars shortly after. Blood trickled down his forehead, blurring the watchers' sight even more. A fist slammed into his chest, and his body sunk half a meter into the ground.

The spirit of Wei Wuxian reacted as well, able to feel the same things Nie Mingjue was. He gasped for air, staring at Wen Ruohan with no small amount of shock. That feeling was shared among the watchers.

It was a little hard to measure abilities exactly. Wei Wuxian had been extremely talented with the sword, and only became more dangerous as the Yiling Patriarch. Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen were equally infamous for their talent, and Nie Mingjue's skill was undeniable.

'*I've never fought him myself, but Nie Mingjue was probably one of the three strongest people I've ever met,*' Wei Wuxian concluded. '*And Wen Ruohan's just playing with him!*'

Wen Ruohan stepped on Nie Mingjue's chest, and their vision began to darken.

"My apologies for doubting you, Sect Leader," Meng Yao bowed.

"Useless. He's the one who killed Wen Xu?" Wen Ruohan asked.

“Yes, sir.”

Wen Xu was Wen Ruohan’s heir, but his power wasn’t equivalent to even a tenth of what Wen Ruohan could do. Wen Chao wasn’t even worth talking about, and Wen Qing, the Sect member he was perhaps proudest of, was too distantly related to be crowned Sect Leader.

(And that was before she had betrayed the Wen Sect.)

‘*The war cost me my heirs, Wen Zhuliu, my doctor’s loyalty, and, eventually, my life,*’ he thought, frowning minutely.

(And, although the simulation hadn’t yet yet confirmed it, he was pretty sure the war had also cost the core of the most talented person he had ever seen.)

“What will you do with him, Sect Leader?” Meng Yao asked. “Will you kill him now? Or send him to the fire palace?”

“The-the fire palace?” Jiang Yanli asked, keeping her voice in a whisper.

“It’s, um,” Jin Zixuan looked away. “I’ve heard it’s Wen Ruohan’s personal playground. I-I think it would mean my… mean Meng Yao isn’t willing to give Chifeng-zun a straightforward death.”

“Ah, I… I see.”

“Why bother playing around with someone already half-dead?”

“Now, that’s not it at all. With Sect Leader Nie’s sturdy body, he might become all great and mighty again after just a few days of rest,” Meng Yao pointed out.

“Fine. Do as you please,” Wen Ruohan acknowledged, sheathing his own sword again.

“No, wait… was he buying time?” Madam Jin asked, staring in shock. They knew Meng Yao had already betrayed Wen Ruohan by working as a spy for the Sunshot Campaign, so this might be….

Or it might not.

“I honestly can’t tell what’s real and what’s not anymore,” Lan Xichen confessed. “I genuinely don’t know.”

And then, before they had a chance to discuss it further amongst themselves, a Wen disciple suddenly burst through the door.

“Sect Leader!” the man shouted frantically. “A large force of enemy has come!”

“What?”

“The army is right outside our doorstep! They somehow took down our scouts before those disciples could report to us!”

A frown formed on Wen Ruohan's face, but it transitioned into a more amused acceptance shortly after. Even with the report he had been given, the once Chief-cultivator showed no fear or concern.

(Given how this all turned out, perhaps that was his first mistake.)

"Meng Yao, let's go," he ordered. "If he's as sturdy as you say, he'll survive until we get back."

"Yes, Sect Leader."

Nie Mingjue remained collapsed on the floor, watching as the two exited the room at a leisurely pace. The door clicked shut, and silence reigned. The two disciples who hadn't followed after the Sect Leader (tasked instead with watching over the prisoner) were too terrified to even think about touching Nie Mingjue. Not because of Nie Mingjue himself, but because Wen Ruohan had already implied he wanted to see what would happen if Nie Mingjue was left alone, and they were well aware of how little they were worth to him.

It felt strange to direct this at Wen disciples after what the sect had done to Lotus Pier, but Jiang Yanli nonetheless felt a bit of pity for the pair that had been left to clean up the deformed remains of their once-comrades.

However, she couldn't help but notice the shock that was on their faces as well.

'*I wonder how much of Wen Ruohan's brutality is a result of the war, rather than a cause of it,*' she thought, analyzing the surroundings quietly. '*A-Cheng and A-Xian certainly changed a lot even in just the first few months, and Wen Ruohan lost Wen Zhuliu and both his sons…. At the very least, I can't imagine Wen Qing-guniang passively allowing her brother to be near someone who does this regularly. She would have surely tried to run away far sooner, if this was at all common.*'

Emotional intelligence had always been Jiang Yanli's forte. She knew Wen Ruohan had never cared all that much for his sons as people (especially not Wen Chao), but that was different from saying he would be completely unaffected by their loss. As Jiang Yanli looked over the stunned expressions on the Wen disciples one more time, she felt a bit of pity rise up once more.

However, she quickly shook her head a moment later, trying to wipe those unnecessary thoughts from her memory.

Not only would that realization do her no good, but there was another factor even more relevant to her silence. She knew the Wen disciples here — the victims her observation might help — the ones who had been most affected by this — were far from innocent. They worked for Wen Ruohan's torture chamber; while they might not be Meng Yao, they wouldn't have made it this far if they weren't more than capable of the same cruelty as Wen Ruohan.

Which was why, when a flash of silver suddenly slipped by both their necks, no one was remorseful.

"Xiongzhang," Lan Wangji realized first, instantly recognizing the technique used as chord assassination technique.

The two bodies collapsed to the floor, and Lan Xichen stepped out of the shadows.

"Mingjue-xiong! It's okay, it's me!"

The memories here were clouded and hazy, Nie Mingjue barely conscious by this point.

"Come on. I'll get you out of here!"

Darkness took over.

When Nie Mingjue blinked his eyes open next, he was mercifully nowhere he recognized. It was a tent made of animal hide, containing a single bed and a desk loaded with medical supplies. He glanced to the side, and a Lan Sect disciple rushed over.

"Sect Leader, how do you feel?"

"Awful," Nie Mingjue responded bluntly.

Those words made Nie Huaisang relax however, a small smile appearing on his face for the first time in a while.

"What's the current situation?"

"Ah, the-the siege on Nevernight is continuing," he responded. "It's been a day and a half since you were rescued. We've made considerable progress, it's just… every time Wen Ruohan enters the battlefield, we're pushed back into retreating, and we have to regroup. The Yunmeng Jiang delegation should arrive soon though. I think we'll be okay — they're sending the Yiling Patriarch!"

The illusionary Wei Wuxian jumped at the mention.

"...When will he be arriving?"

"Perhaps a few days from now? Within a week."

Nie Mingjue looked out of the tent and onto the battlefield outside, considering.

"The whole Yunmeng delegation is arriving, but they only care that Wei Wuxian will be there?" Madam Yu muttered, but, when she noticed her son turn downcast at those words, she suddenly regretted having spoken them out loud.

It seemed like every time she opened her mouth, her children wilted just a bit more.

Well, no matter. She would live this time around, and would make sure the allied sects wouldn't ever be so narrow-minded again.

(Even if she could privately admit that, after what she had seen the Yiling Patriarch accomplish, the sects' faith did not go unwarranted.)

Nie Mingjue forced himself to sit up.

"Sect Leader Nie!"

"Da-ge!" Nie Huaisang protested.

"I need to get back out there," he said.

"You need to stay!" the disciple responded. "The healers did everything they could, but you're definitely not fully recovered yet. I can't let you-"

"Move."

The disciple hesitated, unable to disobey the direct command.

"Idiot," Wen Qing hissed. "If you're injured, the last thing you should do is head out and make it all worse."

Nie Huaisang nodded frantically in agreement.

"I needed to join the battle," Nie Mingjue responded defensively. "We have a chance of ending the war. I can rest all I want after that's done. I can handle it."

"Someone who died of a qi deviation should not tell me what he can and can't handle!" the doctor snapped back. "You have no idea how long this battle is going to take! If this ever happens again, you better wait for a doctor to give you the all-clear before you even *think* of so much as standing up! Do I make myself clear?!"

And then, before Nie Huaisang's eyes, an unbelievable event occurred: Nie Mingjue paused, opened his mouth to argue back, then, noticing the death-glare Wen Qing was sending him, gave in. He looked away, breaking eye contact with her.

(And at that moment, the Wen doctor became one of Nie Huaisang's favorite people in the world.)

Unfortunately, the Lan disciple on watch had nowhere near the same level of intensity that she did. He caved in almost immediately, standing aside as Nie Mingjue hauled himself up and got dressed in whatever armor he could find.

'*Pathetic,*' Wen Qing thought, sighing in annoyance.

Wind pulled dust into the air, and, when it cleared, the watchers were able to gaze over a massive battlefield. It was twilight in Nevernight City, and thousands of cultivators fought with all their might.

“The 23rd Year of Xuanzheng, the Year of the Goat,” Jin Ling announced. “The QingheNie Clan, the GusuLan clan, the LanlingJin Clan, and the Yunmeng Jiang Clan led tens of thousands of cultivators to storm Nevernight City. The fierce battle went on for several weeks, and yet the city would not fall.”

Most of the watchers tensed at those words, but Jin Guangshan instead relaxed:

‘*I’m glad the Jin Clan was able to participate in the final battle. That will be a big factor in indicating how much influence we have after this war is over.*’

He glanced at Wen Ruohan, hoping that this fact hadn’t completely severed his ties with the man in this current time.

The watchers were brought down and allowed to look up at the imposing, looming main palace — a place which the allied forces hadn’t even managed to step foot on yet. Then, the doors opened.

Wen Ruohan stepped out and looked down at the dozens upon dozens of enemy cultivators filling up every inch of the stairway. He laughed.

“Know your place,” he advised simply, forming his qi into a ball of energy, then throwing it up into the sky. It reached its desired position, then exploded out — the shockwave sent at least 700 disciples flying. The weakest of the bunch were thrown back so harshly that, when they landed, the bones in their body snapped into pieces.

It had taken Wen Ruohan a mere ten seconds to decimate the front of their force.

Jin Guangshan really, really hoped Wen Ruohan wouldn’t hold a grudge.

The shockwave reached out far enough to even be felt by the people fighting on the edges of the battlefield. Lan Wangji spun around, wide eyed, to face the source. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin frowned as their comrades were blasted behind them.

“Wen Ruohan!” Jiang Cheng shouted, glaring up as Zidian crackled beside him.

‘*Ha! Look at that! Despite what everyone said, A-Cheng’s cultivation was more than strong enough to let him stand against Wen Ruohan’s attack,*’ Madam Yu thought, lips curling up. ‘*Of course he was able to! He’s my son!*’

Nevertheless, the person who seemed least affected of all was the now mostly-recovered Nie Mingjue. He unsheathed his saber, blasting through the Wen disciples in his way without even bothering to defend against them. One of the stronger ones attacked-

Black shadows jumped up and tore the Wen to bits, clearing the way for Nie Mingjue. The watchers knew very well what the source of those shadows was was.

Only one thing could make spirits feel like they were hearing a flute’s whistle without actually creating any noise.

The watchers glanced back and saw Wei Wuxian floating in the air, the Stygian Tiger Seal in hand as he commanded his army to provide support.

'*My other-self knew he would do that,*' Nie Mingjue realized. '*I didn't even hesitate to charge, which means… I've gotten used to fighting with this group. I trust them.*'

(So then, how did he end up on the battlefield against Wei Wuxian? He had trusted Meng Yao too, once, but… he simply couldn't imagine Wei Wuxian ever doing anything like what Meng Yao had done to break that trust.)

Regardless, the most important thing for the current simulated Nie Mingjue was clearly Wen Ruohan. Black, whip-like shadows knocked the disciples before Nie Mingjue back, leaving him a clear path to the Chief Cultivator. He blasted forward, and there was a clang as his sword made contact, sending a house-sized cloud of dust into the air. Through the cloud, slashes of golden light were visible as combat continued. They struck out, cutting through a sturdy wooden pillar and forming gashes in the stone floor below. Part of the roof fell, crashing into the ground below.

Then, a clang rang out. And everything else stopped. The dust settled.

Nie Mingjue's blade was frozen in the air, held in place by Wen Ruohan's hand.

"Damn it," Nie Mingjue muttered. He knew full well how valuable the simulation's information could be, and getting to see himself fight Wen Ruohan was some of the most useful hints of all. However, no matter how hard he focused, he couldn't figure out what he could do to turn the tide.

And unfortunately, neither could his other-self. Wen Ruohan pulled the blade forward abruptly before slamming his palm into Nie Mingjue's chest. Sect Leader Nie gasped out as the wind was knocked out of him and fell to his knees. Luckily, before Wen Ruohan could do anything more, there was a gleam of blue light, and an unheld Lan sword attacked. It was stopped twenty centimeters away from Wen Ruohan, halted by a field of energy. However, Lan Xichen himself appeared shortly after, grabbing his blade and resuming the attack. Nie Mingjue got up as well, and the pair fought as one. While Lan Xichen was more adept at manipulating his sword's position through the air, Nie Mingjue had the advantage when it came to close quarters combat. They worked as a team, making up for each other's weaknesses without needing words to communicate.

However, Wen Ruohan remained as calm as ever.

Jiang Yanli swallowed nervously, and Jin Zixuan moved his hand around hers in what would have been a reassuring squeeze if they could touch.

No matter what the pair did, Wen Ruohan slipped out of the way each time, dancing around their attacks without changing his relaxed stance. In the next instant, Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue both attacked at once, but Wen Ruohan merely reached forward and grabbed the tip of Lan Xichen's blade. He pulled it to the right, using it to block Nie Mingjue's attack before knocking both of them back.

He wasn't even using his own sword.

'*How foolish of me,*' Wen Ruohan thought, lacking the smug grin many of the other watchers expected him to have. '*I should have dealt with them right away. Wasting my time like this… the losses the Wen Sect sustained during the war hit my pride, I suppose.*'

(And Wen Chao was one thing, but Wen Xu had always been an obedient, loyal son, and Wen Zhuliu had always been his best disciple. 'Care' might be too strong of a word, but Wen Ruohan was far from indifferent to those two. The anger his other self was experiencing was caused by more than just his pride.)

~~Even if he had won the war, by this point, he would have lost far more than he had gained.~~

The battle went on, and Wen Ruohan continued playing with his opponents. He paid no mind to his own forces, whether that be the ones falling to the allied forces, the ones being kept away from him by the Yiling Patriarch, or the few who had been too close to the battle for Wei Wuxian to push them away, and so were little more than meatshields as the battle went on.

A sadistic smirk formed on Wen Ruohan's face, and he began forming his qi into a new shape. It was a spiral swirling outwards, practically forming a tornado directly in front of him. When Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue next attacked, their blades slammed into the center of that spiral and came to a resounding halt.

Glee was more than apparent in Wen Ruohan's expression, and cruel, mocking laughter began to resound. Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen could neither continue to attack nor retreat, stuck in place by the field Wen Ruohan had created.

And then a Wen soldier turned around. He stood in the shadows created by the building, but several watchers had been paying attention to him. He had been one of the few close to the battle who had somehow managed to survive. Unlike all the other disciples Wen Ruohan had mowed down without care, this one was being watched — protected, almost. The Chief Cultivator had made a point of never aiming attacks in the direction of this specific disciple.

And, at this moment, that disciple was standing directly behind Wen Ruohan, making it hilariously easy for him to unsheathe his sword and cut straight through Wen Ruohan's neck.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Wen Ruohan's eyes widened. He paused, then turned around. Meng Yao stared back at him, unflinching.

Realization settled in Wen Ruohan's expression as the gravity of the betrayal that had just occurred settled in.

Over and over again, whether that was while Nie Mingjue was captured or during this battle, Wen Ruohan had worked to keep Meng Yao safe. He had saved his life when Nie Mingjue

attacked him, and had kept Meng Yao out of the firing range during this battle.

Where everyone else had belittled Meng Yao's heritage, Wen Ruohan had respected his talent.

Where everyone else had gossiped behind his back, Wen Ruohan had promoted him and offered his utmost trust.

~~And that trust had been used against him, just like Nie Mingjue's had.~~

Wen Ruohan fell to the floor, and Meng Yao took off his Wen robes, casting them to the ground in rejection.

A roar of victory swept across the battlefield, as the Sunshot Campaign had destroyed the strongest sun of all.

On the other hand, the watchers were strangely muted. This was the victory they wanted, and Madam Yu especially had been burning with a desire to see Wen Ruohan fall ever since Lotus Pier had been torn to the ground. However, even she remained silent. After all, the person who had fulfilled their wishes was Meng Yao.

Objectively speaking, there was nothing wrong with what Meng Yao had done. It was great in fact; the end of a war, and the downfall of a tyrant. But, by this point, they had already seen him switch sides and stories so many times, that they didn't quite know what was true.

"...He was a spy for us, right?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"Right," Madam Jin confirmed. "Yes, I think they mentioned he had been sending information. So he… was keeping up an act all this time."

She paused.

'*Or he might have decided which side he genuinely wanted to be on last minute.*'

"Jin Guangyao had been acting as a spy in the Wen Sect," Jin Ling summarized. "He passed messages along to Lan Xichen, and, when the time came, helped the allied army launch an attack on the Sun Palace, saving Nie Mingjue's life."

"So… the only reason Chifeng-zun escaped is because of him?" Jiang Yanli asked.

"They said… they said he might have been captured because information had been leaked," Jin Zixuan muttered, eyes wide. "Did he… you don't think Meng Yao was planning on saving Sect Leader Nie's life so that he'd owe-"

"Do not jump to conclusions. We don't have any evidence in support of that," Lan Qiren pointed out.

Madam Yu scoffed: "With how many lies that brat has managed to slip past us, I certainly wouldn't be surprised if it *was* true."

And that was just the problem, wasn't it? The plan might have been to betray the Wen all along, and Meng Yao's loyalty never once fluctuated. Or perhaps the success of the Yiling Patriarch, Chifeng-zun, and the Twin Jades had convinced Meng Yao that the smartest thing to do would be to side with the Sunshot Campaign. Or maybe there wasn't a grand plan, and Meng Yao's personal affection for his father, Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue tipped the scales. Meng Yao always had a story that made everything he did seem understandable and justifiable, but they only ever had his word to go off. It might be true, but there was only one time the watchers had seen him that they could be sure *wasn't* an act, and it was when Meng Yao had killed his Jin superior. The calm satisfaction that had been written over his face at that moment did not paint Meng Yao's other actions in a positive light.

And the simulated Nie Mingjue most certainly agreed.

He and Lan Xichen both stared at Meng Yao, separated from the rest of the army by the dozens of stairs leading to the main entrance of the Palace. Jin Guangshan's son had taken off the Wen uniform, and Lan Xichen displayed a quite obvious amount of relief. Nie Mingjue, on the other hand, soon became overcome by fury.

"You won't get away this time," he hissed, tightening his grip on his saber. He shot forward.

"A-Yao!" Lan Xichen called out, but it was too late. Meng Yao was thrown into one of the pillars, collapsing against the ground immediately after.

Lan Xichen ran in between them.

"Mingjue-xiong!" he called out, raising his hands unthreateningly. "Mingjue-xiong, A-Yao had no choice-"

"No choice?!" Nie Mingjue repeated. "He killed Wulin! And Linqing! Am I supposed to just accept that?!"

"Of course not," the real Lan Xichen said at once. "But he was a spy. You need to calm down and think; there might be more to the story."

Sect Leader Nie paused at that, hating the idea of acknowledging Lan Xichen's point, but unable to disagree regardless. After all, hadn't he realized the same just a little while ago?

(Even if Meng Yao had been telling the truth about his superior officer, Jin Guangshan would never be fair with him.)

However, the simulated Nie Mingjue had become overcome by rage.

"No choice?" he repeated. "He became those Wen-dogs' fangs and claws, and now you're telling me he had no choice?! The things he did under Wen Ruohan…."

"Sect Leader Nie, I really had no choice!" Meng Yao protested. "You must understand. Given the situation at the time-"

"It should have been simple enough to decide whether or not to kill them!"

“Was it really up to me? Sect Leader Nie, think about it from my perspective-”

“I won’t!”

He attacked at once.

Lan Xichen breathed out a tired sigh, rubbing his temples as he muttered, “Even now, I still can’t tell what’s real and what’s not.”

Did Meng Yao really feel like he had no other choice? Or had there been some satisfaction there, for getting a chance to hurt and kill people who he had been subordinate to while he was in the Nie Sect?

No one could really tell.

(But they would need to know, if they were going to even consider letting the Meng Yao of their world live.)

Drained from the fight with Wen Ruohan, Nie Mingjue was unable to kill Meng Yao, especially while Lan Xichen continued protecting him. Every other disciple in the war was too far away to see what was going on, and Meng yao was forced to doge in a direction that brought him further from the crowd. It was just the three of them.

“Mingjue-xiong!”

“Sect Leader Nie!” Meng Yao called out at last. “Don’t you understand that if I hadn’t killed them then, you would be dead now?!”

‘*In other words,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*’You owe me, so you can’t kill me,’ huh?’*

Nie Mingjue’s movements halted. Then he frowned.

“All right, fine! After I kill him, I’ll take my own life!”

“No! No!” Nie Huaisang shouted from the side. “Don’t listen, Da-ge! You can’t trust anything he says!”

Sighing at the futility of it all, Nie Mingjue lifted his hand and motioned a reassuring pat on Nie Huaisang’s head. Despite the no-touch rule, the gesture was enough to calm the Nie heir down slightly.

With a humph, Nie Huaisang sat back down.

However, weakened as he was, Nie Mingjue had still not managed to kill Meng Yao.

“Mingjue-xiong!” Lan Xichen repeated again.

“Xichen, move!”

Nie Huaisang sent Lan Xichen a glare (only stopping when Nie Mingjue sent him a disapproving look). However, as the first jade appeared to wilt under the Nie heir's silent reprimand, Nie Huaisang supposed it was all well and good.

"Mingjue-xiong! Calm down! Why would this be worth it?"

Growling, Nie Mingjue demanded "Why don't you ask what he did?!"

Lan Xichen looked back at Meng Yao, and saw the face full of terror. The spy stammered, not daring to speak to the enraged Nie Mingjue, and turned to cast his eyes towards the ground.

"That day… after you fled from Langya," Nie Mingjue had to cut himself off and breathe, his anger practically steaming out of him. "I was wondering why I couldn't find you no matter where I looked! So you became an underling for the Wen-dogs and took sides with the tyrant of Nightless City?! You-"

"*Mingjue-xiong.*'

The real Nie Mingjue jumped slightly. He knew full well how unusual it was for Lan Xichen to ever cut someone off — it was something he only did when he truly felt he truly had to.

And this was one such time:

"Do you remember the maps of Qishan and the information on the Wens' tactical formations that you've used the past few months? Do you know who offered you that?"

"...You."

"I was just delivering them. Do you know who the source of that information was?"

The meaning was clear enough. Nie Mingjue glanced over at Meng Yao, and his brows furrowed as if he couldn't believe what Lan Xichen had said. Meng Yao stood, head lowered, and offered no protests of his own.

"There's no doubt. A few weeks ago, the reason I was able to aid you and help you escape from Wen Ruohan was because he contacted me on where to lead the army. Or else, how could we have gotten in?"

Nie Mingjue was unable to respond.

"After the incident at Langya, A-Yao was remorseful, but he was afraid he might run into you. All he could do was sneak into the Qishan Wen Sect and gain Wen Ruohan's trust, writing me letters in secrecy. At first, I didn't know who was sending the letters either. I only managed to realize it from a few clues he mistakenly left."

"Well, that…" Jin Zixuan paused. "That at least confirms the positive assumptions we made."

"Not at all," Wen Ruohan disagreed. "I saw nothing in there that would confirm one way or the other that he was always intending to be on your side. For all you know, he was feeding

both sides information, and only made his decision after going back and forth quite a bit."

Lan Xichen frowned at those words, pointing out, "We have nothing that would indicate any of that is true."

"Except for how many times he's lied, and how good he is at coming up with a story that justifies what he's done?" Wen Ruohan suggested back.

Obviously, a bit of doubt wasn't anywhere near enough to confirm that anything Wen Ruohan had said happened. The man himself knew full well that Meng Yao could have always been on the Sunshot Campaign's side ~~no matter how poorly most of them treated him, or how well Wen Ruohan did.~~

But the bit of doubt was enough to make them hesitate.

Lan Xichen paused, looking over with a stern expression. They had seen Meng Yao kill many people throughout the simulation, and they had no way of knowing how much those victims truly deserved it. Unless the simulation showed them in full, they had no way of knowing to what extent Meng Yao really had "no choice." However, Lan Xichen knew for a fact that his other self in the future trusted Meng Yao implicitly.

And he was also well-aware of the fact that the future Jin Guangyao had kept Nie Mingjue's head in his secret chamber like a trophy, keeping it up on a shelf while letting the rest of his dismembered body be strewn about across the country.

And they couldn't forget what he had done to Qin Su.

'*It's because he was your son that this is so horrifying!' she shouted.*

"Did you not tell Mingjue-xiong about all this?" Lan Xichen asked at last, glancing back at Meng Yao.

"...Zewu-jun, you saw it too. Even if I had tried to explain, Sect Leader Nie wouldn't have believed me."

'*So, you had 'no choice' once again?*' Nie Mingjue thought. '*Though, I guess he's not entirely wrong.*'

But they couldn't just *trust him*.

The simulated Nie Mingjue was far less indecisive. Despite the words and excuses coming at him from all sides, he still seemed to be considering dealing with Meng Yao right then and there. Knowing that full well, the simulated Meng Yao's face was full of fear. Despite that, he stepped forward on trembling legs, and kneeled down at once.

Lan Xichen turned his way: "Meng Yao?"

"...Sect Leader Nie, back in the Sun Palace, although it was in order to gain the trust of Wen Ruohan, I did indeed harm you and say inappropriate things. I purposefully aimed

at your scar, knowing that the fate of the previous Sect Leader Nie still hurts you deeply. Although I had no other choice, I'm truly sorry."

A stern expression crossed Nie Mingjue's face, and he responded, "The one you should be kneeling and apologizing to isn't me, but the cultivators you killed with your own hands."

Nie Huaisang nodded rapidly in agreement.

"Wen Ruohan had a cruel character. Whenever someone disobeyed him, he'd practically turn mad. Since I was pretending to be loyal to him, I had to respond when someone insulted him! So-"

"It's seems like you've been doing these sorts of things for quite some time."

'*A fair point,*' the real Lan Xichen thought.

The simulated one frowned, clearly disagreeing.

"I was in Qishan," Meng Yao reminded him.

Lan Xichen sighed as well, adding, "Mingjue-xiong, he was undercover in Qishan. Sometimes there would be things he would have to face that… could not be helped. While he was forced to do these things, his heart was also-"

'*You don't know that though,*' Lan Xichen thought. He hoped it was true — he wanted it to be true — but they really didn't know for sure.

And Wei Wuxian sighed as well: '*Zewu-jun is still… too kind. Too pure.*'

Lan Xichen flinched slightly.

'*Then again, I suppose the only reason I'm so guarded against him is because I already suspected him. The Lan Xichen shown here has no reason to be on guard against someone who was forced to be a spy, enduring the agony alone. We're going at this with such different viewpoints, how could our feelings be compared?*'

Lan Wangji nodded in agreement, and Lan Xichen sent his brother a small smile.

However, at that moment, the simulated Nie Mingjue raised his saber.

"Mingjue-xiong!"

"Da-ge?"

Lan Xichen had gotten too far away from Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao to be able to stop the attack before it landed. Meng Yao looked up at the saber, eyes wide.

"Mingjue-xiong," Lan Xichen repeated, placing his hand on Shouyue. "Please-"

A silver light flashed as Nie Mingjue swung down-

The bolder to the right of Meng Yao shattered into pieces.

When Nie Mingjue had raised his saber, he had been considering it down to the last second. However, he had changed his mind and spared Meng Yao.

Now, they would get to see how many lives that choice would affect.

(For better and for worse.)

Meng Yao stared at the cleanly split saber, blinking in disbelief at the fact that he was still alive. Meanwhile, Nie Mingjue resheathed his saber, turned in his heel, and walked away. In the end, his saber couldn't fall on Meng Yao.

The simulation faded to black.

When light returned, the watchers once again found themselves in the in-between zone, where they could wait for the next segment to start. Unlike some previous times, the silent pause that followed wasn't out of shock, but rather a near-tangible sense of frustration shared by most of the watchers.

The simulation was meant to allow them to gain insight into the truth. However, even after watching everything that had happened, most of them still didn't quite know what to make of Meng Yao.

"...I wish we had gotten to see a few of his thoughts," Lan Xichen sighed.

Although he didn't entirely disagree, Lan Qiren nonetheless had to point out, "We won't be able to see anyone's thoughts once we leave the simulation, Xichen. It's better to not get too used to this."

The first jade tilted his head in acknowledgement, but his wish was still shared by everyone there.

"I want to see how Wei Ying and my future self deal with this," Lan Wangji commented. "He'll have seen the same scenes we did, and my future self will most likely trust his judgment. Obviously, the situation differs — we won't have Qin Su-guniang's life to immediately worry about, and Chifeng-zun's head is not there — but I would still like to make a decision after seeing that."

"While I do agree that Wei Wuxian is unlikely to be fooled by him, the situation seems much simpler than that," Wen Ruohan mused. "We simply can't trust Meng Yao, regardless of what world it is. We should deal with him at once."

Quite a few people pursed their lips together at that, wanting to disagree but not confident enough in their side to do so. Madam Jin especially frowned when she saw the small flinch her son had given. When Meng Yao had killed Wen Ruohan, he had been doing the world a great service. Who were they to oppose-

“We shouldn’t allow our personal experiences to cloud our judgment too much,” a voice calmly advised.

Wen Qing froze. It was Lan Wangji that had just spoken, and she and Lan Qiren both realized simultaneously how dangerous that could be. Wen Ruohan didn’t like when *Sect Leaders* disagreed with him. For mere heir, and a second son at that-

“Why can’t we?” Wen Ruohan asked back. His voice wasn’t angry, and it wasn’t offended. There was no mocking scorn or arrogant disregard to be found. If anything, he seemed genuinely curious by what Lan Wangji had to say.

(Wei Wuxian had proven himself to be unmatched in every aspect in Wen Ruohan’s eyes, but Hanguang-jun, the lightbearer, could be considered worthy of respect as well.)

(After all, Wei Wuxian might like others, but he would never fall in love with someone who wasn’t truly his equal.)

“...I do not believe Meng Yao can be taken at face value,” Lan Wangji clarified. “However, the ways in which he has personally affected our future selves could very easily alter our understanding of these events. What we saw between your future self and his was only a few minutes as compared to years of having known each other. However, as it was *your* future self, you might initially feel like you’ve seen the full picture already.”

Wen Ruohan paused for a moment, considering that. In the few minutes they had seen, Wen Ruohan had watched his other self prioritize Meng Yao without fail — saving the boy’s life a half dozen times in the process — only to wind up dead at his feet mere moments later.

Was that really not enough to understand their relationship? The betrayal on his other-self’s face told a pretty clear story, in Wen Ruohan’s mind.

However, the little light-bearer might have a point as well. There was still *so much* they hadn’t seen. In the case of Wei Wuxian, the later revelations had proven just how little choice he had in the bad actions attributed to him. In the case of Yi City, the conclusion of the flashback had shown just how infuriatingly tragic the world could be. They still didn’t know the full context of Nie Mingjue’s death or what Qin Su had been talking about.

“...Do you believe our decision will change if we wait?”

Although Lan Wangji’s expression didn’t fluctuate at those words, he nonetheless responded with urgency: “We agreed to not punish anyone for crimes they haven’t yet committed. I would still like to wait and see how my future self approaches this situation.”

“Those situations aren’t comparable. Your future self will face a Meng Yao that has already committed those acts.”

Of course,” Lan Wangji nodded. “So our response will be considerably less intense.”

Wen Ruohan laughed, “Less intense just means less effective. Do we do nothing and just hope he never tries to rejoin the cultivation world?”

“I don’t see why not!” Jin Guangshan jumped in, the first to break up the stream of consciousness between Lan Wangji and Wen Ruohan. “In fact, as he is essentially a problem of the Jin Sect, I’ll make sure to handle that personally. At the very least, we can ensure he has no way of entering our world.”

“Huh? But A-Die,” Jin Zixuan interjected at once. “We can’t just keep him from joining a sect! There are plenty of sect leaders who won’t agree.”

“Of course we can. Keeping him out of the cultivation world is entirely within our power, should we all agree.”

And that was the point, wasn’t it? The reason they had all been invited into the simulation was the influence they had on the cultivation world. If all thirteen of them decided on one thing (and Jiang Fengmian and the Wen brothers could be made to agree as well), then that would happen. They had enough power to represent the cultivation world; no cultivation clan would realistically be able to defy them.

“What do we think about what Wei-xiong was mentioning earlier?” Nie Huaisang brought up. “Remember? He said there was an organization my and Wei-xiong’s future selves suggested as a means of dealing with Xue Yang, right?”

Memories flooded back into the watchers’ minds:

‘Xue Yang was dealt with, then?’ their Wei Wuxian had asked, in one of his calls to them.

They had confirmed as much.

So Wei Wuxian had continued, saying, ‘On the subject of how to deal with the child version of him, the clans in the future decided they wanted to forbid him and the others from joining cultivation clans.’

More and more, everyone was starting to suspect that Meng Yao counted among ‘the others’ the future Wei Wuxian had mentioned.

And Wei Wuxian had continued, explaining ‘He said there were a few calls for harsher punishments, so this was the one thing the future clans wouldn’t budge on. They recommended we sponsor a new organization that will exist for keeping watch on them without introducing them to cultivation in any way. Presumably members of the great sects will be heavily involved, so your plan on having members of the Nie clan keep track of him is still more than possible.’

“...Isn’t it a little different with my… with Meng Yao?” Jin Zixuan asked. “Xue Yang had never really cared about the sects, beyond which ones he wanted to get revenge on.”

(There was also the small detail of the Jin Sect refusing to execute him and possibly faking his death, but he wasn’t ready to think about that yet.)

“A-anyways. Xue Yang wanted to be safe and, well, to have food, but he never specifically wanted to be part of a sect. Meng Yao, on the other hand… he’d apparently give up anything

to join the Jin Sect."

"So therefore he deserves a position in it?" Nie Huaisang asked, raising an eyebrow. "What evil wants, evil should get just because he wants it the most?"

"It's not evil to want your father's acknowledgement," Jiang Cheng grumbled from the side.

"Perhaps," Lan Wangji acknowledged. "But just as it would be going too far to decide on a punishment now, I can't simply accept offering him what he wants without further measures."

Nie Huaisang nodded, "Da-ge lost trust in him because of actions he took *after* joining the Jin Sect. That's obviously not enough."

(There was an unspoken extra meaning here too. The simple way to get Meng Yao what he really wanted was for Jin Guangshan to offer support and love. However, many of them doubted he would be able to fake it well enough to fool someone like Meng Yao, and if the alternative was creating a situation in which Meng Yao could *genuinely* earn Jin Guangshan's approval?)

(Well, over the course of the simulation, every single watcher except Jin Guangshan had started to get just enough of a bad feeling to know that was a bad idea.)

"Besides, Meng Yao is invited into the Jin Sect by Sect Leader Jin after the Sunshot Campaign, right?" Nie Huaisang added.

Nodding slowly, Jin Zixuan hesitantly agreed, "...I guess?"

"He hasn't had his son together with Qin Su-guniang yet. He hasn't even gotten together with her. But something about their son was horrifying for her to find out. Becoming Sect Leader of the Jin Sect might not have been enough to stop Meng Yao. If that didn't satisfy him, then why do you think your plan would?"

Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng flinched.

"I agree," Nie Mingjue agreed, breaking up the huddle of just the youngest ~~and drawing Wen Ruohan's attention away from his brother~~. "So, we're back where we started. Jin-gongzi isn't wrong when he says that the future's organization-plan will have a different impact on Meng Yao than it will on Xue Yang. Let's finish this flashback first, and then, the next time Wei-gongzi contacts us, we can tell him our choice regarding the two of them. He can lay the groundwork for that, and, if we haven't changed our minds when the simulation ends, we can get to work on that."

As Nie Mingjue was the one most involved in the flashback that had been shown, no one disagreed. Some of them most certainly wanted to, but even the most outspoken held their tongues.

(Madam Yu especially wanted to object to all the special treatment the low-born bastard son was getting. However, every time she opened her mouth to speak, she could hear a calm,

casual, ‘what’s wrong with servants?’ flash in her mind. She wasn’t *scared* of Wei Wuxian’s voice, but, for some reason, every time she heard that line she found herself unable to say whatever she had been planning to. Thus, she remained silent.)

On the other hand, there were the few people who had been at least somewhat on Meng Yao’s side. Lan Xichen was praying desperately that his other self’s faith in the man was not entirely unfounded, and Jin Zixuan was trying (and failing) to make sense of the curiosity, duty, and guilt swirling inside him. That said, as they didn’t personally know Meng Yao, they were nowhere near as certain of their hope for him as their other selves might be. Banning Meng Yao from ever joining a sect was a harsher punishment than the straightforward solution it would be for Xue Yang. However, the more they thought about it, the more they had to acknowledge that might be the best option they had.

Meanwhile, outside the simulation, a far less morally-questionable individual was sitting across from Wen Xu, joining him for tea. Unfortunately, this individual was not morally straightforward in that he could never be accused of doing wrong.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

“It’s unbelievable I tell you! What are our sect’s coming to?”

“...” Wen Xu remained silent.

“I mean honestly. Before the Great Sleep happened, everything was going great! Now problems are popping up left and right, Sect Leader Jiang is the only one who’s actually out here, and as a result that Jiang Sect gets to hoard all knowledge about the simulation to itself. I swear to the Heavens that when I find out what they’re planning… why I’ll teach them a lesson, I tell you!”

“....” Wen Xu didn’t *think*there was any alcohol in this tea, but maybe he should double check that.

“Gods, Sect Leader Jin might not be dead, but if he was he’d be rolling in his grave. To think that a lowly son of a servant would speak that way to me! Has all sense of courtesy been lost in this world?! No one even intervened. The Jiangs are becoming far too arrogant, I tell you. They must be up to something with our Sect Leaders!” Jin Zixun declared, pounding his fist on the table in righteous fury.

“...I see,” Wen Xu said. He didn’t particularly care what Jin Zixun thought, but, as his father would be displeased if he didn’t take advantage of the Jin Sect’s sudden weakness in leadership, he had felt it important to maintain relations. That said, every single word Jin Zixun had uttered since entering the Sun Palace had gone in one ear and out the other for Wen Xu.

(For such a loud person, Jin Zixun was frighteningly easy to zone out of when you realized he wasn’t actually saying anything of value.)

“And to top it all off, he refused to answer any of my questions about the simulation. They’re clearly hiding something, or else why would they be so confident?! For a servant to mock me… we really must deal with them, don’t you agree Wen-gongzi?”

Wen Xu gave no answer.

Unfortunately, he was not the only one there.

“Absolutely,” Wen Chao agreed. “He must be dealt with at once!”

“Ah, I knew you would see reason!” Jin Zixun declared. “It’s no surprise, considering your heritage, but I’m pleased to see that not everyone has gone insane since the Great Sleep occurred.”

“Most certainly not. I am well aware of just how imperative it is that we handle him before he grows too powerful to control. In fact, I’ve already begun making a few plans of my own,” he laughed, and no one commented on the near-crazed look in his eyes.

“That’s amazing Wen-gongzi!” the courtesan by his side declared. She was a beauty, although an usual choice for Wen Chao. There was a reason for that, however; this girl’s light eyes and smaller chest made it so she could not be any more different from Wang Lingjiao, in Wen Chao’s mind.

(After what he had seen in the simulation, the mere thought of sleeping with her made him puke.)

“Do tell!” Jin Zixun insisted. “I have been trying to plan, but, with Sect Leader Jiang’s protection, he had seemed like a difficult target.”

“No need to worry. He may be powerful, but Wei Wuxian is not-”

“Wei Wuxian?” Wen Xu repeated, finally registering two words in the conversation. He quickly backtracked through his memories, going over what had just been said, and his eyes widened.

Confused, Jin Zixun frowned and asked, “Wen-gongzi?”

“Absolutely not,” the heir cleanly rejected.

“I… I beg your pardon?”

“Sect Leader Wen, your Chief Cultivator, has declared that boy off limits,” Wen Xu said, standing up. “I do apologize for the sudden announcement, but I’m afraid I must ask you to leave, Jin-gongzi.”

“W-what?”

“Wei Wuxian has more than just Sect Leader Jiang’s protection. Unless you are willing to make an enemy of Wen Ruohan, I suggest you pick your next actions carefully.”

And at that moment, Jin Zixun's brain finally reminded him of the conference that had taken place not too long ago, and the way Wen Xu had protected Wei Wuxian without question.

"But… but I-"

"Dismissed," Wen Xu ordered, turning on his heel and leaving without offering a response. His steps echoed loudly in the hall, and when the servants closed the door behind him it seemed to slam deafeningly loud.

Jin Zixun flinched.

(He really, truly, could not afford to make an enemy of the Wen.)

However-

"Don't mind him," Wen Chao said. "He left the simulation early. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"...What does the simulation have to do with this?"

Wen Chao's eyes went dark for a moment, memories flashing through at a blinding rate. A slight tremble overtook his body, and his concubine moved away from him nervously.

"The simulation has *everything* to do with Wei Wuxian," he laughed once, the sound broken and crazed in a way that made even Jin Zixun step back. "It shows exactly how much we need to stop him."

"To stop him? Does he… he isn't actually capable of upsetting the current order of things that much, is he? I… no. No, you're being ridiculous."

He stood up, marching out. He couldn't afford to listen to any more of this. He had been wrong; both the Wen brothers had obviously gone insane as a result of the simulation, just as he kept telling everyone would happen.

"If you don't believe me, then let's test the accuracy of the information!" Wen Chao demanded. "You wanted his weakness, right? I'll tell you. That little freak of nature grew up in the streets like the beast he is. He fought with other creatures for food, until he somehow managed to trick Sect Leader Jiang into thinking he was human."

Jin Zixun walked out faster.

"See how he reacts to a dog, Jin-gongzi!" Wen Chao shouted. "I promise you, you'll believe me after that."

Here, at last, Jin Zixun paused.

"I got a few wolves for myself, just in case that monster came calling. I'll let you have as many as you want. Try it, and see how he reacts. You might be surprised."

Slowly, the Jin turned back around.

“It’s a wonderful feeling, to make a being like *that* shake in fear.”

Up above, there was one additional person there that none of the people below knew about. He was small enough to hide behind the wooden beams that made up the roof, and he had been present for the entire conversation.

‘Wen Ning, you’ll never believe this!’ Wei Wuxian declared, as excited as the mere fifteen years he had lived insinuated. ‘Come see what I made!’

Wen Ning had snuck inside. He had gotten off the call with the watchers quite some time ago, so he hadn’t had anything else to do anyways.

‘Mo Xuanyu — the future one, I mean — has been working on this with me. It’s the next step in an advancement of the Píngxíng gateway. You know how we’ve managed to make it so that we can talk to each other in real time now?’

‘Yes?’

‘Well this right here can separate our spirits from our bodies!’ he declared, gesturing excitedly at what looked to be a giant necklace pendant. In the face of this, there was only one thing Wen Ning could ask.

‘Wh-why would we want to do that, Wei-gongzi?!’

‘Well it’s kinda boring to always be in just that incorporeal zone when we talk, and it’s super annoying to describe things from our world when I can’t show the people on the other side. It’s only step one of fixing that problem, but I’ve tested it a few times and I think it’s pretty safe. Want to give it a try?’

If it was the Wen Ning of a month ago, he would have frozen in fear and been unable to do anything. However, right now, his sister needed him, and any advancement Wei Wuxian made in understanding was one step closer to keeping her safe.

‘Yes, I’ll take it!’ he had said.

So, to test it, he had gone to the Wen Sect, and had floated his incorporeal body up to the roof. And then a few people had walked in below him, and he had worried that he would be caught if he tried to leave.

And then they had started talking.

“I… really need to tell Wei-gongzi about this,” he muttered, eyes wide.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I must admit, while I've always liked Nie Mingjue, I've never *loved-loved* him.
Writing this chapter may or may not have changed my mind.
(Which also means I'm now even sadder about his death 😭😭😭)
:)

Murphy's Law: A Detailed Demonstration

Chapter Notes

Beta read by Tintin! Thanks so much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Poke-Poke.

"..."

Poke-Poke.

"..."

Po-

"A-Lu, stop that!" A-Yue demanded, slapping her brother's hand away. He jumped at the sudden movement, hitting his toes against the table in front of him in the process.

"Ow!" he whined, standing up at once. "What was that for?"

"Shi-xiong, are-are you alright?" Mo Yu asked, looking back and forth between A-Lu's toes and face with no small degree of worry. A-Yue rolled her eyes.

"He's fine, A-Yu," she insisted.

Huffing in annoyance, A-Lu gave a disgruntled mumble of "At least A-Yu cares about me."

"You kids okay back there?" a voice called out.

"We're fine, Da-shixiong!"

Scowling, A-Lu insisted, "I'm not."

They heard a huff of a laugh, and the door creaked open.

"What are you three doing?" Wei Wuxian asked. "When you offered to watch over Wen Ning's body, *I* had thought you were just looking for an excuse to get out of helping me."

"We weren't!"

"An excuse?!"

“Da-shixiong, that’s not it!” Mo Yu insisted at once, tugging on Wei Wuxian’s pants. His eyes gleamed with tears, not recognizing the teasing for what it was.

“Alright, alright, I’m sorry,” Wei Wuxian caved in, reaching down to scoop Mo Yu into his arms. “So, what’s wrong?”

The siblings’ faces fell to the ground, and A-Yue muttered a depressed, “We’re just worried about Wen-gongzi.”

“Yeah. It’s weird to see him like this,” A-Lu agreed.

Wei Wuxian’s eyes drifted to the left, where Wen Ning’s unconscious body laid. A pendant sparking in resentful energy was laid around his neck, giving that part of the room an ominous red glow.

“I told you, it’s perfectly safe,” Wei Wuxian reassured. “Some very smart people in the future have been working on it with me, and I’ve tested it quite a few times myself. Wen Ning’s basically just asleep.”

“But he’s not asleep!” A-Lu protested. “If he was asleep, he’d be able to wake up if something happened, but no matter what I do he doesn’t react at all!”

In demonstration, he poked the unconscious Wen Ning on the cheek again, and, at the obvious lack of reaction from the Wen cultivator, gestured wildly towards him in a ‘*see?!*’ manner.

“B-besides,” A-Yue continued, “Wen-gongzi promised he would help me with my archery. He can’t do that if he’s like this. I need to wait for him because of that!”

Smiling softly, Wei Wuxian bounced Mo Xuanyu in his arms a few times, touched by the concern the three kids were showing for Wen Ning. It really made him grateful that the other boy had shown up, even if he was still a little confused as to why Wen Xu sent him in the first place. Without Wen Ning, things would have been much more-

POP

A face came out of the floor.

“*AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*” the kids shrieked, Mo Yu burying his face in Wei Wuxian’s chest and flailing wildly while A-Lu and A-Yue jumped behind the bed Wen Ning was resting on, scrambling for their lives.

“Eh? Wei-gongzi?” the face in the floor asked.

“Hi, Wen Ning.”

At those words, the kids peaked out of their hiding places, slowly and hesitantly looking down at the head that was sticking out of the wooden floor. It was Wen Ning’s.

“H-hello,” the face greeted.

The kids were too petrified by fear to respond.

Shutting his mouth and squirming awkwardly, Wen Ning then floated up, phasing out of the ground until his whole body was a foot in the air. He drifted up smoothly like a leaf carried by a wayward breeze, and not at all like the 60 kilogram boy he was supposed to be.

“S-sorry for scaring you,” he said.

Wei Wuxian laughed.

“Well, we weren’t expecting that, huh, A-Yu?” he asked the boy in his arms. “I suppose I should have known. I’ve heard this is the time of year in which A-Nings will spontaneously sprout out of the ground, terrorizing innocent bystanders!”

Wen Ning wilted at the description, while A-Yue and A-Lu straightened themselves up, giving equally stubborn ‘I wasn’t scared’ glares at Wen Ning. The Wen representative wilted further at their looks.

Then, a voice nearly too quiet to hear spoke up.

“Is he dead?” A-Yu asked.

“Hm? No, no, definitely not. We wouldn’t be able to talk to him if he was dead,” Wei Wuxian said ~~ignorantly~~. “Wen Ning is just fine. Though I’m not sure why he chose to come out of the ground.”

“S-sorry Young Master Wei!” Wen Ning stuttered. “I was coming back from Qishan, but-but on the way people kept glancing my way and I was almost noticed a few times! I was just going to float through the sky on the way back, but I thought someone might see me that too, and if I pretended to be physical and just walked around someone was probably going to bump into me and then they’d notice they couldn’t touch me and I’d-”

“Is that a problem?” Wei Wuxian asked. “It’s not like it’s a secret that we’re working on improving our communications with the future. I certainly don’t think you’d have to go so far as to hide underground and try to make your way back to us blind.”

“Well, I… heard something.”

The deliberate vagueness of his words made Wei Wuxian frown slightly.

“Y-you’re fine?” the tiny voice asked again. “You’re not… you’re not a ghost? You’re not dead?”

Blinking in surprise at Mo Yu’s continued questions, Wen Ning abruptly realized that he was still floating mid-air above his body. A ghost wasn’t exactly a far-off guess. He blushed.

“I’m not dead,” he confirmed, lowering himself. “Here, just watch.”

Wen Ning descended into his body, floating down vertically to touch his finger against the pendant on his chest. Upon making contact with it, there was a spike of resentment as the

pendant glowed, sucking his soul in. That glow then spread throughout the unconscious body below, fading out of the pendant as it settled into Wen Ning. A moment later, the physical body's eyes blinked open. He sat up.

"S-see? I'm fine."

"Woah," A-Lu gaped. He reached out again, poking Wen Ning's cheek one more time, and delighted when Wen Ning jumped at the action with a little 'eep!'

"Wen-gongzi's okay?" A-Yu asked one more time, turning to Wei Wuxian for additional reassurance.

"Yup!" the head disciple confirmed cheerily, taking the pendant off the now fully-conscious Wen Ning's neck. "And if there's anything off with him, I'll be able to deal with it right away. Come on, why don't you and A-Lu and A-Yue head out for now. I'm gonna make sure Wen Ning's doing fine."

He set A-Yu down, and watched as the siblings guided him out, reassured now that they'd seen Wen Ning's safety for themselves.

"Go to the kitchens, if you have time!" Wei Wuxian called out after then. "I heard an elder got his hands on a bunch of watermelon at the market today!"

"Okay!" two voices called back.

The door clicked shut.

"Now then," Wei Wuxian turned back to Wen Ning. "*Is* everything alright? You were acting a bit strange."

Wen Ning abruptly sat up straight: "You're right! It's an emergency, Wei-gongzi!"

"What is?"

"Wen-er-gongzi and Wen Xu-gongzi are fighting over whether or not to send an army of dogs after you! They've got it all prepared, and-and I think they're going to send their forces to invade Lotus Pier!"

"I... what? Why-"

"Because Wen-er-gongzi thinks his father likes you too much!"

Wei Wuxian mentally backtracked his mind for a moment, going over what had been said again.

He did know of Wen Chao and Wen Ruohan. And he knew Wen Xu personally, from the intersect conference. And he could vaguely understand the meaning of an "army of dogs."

And yet, the full sentence still made no sense.

"...Say that for me again?"

"W-well," Wen Ning stuttered, not quite knowing how to approach this. "I-I'm sorry! It's just… well, it was a bit confusing, but the important thing is that I'm pretty sure the Yunmeng Jiang Sect will be attacked by a bunch of dogs!"

Wei Wuxian nodded once in understanding.

'*Maybe I did mess up the pendant, somehow,*' he thought. '*I wasn't expecting it to cause hallucinations. I better figure out what he saw as soon as possible so that I can make sure the rest of his mind is okay.*'

He smiled.

"Start over from the beginning. I'm sure we'll be able to figure something out," Wei Wuxian suggested.

Nodding rapidly, Wen Ning forced himself to take a deep breath and began: "Th-then, I guess it started this morning, when I got in contact with the watchers. See, A-Jie told me to be careful of Wen-er-gongzi, and Sect Leader Wen didn't say anything to disagree with her."

"Nothing?" Wei Wuxian repeated. "Was he just not paying attention?"

"She said it to everyone! It wasn't a whisper or anything, and, while I couldn't see them, everyone still seemed to be choosing their words pretty carefully, so I-I think he was there? But she told me to trust my own judgment over his orders!"

"That seems like a pretty good philosophy to have in general," Wei Wuxian commented. "Your sister's a smart lady; maybe that's all there was to it."

"That's what I kinda thought too. But I was still a little nervous, so when I agreed to test this for you, I thought I could at least head over to the Wen Sect to see. Just in case! I wasn't really expecting to find anything, but I could move over long distances so much faster while I was incorporeal, so I thought it couldn't hurt! But then-then I was in Qishan, and I went into a room, and then someone opened the door below and I panicked and hid behind the ceiling beams. I know I didn't have to and I guess I could have just explained that I was there to test your invention, but they startled me when they opened the door, and it… it ended up being Wen Xu-gongzi, and I thought he might be mad if he found out I hid from him so I just stayed up there."

"...Alright, fair enough," Wei Wuxian acknowledged, handing over a cup of water to help calm the somewhat-panicking Wen Ning down.

"A-anyways. After Wen Xu-gongzi walked in, Wen-er-gongzi did too. And following the two of them was someone from the Jin Sect. It was… it was Jin Zixun-gongzi."

He said the name hesitantly, afraid of the memories it might spark for Wei Wuxian.

"..Jin Zixun? Oh, you mean the Jin Sect member handling external affairs!"

“Y-yes.”

Wei Wuxian blinked, waiting for him to continue.

“You’re… you’re not worried?’

“Why would I be? That all seems to make sense.”

“Well, it’s just… Jin Zixun-gongzi said all those awful things about your mother and Sect Leader Jiang, so I just-I thought…” he trailed off, noticing Wei Wuxian’s look of confusion. The head disciple’s brows were knit together, and he seemed to be thinking rather carefully, as if trying to recall who Wen Ning was talking about.

The silence continued.

“It… it was just a few days ago,” Wen Ning reminded him.

“Eh? Was it?” Wei Wuxian asked, still knitting his brows together. “Hm. So much has been happening recently that I guess it just didn’t stand out. Alright, continue.”

(If Jin Zixun knew that his attempts at pressuring Wei Wuxian were so inconsequential that the boy didn’t even *remember them* he would have gotten so enraged he would have probably had a heart attack on the spot and died. Unfortunately, he was far, far away, and had no idea what was being discussed.)

“O-okay. So Jin Zixun-gongzi was there, and they had the usual greetings, and then he started, um… complaining. About you, specifically. He-he was pretty offended by how no one came to his defense last time he visited Lotus Pier, and started accusing you of trying to take over the Jiang Sect while the rightful leaders weren’t around.”

Wei Wuxian nodded, knowing full well that some of the gentry had accepted that consensus. It was a bit annoying, but, now that Jiang Fengmian had left the simulation, the Jiang Sect Leader had been working day and night to convince the public that there was no merit to the rumors.

(Unfortunately, no amount of reassurance would convince certain people.)

“Wen Xu-gongzi, Da-shixiong, was pretty displeased with the conversation and left in the middle, but Wen-er-gongzi was even more invested than Jin Zixun-gongzi. Wen-er-gongzi is the one who brought up sending dogs against you. I-I think it might have been mentioned in the simulation because he was certain they would work against you!”

Here, at last, Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened.

“Mentioned in the simulation?” he repeated. “But that… why would they….”

The future’s Mo Xunayu and Jiang Cheng had told him that his future self had died at twenty two.

But Jiang Fengmian had been acting noticeably different since he had left the simulation, and not just in regards to his own children. He had *spoken out* against the new rumors surrounding Wei Wuxian, something he had never attempted even when it was his own honor under question. Wei Wuxian had thought that was a symptom of temporarily not having to worry about upsetting Madam Yu, but, even still, it had been surprising that Jiang Fengmian would go so far.

And then there had been that time with the child Mo Xuanyu, when Jiang Fengmian had looked at him and Wei Wuxian, and all Wei Wuxian had been able to see was *guilt*.

And a few hours ago-

"...Jiang-shushu told me he contacted the Wen Sect after you spoke with them this morning," Wei Wuxian commented. "Do you… know what he said?"

"Ah, yes!" Wen Ning nodded. "He was passing along a message from Sect Leader Wen, as well as one of his own. I-I'm not entirely sure, but I think he was warning Wen Xu-gongzi against being 'overly ambitious' while Sect Leader Wen is gone. M-maybe he didn't like the most recent trade deal made between the Wen and the WanglinNian Sects?"

"...Maybe. You also said he was passing along a message from His Excellency?"

"Yes! Sect Leader Wen wanted to tell Wen-er-gongzi that he 'keeps his promises.' I-I'm not really sure what that means, but it actually came up after Da-shixiong left Wen-er-gongzi and Jin Zixun alone!"

"In what way?"

"Well, Jin Zixun was a little intrigued by the… the suggestion Wen-er-gongzi made, and wanted to test it at once. But Wen-er-gongzi…"

'Just send a bunch after him? Are you crazy? That will get traced back to us at once!'

'You told me you had a bunch of dogs for me to use to see if your theory was right. Why are you backing out now?'

'It's not just the Jiang Sect that's on Wei Wuxian's side. You heard what my brother said… my father personally wants to keep him alive. I think he hopes to use him instead of just getting rid of him, but that-that's only because he doesn't understand how dangerous Wei Wuxian is!'

Jin Zixun laughed: 'Dangerous? He's just an annoyance! That son of a servant couldn't possibly be useful to someone like His Excellency! Are you insane?'

'No, you don't understand. We need to be careful, subtle, like-like Xue Yang! He wasn't caught!'

'Like who?'

(Most would say Xue Yang destroying the Chang family wasn't the most subtle of attempts, but, in Wen Chao's eyes, if Xue Yang wasn't given punishment immediately after, it counted

as being subtle.)

'You don't know him, but… yeah, maybe we should go find him. I bet he would be helpful,' Wen Chao seemed to cackle. 'Father will forgive me if I present that brat to him. We don't need the Yiling Patriarch if Xue Yang is on our side!'

Jin Zixun, who didn't know who 'Xue Yang' or 'The Yiling Patriarch' were, just stared blankly in response.

"Xue Yang?" Wei Wuxian repeated. "But wasn't he a criminal in the future? Why would they want to emulate…."

He trailed off, considering the words deeply. Allegedly, the reason the future's Mo Xuanyu wanted them to create an organization was to help people like Xue Yang lead different lives. However, that was made under the assumption that all the great sects were in support of that endeavor. Was Mo Xuanyu's plan really to go *against* the Wen Sect to find Xue Yang? Wen Ruohan hadn't seemed especially opposed to the organization plan when Wei Wuxian had brought it up, but Wei Wuxian supposed the man's own son would know best. Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning hadn't exactly been able to see the watchers while contacting them, so they might have missed a few clues they would have otherwise seen.

"If I'm remembering correctly, wasn't the Yiling Patriarch the inventor of demonic cultivation?" Wei Wuxian asked. "I guess Xue Yang was involved too… then maybe the reason why Wen Chao is so angry with me isn't my current influence, but the demonic cultivation I'm learning from Mo Xuanyu."

"Eh?" Wen Ning jumped at the suggestion. "You think so? Then what should we do? Should we… tell Sect Leader Jiang?"

"No, no, there's no need to bother him," Wei Wuxian shook his head, then paused. There had been a notable change in Jiang Fengmian's behavior since he had left the simulation. Going out of his way to check in on Wei Wuxian, caving into many of Wei Wuxian's mostly-joking requests, and, most recently, sending his own warning to the Wen brothers…. It had all seemed pretty strange. When Wen Chao had requested Wei Wuxian's presence, but the heir's recent dog-acquisition had made Wei Wuxian nervous, Jiang Fengmian had offered to go instead. Wei Wuxian already owed Jiang Fengmian more than he could pay back simply because the man had taken him in, but now….

Was this really just because Madam Yu wasn't here?

"Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning spoke up. "I-I'm sorry if you think I'm intruding, and I'm fine with doing something else, but if you don't mind too much I-I really do think we should tell Jiang Fengmian. That was basically a threat against you, and… if you don't want to, then we should at least try to add a few more defensive measures around the Pier!"

(Yes, Wen Ning was basically betraying the Wen Sect by telling another sect to defend against them, but his sister had practically given permission so he was going to worry about that later. Right now, Wei Wuxian was his priority.)

“I guess you’ve got a point,” Wei Wuxian admitted. “Yeah, alright. Let’s tell Uncle Jiang about what you saw and see what he says. At the very least, it seems like Wen Xu isn’t as interested in this plan as Wen Chao is, so we can see about talking to him. Hopefully this can all be taken care of without it exploding into an emergency.”

Wen Ning nodded rapidly in agreement, and Wei Wuxian smiled warmly. Out of the corner of his eye, however, he found himself glancing back at the room where the unconscious Jiang members were being watched over.

‘*I wonder how Jiang Cheng is doing today,*’ he thought.

“Awful,” Jiang Cheng said. “I’ve never heard of something more stupid in my life.”

“But Uncle!” Jin Ling protested. “You told me you would at least try to get along with Wei Wuxian! Especially after the fuss you caused in the Cloud Recesses all because of a misunderstanding!!”

“‘Not actively fighting with him’ and ‘attending his wedding’ are not at all the same thing!” Sect Leader Jiang Wanyin snapped back. “I don’t care that Nie Huaisang wants my help. If Sect Leader Nie was somehow stupid enough to agree to plan the wedding for them, then he has to live with the consequences.”

Stomping his feet on the ground, Jin Ling shouted back, “He’s not even asking for much! All he wants is some purple dye, and in exchange he’ll try to arrange things so there aren’t any issues with you attending the wedding. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is that I’m not *going* to attend the wedding. I have better things to do than watch Wei Wuxian and that husband of his frolicking around like-”

“The least you could do is say Hanguang-jun’s name! If you call him just Wei Wuxian’s husband at their wedding it’s going to be-”

“I already said I’m not going!”

The shouting continued nonstop, and the servants at Lotus Pier didn’t so much as bat an eye. While it would usually be considered concerning for two Sect Leaders of the Great Sects to be shouting at each other in such a way, it was perfectly normal when it came to these two.

(And besides, Nie Huaisang hadn’t really planned on Jiang Cheng agreeing to this. All he wanted to do was put the suggestion into his mind, so that the Jiang Sect Leader would react appropriately when Nie Huaisang initiated the next part of his master plan. He had brought Wei Wuxian back to life to get this wedding; everything was going to go perfectly.)

“Wen-guniang?”

“Yes?” she asked, glancing to her side to see Nie Huaisang staring up at her.

“I think my Da-ge has something to say to you, but he’s too much of a coward to come over on his own-”

“Huaisang!” Nie Mingjue shouted, storming over and trying to pull Nie Huaisang away. Unfortunately, as a result of the no-touch rule, he was unable to actually grab his brother and was thus left floundering as Nie Huaisang continued to talk.

“Anyways, now that he’s here, I’ll let him have the floor.”

“*Huaisang!’ Nie Mingjue growled, but, upon seeing Wen Qing’s expectant face, quickly straightened up, clearing his throat. Unfortunately, his brother hadn’t said anything false thus far. Nie Mingjue did have something he wanted to say to her, and had been deliberating with himself on how to get it out.*

“I… it’s…” he cleared his throat, making sure to look Wen Qing in the eyes. “I don’t regret what I did during the war — fighting back against the Wens, I mean…”

He trailed off and Wen Qing raised an eyebrow, wondering what his point was.

It wasn’t that Nie Mingjue regretted fighting back against the Wen-dogs. He hated Wen Ruohan, and the simulation had made it all the more clear that the tyranny of the Wens had to be stopped. However….

‘Did you join my forces to kill Wen dogs or to make idle talk?’ the simulated Nie Mingjue demanded.

Later, Ouyang Zizhen had paused, not wanting to say the words ‘Wen-dogs,’ and only doing-so because the members of the Sunshot Campaign used those terms.

‘Isn’t Jianling still in the hands of those Wen-dogs?’

‘W-well, good thing Zewu-jun and Hanguang-jun are helping everyone. Or else who knows how many sects of innocent cultivators would have fallen to the hands of those Wen-dogs.’

‘I’ve heard some people talk about how Lan Zhan and I continue to fight each other even while we’re on the battlefield killing Wen-dogs together.’

‘Sect Leader Jiang is right! In terms of evil, what could possibly be more evil than those Wen-dogs?! He’s on our side anyways. It’s fine, so long as he’s killing Wen-dogs.’

That phrase was said over and over and over again, becoming ingrained into their minds until it felt natural to say it. But Ouyang Zizhen had hesitated, and Wen Qing had forced herself to not react every time those words were repeated.

But it was propaganda. They needed to rally everyone together against the opposite side. That’s all it was; a way to get people to unite against the enemy army. ‘Wen-dogs’ obviously didn’t include Wen Qing-

(Was it so obvious?)

It was clear that the future Wen Ning was dead, and it was quite likely that Wen Qing was as well. They had betrayed the Wen Sect, but… there had been no news of Wen Ruohan finding out and executing them.

What had happened to the future's Wen Qing, in the end?

'It's fine, so long as he's killing Wen-dogs!'

"I don't… regret fighting in the Sunshot Campaign, but in regards to calling you that-"

Cruel, despicable, dehumanizing term.

"I won't use the term Wen-dogs in our world," Nie Mingjue said at last. "I apologize for… making you sit through it."

Wen Qing's eyes widened, and she would have surely done a double take if she hadn't already been looking at him. It was true that it had bothered her slightly to hear that, but it wasn't as though she didn't understand.

"...No one ever called *me* that," she pointed out, not knowing what else to say.

"Right, well…" Nie Mingjue trailed off. "Anyways, I-"

"Anyways, we're sorry!" Nie Huaisang popped in. "You helped our side out, so making a name that also applies to you into an insult was probably wrong, is what Da-ge is trying to say."

"Would you stop speaking for me?!"

Holding his hands up in surrender, Nie Huaisang quietly slunk back to Lan Wangji, Jiang Wanyin, and Jin Zixuan, who were staring at him with wide eyes.

Wen Qing laughed.

"Alright then," she decided. "Apology accepted, so long as you manage to stay true to your promise of not repeating that."

"Right!" Nie Mingjue agreed at once, nodding at her. "Thank you!"

He glanced to the side and saw Lan Xichen send him a nod of encouragement.

And, at that moment, the simulation went dark.

The watchers all paused in what they were saying, trained by now to pay attention when the world shifted like this.

The first sound that appeared was unusually-awkward, hesitant, and somewhat-forced narration from Lan Sizhui:

“Now that Wen Ruohan had died, even though the remnants of Qishan Wen were still alive, they were already beyond hope. Their… their defeat was set in stone,” he explained.

Wen Ruohan’s eyes went cold, and Wen Qing took a deep breath, forcing herself to not otherwise react. She truly didn’t blame Nie Mingjue or Lan Xichen or Wei Wuxian, and even Meng Yao, whose alliances seemed sketchy at best, had made a final choice that she couldn’t claim was objectively terrible. She understood why they made the choices they did.

(Unfortunately, the winning side of this war would be much less mature than her when it came to the Wen survivors.)

“The sacrificial Meng Yao, who had been undercover in Nightless City for years, became famous immediately after the battle,” Sizhui continued as the visuals shifted to show celebrations breaking out across the army. “The plethora of expectations all around pushed Lianfang-zun, Zewu-jun, and Chifeng-zun closer together.”

A blue wisp of Wei Wuxian followed diligently after Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, Jin Guangshan, and, further back, Meng Yao through the now-empty halls of the Nightless City. Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen were still obviously exhausted from the battle which had just occurred, but Jin Guangshan seemed to pay that no mind, easily taking the lead of the group (being the only one who hadn’t spent the last week and a half fighting non-stop).

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian’s thoughts turned toward the individual following behind, unable to meet Nie Mingjue’s eyes.

‘For a long time, I’d thought it was strange that Meng Yao and Nie Mingjue could end up as sworn brothers. Whatever trust there had been between them vanished the moment Meng Yao betrayed the Nie Sect, and even all of Lan Xichen’s attempts at bringing them closer together had seemed fruitless. Now it’s pretty clear that, aside from Lan Xichen’s influence, the most important factors were gratitude for saving his life and writing the letters. To be precise, throughout the war, Nie Mingjue had more or less depended on information from Lan Xichen, which had been received through Meng Yao’s letters. Nie Mingjue probably still thinks of Meng Yao as a rare talent he could rely on, and so wants to bring him back to the right path. However, Jin Guangyao wasn’t his subordinate anymore, so the only way he would have the authority to do that was by becoming sworn brothers with him. Once he had that, he could try urging Jin Guangyao in a different direction, just like how he’s interacted with Nie Huaisang all these years.’

The Nie heir couldn’t help but frown at the comparison. His Da-ge might have wanted to create a similar relationship with Meng Yao, but, no matter how often they argued, there was no one Nie Huaisang loved and respected more than his brother — Meng Yao’s relationship with him obviously couldn’t be further off.

As soon as he reached the throne room of the Nightless City, which looked out over the courtyard below, Jin Guangshan spun on his heel and turned to face his companions.

“Sect Leader Nie, Sect Leader Lan,” Jin Guangshan began, “We have fought long and hard to reach this point, and withstood many sacrifices on the way. Although our soldiers are celebrating now, there is still a layer of tension hanging over them. I believe we need a way to prove to them that the battle is over, so that they may finally set their hearts at ease.”

“...Of course, Sect Leader Jin,” Lan Xichen agreed, noticing that Nie Mingjue’s patience was growing especially thin. “What do you suggest?”

“The Lanling Jin Sect will host a Flower Banquet, lasting for at least a week. It is only appropriate, after years of struggle, to celebrate with equal magnificence! I have already spoken to Sect Leader Jiang about this, and he has accepted my invitation. I hope that you two will do the same.”

“I… of course.”

“Right,” Nie Mingjue acknowledged, though he looked just as put off by the suggestion as Lan Xichen. There was an unspoken undercurrent to their acceptances.

(If you have enough resources to pull something like this off, why did you constantly request backup during the war? How are you already prepared to hold a banquet, when your sect offered so little help in the final battle?)

But they couldn’t speak those thoughts out loud.

Even if most of the watchers heard them just the same.

“When will the banquet be held?”

Instead of answering, Jin Guangshan glanced back at his son, who immediately responded, “In two days. The LanlingJin Sect has a few more preparations to make, but we would be honored to host the other sects as soon as possible so that we may finally set everyone’s consciences at ease.”

Nodding once, Lan Xichen smiled and agreed, “Then, let’s do as you say, A-Yao.”

He glanced to the left and the right, checking to see if there would be any objection from the other Sect Leaders in the room. As much as it seemed like Nie Mingjue wanted to protest, he remained silent.

The real Nie Mingjue could understand his other self’s feelings.

‘The LanlingJin Sect has a few more preparations to make, but we would be honored to host the other sects…’

‘We’ would be honored. Jin Guangshan had accepted him under the pressure of Meng Yao’s miraculous accomplishment in the war, bringing him into the Sect with open arms. It was just as Nie Mingjue had once wanted.

Except, last time Nie Mingjue had sent him there, things hadn't worked out that way at all. Was the approval Jin Guangshan was giving him now really enough to make it so that Meng Yao would never be 'forced' to commit such an act again?

Nie Huaisang, at the very least, doubted it.

But the simulated Nie Mingjue felt unable to put up anymore resistance and relaxed his stance, forcing himself to not engage Meng Yao for the time being. Lan Xichen's smile widened at that.

And the real Lan Xichen looked away, an unusual awkwardness covering his expression.

Finally, without a single word being spoken, Nie Mingjue walked out, unwilling to engage with Meng Yao anymore. The not-yet-Jin had to step to the side hurriedly to avoid Nie Mingjue's path, bowing as Chifeng-zun walked straight by.

Following Nie Mingjue was Jin Guangshan. He stepped at a slow pace, far more leisurely than Nie Mingjue had been, but no less confident. When he reached Meng Yao, he smiled and nodded once.

It was acknowledgement; praise; acceptance.

Meng Yao smiled back, small dimples forming in his cheeks as he cast his eyes to the ground.

And a strange, ugly feeling twisted in Jin Zixuan.

He frowned at himself. As far as he knew, this was exactly the kind of thing he had been looking for the past few days through the simulation. He had seen time and time again how horribly his half siblings were treated, and how unfair his own status was in comparison. Even if the new revelations as to Meng Yao's character had put a bit of a damper on things, he did still want a brother — had been overjoyed when he found out Mo Xuanyu had been taken in by the real Wei Wuxian outside the simulation.

So what? Was this jealousy? Was he really so conceited that he'd not want his father to even smile at the person who ended the war?

'*I guess it's possible,*' he thought. '*I've never had a sibling before. I've heard it can be hard to share.*'

And yet, some part of that explanation still didn't feel quite right.

While Jin Zixuan's thoughts and memories had flashed through his mind, the rest of the watchers remained focused on what happened before them. Lan Xichen had begun to leave as well, and, unlike Nie Mingjue, had stopped to acknowledge Meng Yao.

"A-Yao," he said.

Meng Yao looked up.

‘*How long did they know each other before Xiongzhang started calling him that?*’ Lan Wangji couldn’t help but wonder. He knew he had asked his brother to start referring to him as “Wangji” instead of “A-Zhan” at the ripe old age of fourteen, but that didn’t change the fact that the Lan Xichen he knew would refer to even his closest friends with far more distance than that.

How much time could they have possibly spent together by this point?

It seemed Nie Mingjue wasn’t the only one who had found Meng Yao’s abilities, pitiful situation, and (apparent) character to be captivating.

As if in proof of that, Lan Xichen and Meng Yao stared at each other for some time longer, as if Lan Xichen was trying to convey his feelings with just his eyes. Eventually, having chosen his words, he spoke again:

“A-Yao, you don’t have to take Mingjue-xiong’s actions personally. He is very aware in his heart that he feels both gratitude and resentment, and that he abhors all evil as a deadly foe. He is just worried you’ve fallen down the wrong path.”

“Abhors all evil as a deadly foe?” Meng Yao slowly repeated, staring into the distance. “Am I evil then?”

Lan Xichen appeared taken aback by that question.

And many of the watchers were too.

“I-that’s not what I mean,” he clarified.

Nodding once, Meng Yao finally looked up to make eye contact with Lan Xichen and said, “Zewu-jun, there’s no need to be so polite. I’ve served Sect Leader Nie for a long time. I understand his intentions. I have also never taken it to heart before.”

A pause passed between them.

“...Zewu-jun, go ahead with Sect Leader Nie,” Meng Yao requested. “I’ll take care of everything here.”

Eyes falling, Lan Xichen paused for a moment before finally nodding and agreeing, “Alright.”

Meng Yao stepped back and began to bow, only to be stopped by Lan Xichen’s firm hand. They made eye contact and smiled. Then, at last, Lan Xichen left.

As the simulated Sect Leader Lan walked out, the watchers were left to think about the question Meng Yao had asked, and had trouble coming to an answer.

“I don’t… I don’t think so?” Jiang Yanli attempted first, hoping to comfort her fiance. “He’s just… evil is a bit much, isn’t it? So far, I've at least understood why he made the choices he did."

“What exactly are we considering to *be* evil, in this case?” Wen Ruohan wondered aloud. “I’m assuming ‘all Wen-dogs’ are included there, yes?”

“*You!*” Madam Yu stood up. “You lot are in no way the victims here! How dare you look so proud of yourself after what you did!”

“Will do,” he corrected seamlessly. “And besides-”

“And besides, Wen Qing and Wen Ning definitely don’t count as that,” Nie Mingjue sternly interrupted. The Wen doctor paused at that, glancing at Nie Mingjue for a moment in silent thought. Nie Huaisang, meanwhile, nodded furiously in agreement.

Fearing Wen Ruohan’s annoyance would grow, Jin Guangshan hastily cut in, “I think it’s rather hard to say he’s *not* evil. Just think of how many people he’s betrayed and how many of us he kills! And his poor wife. How could we not consider him evil after that?”

“It almost feels like Jin Guangyao and Meng Yao are different people,” Madam Jin observed, frowning deeply (and notably *not* commenting on her husband). “No matter what happens in the future, there’s no way Jin Guangyao was ‘forced’ to do whatever he did to his child.”

“He wasn’t forced to do any of the things we’ve seen him do,” Nie Mingjue agreed. “They’re not different people. It’s all still him.”

“So, you think he *is* evil then?” Jin Guangshan wondered.

“That word is too subjective to be useful here,” Lan Wangji cut in.

Raising an eyebrow, Wen Ruohan asked, “Then, do you have a better way to describe it?”

There was a moment’s pause as Lan Wangji considered that question, before, at last, he replied, “Rather than evil, it would be more useful to discuss at what point he becomes set in his ways. Unchangeable, or at least so difficult to change that it’s not a realistic investment.”

The watchers looked at each other again, before, one by one, all unconsciously turning Nie Mingjue’s way. Aside from Wen Ruohan, he had been affected by Meng Yao the most.

And, as Sect Leader Nie stood there, only one thing replayed in his mind.

‘...My father hasn’t seen me yet. I haven’t even met him yet. They’re going to kill me.’

The simulated Nie Mingjue hadn’t believed him.

But the real one did.

(Perhaps he was a fool for thinking this, maybe he was an idiot for listening to anything Jin Guangyao had to say, but….)

“Not yet,” Nie Mingjue decided. “He’s not irredeemable yet.”

Thankfully, as if having known that the watchers would need some time, the simulation hadn't yet moved on to the next important plot point. It had gone through sweeping scenic shots of the blood-soaked land outside the Nightless City, allowing the watchers to observe the result of their collective choices.

At long last however, deciding that it had given the watchers enough time to converse, it changed scenes. There was a rustle, then a stampede of footsteps, then a cheer. Light filled the world.

"...Wow," Jiang Cheng muttered.

White peony petals covered the ground like snow, and full flowers were hung from the roofs of buildings in baskets woven together out of reeds. Their golden centers reflected the light even further, making it into a truly blinding scene. The sources of the earlier sounds were the crowds of people excitedly passing through the petal covered streets, all rushing towards the same location. The destination of these excited travelers was, unsurprisingly, Koi Tower.

Nie Mingjue stood atop the decadent structure, and the steep scowl on his face did nothing to deter the enthusiasm of everyone who passed him. Every time Nie Mingjue stepped somewhere, the crowds would part, people on both sides bowing and greeting "Chifeng-zun" with excitement and awe.

'*Such a show of extravagance is going to reach even the heavens,*' Wei Wuxian thought with a little chuckle as his incorporeal form followed after Nie Minjgue. '*All these people both fear and respect Nie Mingjue. There were quite a lot of people who feared me too, but you'd be hard pressed to find someone who respected me.*'

'*Well, I can't say I'm surprised by that,*' Nie Mingjue thought. '*Putting aside what we found out about the future, Wei Wuxian is using demonic cultivation. Of course that isn't accepted.*'

(Because that was so very *different* from Nie Mingjue's own cultivation, huh?)

'*We use resentful animals; Wei Wuxian uses the corpses of humans. That's completely different! Our simulated versions don't know the reason he was forced into creating that. They can be okay with one without being okay about the other-*'

(But Wei Wuxian had been encouraged to use it as a weapon of war. It was only after the war, when he wasn't useful anymore, that people really started to disapprove.)

Which made sense. Demonic cultivation was dangerous, and people tended to fear what they didn't understand.

(But a very, very tiny part of Nie Mingjue then recalled Meng Yao's face, when the Nie cultivators had gossiped and ridiculed him behind his back, using his parentage as the justification for their scorn.)

(That face then transitioned into Wei Wuxian's, as he bit his tongue and kept his silence while Madam Yu brought his parents up in her rants time and time again.)

‘*...I wonder what people’s reactions would be if I was the one who had brought demonic cultivation to the war.*’

That thought remained unanswered, however, as the simulated Nie Mingjue reached his destination. There was a table set up with three glasses, and Meng Yao and Lan Xichen stood on each side. In the audience, Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji, Nie Huaisang, Jin Zixuan, and Jin Guangshan stood in wait. Nie Mingjue’s eyes turned briefly to Meng Yao. There was a bit of a tension there, but it lacked the clear dismissal of their last interaction. The reason why became clear a moment later, when Nie Mingjue turned his eyes towards Lan Xichen and relaxed.

“Ah,” Lan Xichen realized. “My other self must have insisted on the two of them interacting a bit.”

“W-well, I can understand why you would want your friends to get along,” Jiang Yanli pointed out.

Lan Xichen nodded to her once in thanks but remained somewhat grim. He couldn’t figure out yet just how big of a mistake his other self was making. He was still firm in the belief that it wouldn’t be fair to punish Meng Yao for actions he hadn’t taken yet, but….

He really did need to watch closely.

The voices of this simulated trio were completely different. Where Nie Mingjue’s was gruff and confident, Lan Xichen’s was calm and assured, and Meng Yao — now, apparently, Jin Guangyao — was jovial and performative. And yet, in this moment, they all spoke as one.

Together, they continued, “We hereby take an oath to become sworn brothers. We vow to not seek fame and fortune, and vow to be of one heart and one mind, and to help those in need. May the heavens and the earth be our witness. If one were to think otherwise, they shall face a thousand accusing fingers and be torn limb from limb.”

Nie Huaisang remained silent as he listened to the words being spoken. He had to be, because it was all he could to keep himself from laughing at Jin Guangyao's too-calm expression.

‘*We vow to not seek fame and fortune, and to help those in need?*’ he mentally repeated, wishing, once again, that he had his usual fans. ‘*If what Qin Su implied about their son is at all true… if Jin Guangyao killed his own son and framed his political opponents so that he could put up the Wen Sect’s supervisory offices under the name ‘watchtowers,’ then… well, considering how good that snake is at lying, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that those were just empty words to him.*’

A voice that sounded like a strange mix between his brother’s and Lan Wangji’s began lecturing him to not jump to conclusions about Jin Guangyao’s actions without sufficient proof. Nie Huaisang thought for a bit, acknowledged their point, then subsequently wrote it off.

(He was open to changing his mind if something new was discovered, but, for now... Jin Guangyao's interaction with his wife didn't exactly leave much open to interpretation.)

The scene transitioned away. The decorations flooding the streets made it clear that the flower banquet was not yet over, and yet it felt like many things had changed. Across the street from where Nie Mingjue was, beside the base of the glittering Koi Tower, stood Jin Guangyao.

'*Now that he's become sworn brothers with Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen, he's been accepted into the clan,*' Wei Wuxian thought, observing Jin Guangyao's golden edged robes and the vermillion mark between his brows. The spark of cleverness in his eyes was still there, but there was a new aura of calmness that hadn't ever been present before.

Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue both frowned, disliking the framing of their sworn brotherhood — something they wished could be just a personal exchange — as such a political move. On the other hand, they knew full well that *everything* they did was political. In addition, both of them had been disgusted by the slanderous comments people whispered behind Jin Guangyao's back and wanted to feel like it was a good thing that Jin Guangshan had accepted him.

(But, much like Jin Zixuan, they couldn't help but feel like something was off about that.)

Then, Jin Guangyao shifted, and the watchers were able to see who was with him.

"*What?!*"

"No, no-"

"That damn-"

"Xue Yang?!"

And indeed, there was a significantly younger Xue Yang standing before them, also wearing the robe of Sparks Amidst Snow. Although his features were still cute and strangely childlike, he was already rather tall — a young master full of youthful talent. They seemed to be talking about something amusing, Jin Guangyao gesturing with a smile, and Xue Yang bursting into laughter right after.

"W-well," Jiang Yanli cleared her throat. "I suppose Xue Yang hasn't attacked the Chang family yet, right? And… even Xiao Xingchen enjoyed spending time with him, at one point."

"Yeah…" Jin Zixuan nodded. "I-I guess."

Xue Yang looked around, glancing at the surrounding cultivators — eyeing them like they were pieces of trash. When he saw Nie Mingjue, he had none of the fear other scoundrels would have; instead, he grinned, flashing his canine teeth. Noticing that Nie Mingjue's expression was rapidly darkening, Jin Guangyao whispered something in Xue Yang's ear, causing the younger to skip off in another direction shortly after.

“I didn’t think anyone would be able to control that ruffian,” Madam Jin commented. It was a little hard to tell if she meant that as an insult or a compliment.

Tilting his head in consideration, Nie Huaisang asked, “Say, did we ever find out where Xue Yang’s body was taken to? We assumed that the masked guy wanted the Stygian Tiger Seal, right?”

“Oh?” Jin Guangshan looked over, surprisingly interested. “What are you suggesting?”

“Nothing, nothing!” Nie Huaisang wailed. “I just thought it was weird that he and Jin Guangyao are friends! I thought maybe — I don’t know — maybe it wasn’t for the Seal. Maybe they’re just helping each other out as friends!”

“If it was because they wanted to help him, the masked perpetrator would have intervened *before* Xue Yang’s arm had gotten cut off. There’s no point in rescuing a corpse already starting to cool,” Madam Yu scoffed, very carefully not thinking about how far above and beyond Wen Ning went to recover her and her husband’s bodies.

“Ah, I guess so,” Nie Huaisang acknowledged.

And yet, a seed had been planted. ‘*They clearly know each other. What if Jin Guangyao is involved in even more of what’s happened than we’ve realized.’*

Jin Zixuan swallowed nervously.

In the meantime, Jin Guangyao had walked over to Nie Mingjue and was now greeting him respectfully: “Da-ge.”

“Who was that?” Nie Mingjue asked, not bothering to respond to his greetings.

Jin Guangyao opened his mouth, then hesitated for a moment before finally answering, “Xue Yang.”

“Xue Yang of Kuizhou?”

Jin Guangyao nodded.

“I guess he’s already infamous,” Madam Jin muttered, sighing at the fact that her sect was welcoming someone like that with open arms.

In further confirmation, Nie Mingjue knit his brows together and demanded, “Why are you wasting your time with someone like him?”

“The LanlingJin Sect recruited him.”

A bit of an awkward silence passed.

Even after all this, they still had no idea how much Jin Guangyao knew of Xue Yang’s true character. He could be indeed unaware and interacting with him positively as a result. He

could be aware but forced to associate politely with Xue Yang due to his father's orders. He might be aware of Xue Yang's nature but indifferent to or even approving of the implications.

As always with Jin Guangyao, they really didn't know.

"Please excuse me," Jin Guangyao bowed. "I need to take care of a few matters for our guests."

He scurried off, not willing to speak to Nie Mingjue any longer. Sect Leader Nie shook his head and turned around, and at that moment, the blue form of Wei Wuxian's soul seemed to light up.

'*Lan Zhan!*' he thought.

"Awwww," Nie Huaisang, Lan Xichen, and Jiang Yanli all said simultaneously. Lan Wangji's ears flushed pink and his heart skipped a beat, but he recognized the change in his heart rate as a result of happiness, rather than embarrassment.

(A thought which *did*, in fact, make him quite embarrassed.)

Meanwhile, the simulated Lan Wangji showed no such embarrassment, walking side by side with Lan Xichen with his usual calm expression. The two jades of Lan stood together, one carrying a xiao and the other, a guqin.

Wei Wuxian gave an impressed whistle.

'*Lan Xichen's warm smile contrasts against Lan Zhan's cold dignity, but they are nonetheless equally stunning and similarly poised; truly the same color, yet two different airs. No wonder other people always startle and exclaim before such a sight.*'

Lan Wangji had turned two shades darker, and even Lan Xichen seemed caught off guard by Wei Wuxian's flowery prose. Poetry had never been difficult for Wei Wuxian (much to Jiang Cheng's frustration and Nie Huaisang's enjoyment), but the unexpectedness of it managed to catch them off guard.

(And Jin Guangshan might not feel attraction towards his same sex, but Koi Tower was proof enough that he appreciated beauty in any form. He nodded along with Wei Wuxian, giving the pair a long, considering look.)

'*The current Lan Zhan still has a few traces of naivete around the edges, but his cold expression is still the same!*'

Wei Wuxian's eyes remained glued to Lan Wangji's face, as though he was unable to move away. Eventually, it seemed like something was starting to rise up within him, and he finally couldn't take it anymore.

'*Ah, Lan Zhan, I've missed you so much!*' he thought, zooming over and wrapping his arms around Lan Wangji's neck, practically squealing as he hopped close and squeezed.

Jiang Cheng did a double-take, then looked away at once.

Lan Wangji's blush darkened even further, but he couldn't help himself from thinking back, '*I missed you too.*'

Then, an unexpected voice called out: "Sect Leader Nie, Sect Leader Lan."

Everyone turned towards the source of that voice and found the new Sect Leader Jiang there, the Yiling Patriarch standing close behind. Jiang Cheng's sword was at his waist, but at Wei Wuxian's there was only a single flute, made of bamboo from the Burial Mounds.

Lan Wangji frowned, '*Why doesn't he go back to using his sword? I understand why he wouldn't during the war and why he wouldn't while in his new body, without a golden core, but why now?*'

No answer came. The real Wen Qing, Wen Ruohan, and Nie Huaisang, who had their own suspicions, didn't know Lan Wangji's thoughts, and so were instead distracted by the humongous blush that took over the blue illusion of Wei Wuxian.

'*Ah, I'm so embarrassed!*' he thought, watching his past self give a nod of respect to the gathered Sect Leaders. '*I look so pretentious! I can't believe I did this! I wish I could go back in time and beat myself up!*'

"Huh?" several people gaped.

"A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked. "I… I think you're doing fine?"

Sure, they could somewhat see what he meant. The Yiling Patriarch was powerful, and clearly knew it. He seemed slightly arrogant and took on a confrontational appearance.

Still, Wei Wuxian's reaction seemed a bit much. Except-

Except….

"...We know how he became that way," Wen Qing slowly pointed out. "We were with him every step of the way and found we agree with… almost every choice he made…."

(She was still definitely unwilling to talk about her core theory.)

"We're on his side, but…."

She and the other watchers looked back again, at the 'Yiling Patriarch' before them. Now that they were analyzing more closely, they could see that he actually wasn't standing "close behind," but rather side by side with Jiang Cheng. And that had felt good — right — because Madam Yu had said over and over again that Wei Wuxian was just the son of a servant, but they all knew he was so much more than that.

(Some of them were even slowly starting to figure out that it wasn't a shameful feature to have in the first place.)

But, forgetting that for a moment, and forgetting how much they trusted and respected Wei Wuxian….

“I suppose I can see what he means,” Jin Guangshan acknowledged. “Wei-gongzi’s definitely not trying to make friends right now. It would be less strange if it wasn’t such a bit difference from how he used to be. As for the lack of Suibian… it seems he still refuses to use a sword even now.”

Nie Mingjue frowned, “...I don’t see why he wouldn’t carry his sword now. For common courtesy, at least.”

“It's quite strange, isn't it?” Nie Huaisang shrugged. His gaze drifted back.

Madam Yu seemed to be moving in a far more positive direction than Nie Huaisang had expected. The theory Wen Qing, Wen Ruohan, and Nie Huaisang had come to might not have as many consequences as he'd initially expected, especially if Madam Yu managed to come to that conclusion herself. He waited for a moment, curious over whether she would start to think about it.

Unfortunately, Madam Yu didn’t so much as blink.

(Wei Wuxian was the Yiling Patriarch. The watchers had seen the kind of things he could do. Power like that made him dangerous. Subconsciously, most of the watchers had difficulty even *conceiving* of the idea that someone so powerful might not have a golden core.)

Lan Wangji, however, gained a thoughtful look. Unfortunately, only Lan Xichen would be able to tell.

The time it had taken the watchers to discuss that had been more than enough time for Jiang Cheng and Nie Mingjue to finish their greetings to each other. Neither had anything unnecessary to say, so the two soon began to move their separate ways. The black robed Yiling Patriarch glanced around a bit, before his eyes landed on Lan Wangji.

The second jade shook off his thoughts at once, standing alert and staring at the scene before him.

But, before Wei Wuxian was able to say anything, Jiang Cheng returned to his side. He had noticed Wei Wuxian not following him when he started to walk off and had come back to get his second in command. Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Wei Wuxian quickly fell into step beside his sect leader.

“Chifeng-zun is so much taller than you,” he whispered with a grin.

“Shut up.” Jiang Cheng glared. “You’re really asking to die.”

“How do you always manage to interrupt them at the worst possible times?” Jin Zixuan wondered.

Jiang Cheng scowled belligerently: “I’m not *interrupting.* Wei Wuxian and I were doing something already, until he started acting all weird.”

Sure, Wei Wuxian was happy around Lan Wangji, but that was in the future when he and Jiang Cheng were enemies. Right now-

“Ah, Jiang-xiong,” Nie Huaisang tutted a few times, shaking his head. “You have a lot to learn.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

“Why does Wei Ying not carry his sword?” the simulated Nie Mingjue asked.

The real Nie Mingjue had, in fact, asked that exact same question just a short while ago.

However, the watchers all couldn’t help but tense at the cold, untrusting tone the simulated one used.

“Carrying a sword was a sign of etiquette,” Jin Ling explained to them, as if any of them could somehow be unaware. “It was especially important for powerful sects and extremely rude to do otherwise. Not that Wei Wuxian ever bothers.”

“I mean, he’s the Yiling Patriarch,” Ouyang Zizhen pointed out in a not-quite-hushed whisper. “I don’t think anyone’s going to be looking for his sword when he has his flute.”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes.

“Actually, Senior Wei often carries his sword,” Lan Sizhui revealed. “Ever since he started training with it again, he started bringing it everywhere. He just…”

“Thinks it’s funny to keep it hidden,” Lan Jingyi concluded. “Since then he can pretend to be all weak and defenseless in front of Hanguang-jun. It’s his go-to set-up for when he wants to dramatically collapse into Hanguang-jun’s arms.”

““Ah,”” Jin Ling and Ouyang Zizhen both hummed in understanding.

Lan Wangji’s ears flushed bright red.

Right as his other self finally managed to respond, “He probably forgot to bring it.”

“He would forget something like this?”

Lan Wangji didn’t even blink as he replied, “It’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

The memory of Wei Wuxian wasn’t here to hear Lan Wangji say that.

But the blue illusion of Wei Wuxian was.

‘*Well, well, well, bad mouthing me behind my back?*’ he thought, bouncing around to lean over Lan Wangji’s shoulder, draping himself across Hanguang-jun’s back as if unable to contain his excitement. ‘*I’ve caught you now!*’

“Mn,” Lan Wangji said quietly, almost nodding in agreement.

Feeling a need to elaborate, Lan Xichen smiled, “Young Master Wei has explained that he doesn’t see a point in caring about redundant formalities. Putting aside not bringing his sword, if he decides one day to stop wearing clothes, what can anyone do to stop him? Or so he’s claimed.”

“I… what-”

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng screeched, cheeks flushing in embarrassment.

(Lan Wangji was absolutely *not* thinking about what had just been described.)

Meanwhile, Madam Yu sighed, rubbing at her temples as she muttered, “No sense of decorum at all.”

In a far more polite expression of the same sentiment, Lan Xichen concluded, “He’s truly youthful.”

Wei Wuxian’s illusionary form seemed to blush, looking away from the scene awkwardly as he thought, ‘*Well, I suppose there’s nothing I can say against that.*’

Then, almost too quietly to be heard, Lan Wangji muttered, “How frivolous.”

The words were extremely soft, as though only directed at himself, but they made Wei Wuxian flinch slightly, as though unable to handle them.

“Hm?” Lan Xichen suddenly straightened, as if just realizing something. “Wangji, why are you still here?”

Somewhat confused, Lan Wangji calmly responded, “You are here, so I am too.”

“Why have you not gone to converse with Wei Wuxian yet? He’ll soon be gone.”

‘*Hm?* Wei Wuxian thought. *’Did Lan Zhan have something to say to me?’*

“Wha — Xichen!” Lan Qiren suddenly shouted. “What do you think you're doing? Wangji's relationship with Wei Wuxian is none of your business!"

Jiang Cheng frowned deeply. On the other hand-

“Well done, Lan-gongzi,” Madam Jin declared. “Honestly, with how complicated the situation between them has become… Lan-er-gongzi, in our world, you really must communicate to him that you’re worried about his health, and not the demonic cultivation.”

Lan Qiren jumped slightly at those words, knowing that his own (previous) stance on demonic cultivation was a large part of the reason Wei Wuxian misunderstood it that way.

"I suppose that's part of why it works out so well that A-Xian came back to life when he did," Jiang Yanli commented. "Looking for the corp… for Chifeng-zun's body parts has given them a lot of time to just interact with each other."

And they had all seen first hand just how big of a difference that made.

And then, before anything more could be said, there was a loud clamor from the other side of the base.

"Jin Zixuan!" Wei Wuxian's voice shouted, surprising the blue illusion of himself. "Have you forgotten about the things you've done and said?! What do you mean by this?"

The simulated Jin Zixuan fumed: "I was asking Sect Leader Jiang, not you. And the one I was asking about was Jiang-guniang, not you. How are you related?"

Jin Zixuan wilted, and Jiang Yanli consolingly motioned out patting him on the head.

"Well said! How is my shijie related to you?! Back then, who was the one who couldn't see-"

"Sect Leader Jiang!" Jin Zixuan addressed instead. "This is my Sect's Flower banquet and your sect's disciple! Are you going to control him or not?!"

Having come close enough to see, Lan Xichen wondered, "Why are they arguing again?"

Jin Zixuan jumped at those words too and wilted further when he heard Madam Jin giving a long, drawn-out sigh.

Lan Wangji appeared stuck between going toward the conflict and staying where he was. Then, just as he seemed to make up his mind to move, Sect Leader Jiang's voice rang out:

"Wei Wuxian, you can just shut your mouth," he hissed. "Young Master Jin, I'm sorry. My sister is doing quite well, thank you for your concern. We can talk about this some other time."

"Next time?" Wei Wuxian repeated. "There is no 'next time.' Whether or not she's doing well isn't any of his business, either! Who does he think he is?!"

He turned around and left, ignoring Jiang Cheng's call of "What are you doing? Get back here!"

Watching this, Madam Yu pursed her lips, torn. On one hand, she couldn't believe what an embarrassment Wei Wuxian was being. A ~~son of a servant~~ disciple picking a fight with a Sect heir was already bad enough, but he was even interfering in her daughter's to-be husband.

This was the couple that would give her Jin Ling; how dare Wei Wuxian try to tear them apart? And the real Jiang Yanli had been so happy with Jin Zixuan, as they watched the simulation.

On the other hand, that was only the real Jin Zixuan. The simulated one — the one in that timeline — was the man who had made her daughter cry over and over and over again, without so much as a real apology. Sure, he clearly felt badly about the soup incident, but after what he'd done he *deserved* some of this pushback and resistance. With just the information the twenty year old Wei Wuxian had, Madam Yu might have made the same decision.

So, in summary, she had no idea what she felt about this scene.

Madam Jin, on the other hand, content in her knowledge that Jin Ling would be born anyways, reveled in the struggle her son was confronted with. 'See?' her gaze seemed to say. 'This is what happens when you don't listen to me.'

Lan Wangji sent Jin Zixuan a comforting look, knowing full well the kind of embarrassment Jin Zixuan was experiencing.

But the simulated Jiang Cheng was far more firm in his own stance, shouting, "Wei Wuxian! Where do you think you're going?!"

"Anywhere is fine!" Wei Wuxian shouted back. "Just don't let me see that face of his. I never wanted to come anyways! You can deal with whatever's here yourself."

Having been abandoned by Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng's face clouded over.

And the real Jiang Cheng frowned as well, but for completely different reasons. He had seen their relationship in the far-future and had known from the beginning that it almost couldn't be more different from the one they had now. He had seen the start of what brought about that change — Lan Wangji, the Xuanwu, the burning of Lotus Pier ~~and the way Jiang Cheng had *choked him* for it~~ — but now he was starting to see the effects.

'*Still,*' he thought. '*Is it really too much for Wei Wuxian to just bring his sword?*'

At that moment however, Jin Guangyao passed by. He had been tasked with fixing all sorts of problems throughout the banquet, so when he saw the expressions on everyone's faces, he immediately called out, "Young Master Wei, please wait!"

Wei Wuxian's face was dark, and he wasn't paying attention to anyone's calls. He continued marching out. His path led him directly by Lan Wangji, who reached out toward him. But, right as Wei Wuxian got within reaching distance, Lan Wangji hesitated and pulled back. The two brushed by each other without speaking a word.

"It really is strange to see just how different their relationship is in the future," Jin Guangshan commented idly.

Jin Guangyao couldn't catch up. He sighed, turning his gaze to the ground.

“And there he goes…. Ah, Sect Leader Jiang, what should I do?” he asked.

“Don’t mind him,” Jiang Cheng said at once, forcing away the darkness in his expression. “Just look at how impolite he is. He’s used to getting away with this sort of thing at home.”

He then turned toward Jin Zixuan and began talking with him amicably.

Nie Mingjue had very little interest in this, however, and so didn’t stick around any longer. The blue illusion of Wei Wuxian sighed, grateful. It was embarassing enough to watch his past self even without the argument between him and Jin Zixuan.

The watchers understood completely.

(Jin Zixuan especially.)

The Jin heir could sympathize with his older self. He had made mistakes in his interactions with Jiang Yanli too (though much smaller ones than his simulated version had), and if Wei Wuxian was preventing him from making that up to her, he would be frustrated too. But….

But, Jin Zixuan couldn’t help but glance back to where his father was. The man stood close to Wen Ruohan, barely having moved from that position even as the simulation had shown atrocity after atrocity from the Wens. He then looked at his mother, who was so indescribably *unhappy* in her marriage that she had practically become a supporter of Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji just to see a healthy relationship form.

Jin Ziuan wasn’t his father. He wasn’t even *like* his father.

But he had grown up wanting to be. Not in this way, maybe, but certainly in others. Jin Guangshan was a competent Sect Leader. He had made a powerful alliance with Wen Ruohan (and wouldn’t needlessly break it, no matter how many lives that cost). Jin Guangshan had made the Jin Sect prosper (and then used that money to buy himself women). Jin Guangshan was cautious in war, not starting fights unnecessarily (meaning Jin Zixuan was the Jin’s representative during the war, with his father staying behind in Koi Tower).

And then, slowly, Jin Zixuan looked into the distance, where Meng Yao was running from place to place to deal with any issues that occurred. He looked at the golden robes on Jin Guangyao’s body and recalled the blinding smile that appeared when Jin Guangshan acknowledged him.

And then he recalled the casual ease in the future Jin Guangyao’s expression as he terrified Qin Su out of her mind.

Meng Yao had been far from a perfect person, but working under Wen Ruohan for years, even as a spy, had most definitely not made him better.

(And now the feeling Jin Zixuan had initially thought was jealousy came back, and he instead identified it as dread. Because, as much as he didn’t want to admit it, he was starting to think working under Jin Guangshan had made Jin Guangyao worse too.)

The world before them shifted, moving forward in time, and Jin Ling's voice announced: "Qinghe Nie, The Unclean Realm."

Nie Mingjue sat on a mat. Before him was Lan Xichen, who had laid a guqin flat across his lap. Lan Xichen brushed his fingers over the strings, expertly weaving the notes together into song.

🎵♩♪♩🎵♪🎵🎵♪

The last note was played, and Lan Xichen allowed the vibrations of the strings to come to a stop.

Jin Guangyao laughed: "Well, now that I've heard Er-ge's guqin skills, I might as well smash my guqin the moment I get home."

"Your skills are also quite impressive outside of Gusu," Lan Xichen commented. "Were you taught by your mother?"

He shook his head and answered, "No, I taught myself by watching her. She never taught me such things, focusing instead on reading and writing and bringing over a handful of swords and cultivation guides to help me practice."

Lan Xichen nearly did a double take, asking, "Swords and cultivation guides?"

"Er-ge, you've seen them before, haven't you? Those small booklets sold by common folk, filled with jumbled sketches of human figures and deliberately mystifying captions. Anyways, all of them are scams," Jin Guangyao concluded. "They're meant to trick ignorant children and innocent women like my mother. You won't lose anything by practicing them, but you definitely won't gain anything either. But, how could my mother have known that? She bought them no matter how expensive they were, telling me that when I met my father in the future, I had to know as much as possible so as to not fall behind. All of her money was spent on this."

Wen Ruohan frowned slightly at those words, considering them carefully.

Meng Yao had said something to that effect quite a few times. And with the rumors about his first attempted entrance into Koi Tower, a very clear picture was painted. His mother was probably the person he cared about most, given how much affection he spoke of her with. And she had told him practically every day about how wonderful the Jin Sect was, how noble his father was, and how perfect his life would be if he could just prove himself to be a useful cultivator.

That determination had been obvious from the beginning, when he went on errands for those worthless brats in the Nie Sect, just to gain a little favor from them.

Yes, the more Wen Ruohan thought about it, the more certain he was. A man like Meng Yao was too ambitious — too determined — to ever settle for anything less than perfection. His mother had promised him that perfection would come with gaining his father's approval as a member of the Jin Sect. It didn't matter how well Wen Ruohan treated him or how poorly Jin

Guangshan did. Wen Ruohan could save Meng Yao's life as many times as he wanted; if Meng Yao saw a chance to gain Jin Guangshan's favor, he would take it. The future Wen Ruohan was a fool for thinking otherwise.

And yet, was Meng Yao really happy there?

Wen Ruohan thought about the scornful gazes he had seen directed Jin Guangyao's way. It was certainly better than before (he was a member of the Jin Sect; no one would dismiss him so openly), but it was far from perfect. One had to look no further than Jin Guangyao's name to realize that.

*Guang*yao. His courtesy name was just his original name with a prefix added — and not even the right prefix! Jin Guangshan had to accept him because of the political situation following Wen Ruohan's death, but he was doing everything in his power to push Jin Gunagyao out of the line of succession.

It was possible that Jin Guangshan was simply worried about Jin Zixuan's rights as heir. Maybe he didn't want the son he had raised to suddenly feel threatened. Maybe, as he got to know Meng Yao, he would start to care more.

But, given what Wen Ruohan knew of the man, that was unlikely.

He rubbed his brows.

"What is wrong with you?" Wen Ruohan couldn't help but mutter. An insanely talented, unfalteringly loyal boy was dropped into his lap, and Jin Guangshan was going to do everything he could to stifle that potential. How had Wen Ruohan ended up with Wen Chao, while Jin Guangshan got Meng Yao? The Jiangs had made the exact same mistake with Wei Wuxian. Why on earth would someone work so hard to break down their most loyal soldier?

He really, truly, couldn't understand them at all.

Meanwhile, the simulated Lan Xichen had reached a comforting hand out toward Jin Guangyao, saying, "You're very talented, to have learned so much simply from watching others. If a master could offer you advice, you would make rapid progress."

Jin Guangyao grinned: "A master is right before my eyes, but I wouldn't dare to trouble him."

"Why not? Younger master, please sit."

Madam Jin tensed at the term, but, eventually, had to concede. Jin Guangyao was accepted by the Jin Sect; he indeed was a young master now.

~~As he should have been from the beginning, given who his father was.~~

But what about her A-Xuan? He didn't deserve to have to be reminded of what kind of a creature his father was. If they would all just stay out of her family's lives-

Which meant staying in sects where they were mocked for their heritage, or in the Mo family, where conditions were even worse.

(Whatever she felt about the matter, she couldn't say they deserved that.)

"What would you like to teach me, master Lan?" Jin Guangyao asked, the title coming out teasingly.

"Hmm," Lan Xichen paused for a moment before his eyes fell on Nie Mingjue, whose tense posture and knitted brows belayed his stress. "Then… how about the Purification Tone?"

"What?" Lan Qiren gaped.

Jin Guangyao's eyes lit up, but, before he could speak, Nie Mingjue interjected, "The Purification Tone is an exclusive teaching of the Gusu Lan Clan. It isn't meant to be leaked to outsiders."

Lan Xichen simply smiled, however, explaining, "The Purification Tone is different from the Eradication Tone in that it can be used to clear one's mind. How selfish would it be to withhold such a therapeutic technique? Besides, why would teaching it to our third brother be considered leaking it?"

Lan Qiren frowned, wanting to protest, but hesitating a moment later. He didn't trust Jin Guangyao. None of them could after seeing how well he could hide the truth. But, just by going off what Lan Xichen knew, the choice Lan Xichen was making couldn't be considered anything but righteous.

"I… Uncle," Lan Xichen began, feeling a need to justify himself even after what his other self said.. "I'm-"

Lan Qiren shook his head, and, when Lan Xichen paused, explained, "I do not disagree with your choice. And besides, the Purification Tone is a peaceful, healing technique. Informing Jin Guangyao of it can't have any consequences beyond the spreading of that information, which, as your other self said, may in fact be a good thing."

Lan Xichen relaxed, smiling again.

Wen Ruohan personally thought Lan Qiren was being a bit overly-optimistic, but he refrained from commenting on the matter.

The same was true of Nie Mingjue, who withdrew his objection upon seeing how set Lan Xichen was on his choice.

The sun set then rose again, then set and rose and set and rose. Several days passed by in a matter of seconds, bringing them to a secure courtyard in the center of the Qinghe Nie compound. The trees rustled in the wind, and a few pants of exertion came from a familiar face.

Nie Huaisang stood in the center of the courtyard, holding a large saber in the air. Well, saying he was "holding" it might be a little too generous; the shaking of his legs and arms under the weight of the saber led to him teetering back and forth, bouncing this way and that by the saber's weight.

"Huh," Jin Zixuan blinked. "I don't think I've ever seen you hold any kind of weapon before."

Giving a loud whine, Nie Huaisang protested, "Because I don't like them! Stop watching!"

His other self attempted a few swings, but, rather than him wielding the saber, the way he would constantly be flung after it made it seem more like the saber was wielding him.

Nie Mingjue groaned.

"Da-ge!" Nie Huaisang protested.

"Come on now, Da-ge," Lan Xichen added in. "At least he's practicing."

The reason why was revealed a moment later. The watchers were zoomed out, allowing them to see Nie Mingjue and Jin Guangyao watching carefully from the sides. Where Meng Yao had been ecstatic at the one-on-one advice Nie Mingjue had offered him, Nie Huaisang was very much *not.*

He panted a few times, struggling to raise the saber once again.

Nie Mingjue wanted to sigh, though he managed to keep it internal this time. Lan Xichen was right; if Nie Mingjue sighed every time Huaisang tried to practice, he would want to practice even less. Still, Nie Mingjue was leaving him in charge of the whole sect. He should at least be *somewhat* able to defend himself for when he had to deal with sect politics without Nie Mingjue's protection.

Then again, the future Nie Huaisang, while not strong, did at least seem content with his life. Maybe Huaisang didn't need him as much as Nie Mingjue thought he did.

Regardless, at the point in time the simulation was displaying, Nie Huaisang was getting his brother's full attention. He tried for a few more seconds, but, soon enough, gave up and let the saber fall to his side.

"Da-ge," he complained. "Time is up. We should take a break."

"You just had a break half an hour ago! Keep practicing. You're not allowed to stop until you've mastered it!"

Two, simultaneous, dawn-out groans came from the two Nie Huaisangs at those words, and the real one beside them seemed to be trying to melt into his chair in protest.

The color of leaves on the trees changed from a vibrant green to a fiery yellow-red, and a door slammed open.

“Ah!” Nie Huaisang jumped, looking up from the fan he was tenderly holding to see his brother storming in. A dozen folding fans were flattened out before him, lined in gold and displayed for him to observe at his leisure. He had been muttering to himself as he compared the inscriptions on each one.

But now, Nie Mingjue had come in.

“Nie Huaisang!”

The real Nie Huaisang jumped as well, and even Nie Mingjue seemed taken aback by the level of anger in his own voice. As far as he remembered, the only people he used that tone with were the Wens.

“B-b-brother!” Nie Huaisang gasped out, having fallen to his knees from the surprise and terror.

“Where is your saber?!”

“In… in my room.” Nie Huaisang looked this way and that. “No, in the school grounds… no, no, let me think-”

“You bring a dozen fans wherever you go, yet you don’t even know where your saber is?!!”

Nie Huaisang was very, very glad Wen Xu and Wen Chao had left the simulation already. If one of them had laughed at this scene, his Da-ge would have really blown a fuse.

“I-I’ll go find it right now!” Nie Huaisang offered.

“There’s no need! Even if you find it, you won’t get anything out of having it. Go burn all of those!”

All the color drained out of Nie Huaisang’s face, and he hurriedly swept them all into his arms, protesting, “No, brother! All of these are gifts!”

“Da-ge!” the real Nie Huaisang objected as well. “I’ll practice! I will! Don’t burn them!”

Feeling awkward about having to do this in front of everyone, Nie Mingjue nonetheless forced himself to nod, patting the area around Nie Huaisang’s head a few times.

“Alright,” he said. “But you *will* need to practice.”

Nie Huaisang wilted.

The simulated Nie Mingjue reacted quite differently:

“Gifts?!” he demanded, slamming his hand on the table and causing it to crack. “Who gave them to you?! Tell them to get out of here right now!”

“I gave them,” a distant voice said.

Jin Guangyao walked in from outside the hall, and Nie Huaisang lit up. His knight in shining armor was here.

The real Nie Huaisang, on the other hand, darkened considerably.

"Ah," he said, slowly. "I've changed my mind, Da-ge. Burn away."

A sudden awkwardness had come over Nie Mingjue as well, and he fell silent once more. Lan Xichen frowned, but, understanding Nie Mingjue's emotions, didn't have anything to say.

'*In reality, it's not that Jin Guangyao can calm Nie Mingjue's anger,*' Wei Wuxian thought, watching his once-schoolmate hurriedly hide behind his 'San-ge.' '*It's just that, whenever Jin Guangyao comes, all of Nie Mingjue's anger gets directed at him instead, meaning he has no presence of mind to scold Nie Huaisang. There's nothing inaccurate about calling Jin Guangyao Nie Huaisang's knight in shining armor.*'

Thus, Nie Huaisang was absolutely delighted, greeting Jin Guangyao excitedly as he stepped back out for a moment to grab his precious fans. Seeing Nie Huaisang's reaction, Nie Mingjue's outrage doubled.

"Don't send him those useless things!"

Startled by the loud noise, Nie Huaisang dropped a few of his fans on the ground and had to hurriedly scoop down to make sure none of them were broken. Jin Guangyao knelt down as well, offering some assistance.

"Nie Huaisang's hobbies are quite elegant," he said, giving a calm smile. "He's dedicated to art and calligraphy, and has no propensity for mischief. How can you call such a thing useless?"

"Yes, yes!" Nie Huaisang nodded. "San-ge is right!"

"Ha!" Nie Mingjue laughed. "In cohorts now, are you?"

"Hm," Wen Ruohan hummed to himself, watching the interaction with narrowed eyes. As genuine as the support might seem at first glance, there were a few other possibilities in play for Jin Guangyao's motivations. One of the things he was best at was playing the helpless victim. The more he angered Nie Mingjue — as he surely must be aware this gift would do, especially with him being the sender — the more he would be able to convince Lan Xichen that Sect Leader Nie's anger against him was completely unreasonable. Each act might be a small thing, but, as they built up, the receiver would begin to crumble. In addition, little by little, Jin Guangyao was buying Nie Huaisang's affection. And not just with money, either; he knew Nie Huaisang's hobbies quite well and was defending him in front of Nie Mingjue without question.

On the other hand, there was the chance that none of that was true. Even a master manipulator couldn't be completely separate from human interaction. Maybe he really did

just want to grow closer to Nie Huaisang. Perhaps the gift was a genuine symbol of affection, and Nie Mingjue's temporary anger was worth it to support what Nie Huaisang loved.

Wen Ruohan had always considered himself to be fairly good at reading other people, but Jin Guangyao was stumping him time and time again.

"Perhaps," Nie Mingjue began, acknowledging Jin Guangyao's point, "But Sect Leaders have no need for such a thing."

"I'm not going to be Sect Leader though!" Nie Huaisang shouted. "You can stay it. I'm not doing it!"

Nie Mingjue pursed his lips together tightly.

And there was a collective intake of breath. They knew, now, that the reason Nie Mingjue was so insistent on preparing Nie Huaisang for his position was because he may not have much longer to live. Even if he had a child right now, they would be far too young to take over the position by the time he died, so the role would go to Huaisang anyways.

And yet, to the simulated Nie Huaisang, his brother seemed invincible. He would never even consider such a thought.

Next, Nie Mingjue turned to Jin Guangyao and asked, "What did you come here for?"

"Er-ge said that he gave you a guqin," Jin Guangyao responded, as respectful and pleasant as one could be. "He wanted to have it available near you for whenever he needed to help calm your temper. However, he confessed to me yesterday that, as he recently has become wrapped up in his affairs as Sect Leader, you refuse to let him come. The GusuLan Sect is at a critical point in the reestablishment of the Cloud Recesses, but there's no reason you should be unable to receive treatment for the time being. I'm sure that's why he decided to teach me the Purification Tone. I may not be as skilled as Er-ge, but I believe I'll still be able to provide some assistance."

Both Nie Mingjues sent him a heavy glare. They didn't trust him or his supposed good intentions. It wasn't as though there was anything lacking in the explanation he provided, but they had seen first-hand just how good Jin Guangyao was at making up stories to justify all sorts of outrageous things.

(Wei Wuxian had supposedly done things even worse at Nightless City, and yet Nie Mingjue and the other watchers were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt until they saw the full story. How was it fair to mistrust even the reasonable things Jin Guangyao did?)

(But from what they'd seen so far, *Wei Wuxian* had actually been through extreme circumstances that justified the things he did. And yet, even when unreasonably blamed, he had never tried to justify his behavior, even to himself.)

(But they had somewhat wanted him to explain. Why was it wrong now that Jin Guangyao had done so?)

<(Because he always lied.)

And it appeared the simulated Nie Mingjue felt the same:

"...Just take care of your own business," he said at last, rejecting Jin Guangyao's offer.

Nie Huaisang, however, appeared interested: "Da-ge, what song? Can I listen? Let me tell you, the limited edition you gave me last time was absolutely-"

"Go to your room!" Nie Mingjue shouted.

Nie Huaisang fled at once. Not to his room, mind you, but rather to the central hall, where the additional presents Jin Guangyao had brought him lay. Nie Mingjue scowled, seemingly wanting to protest his brother's complete and unashamed refusal to follow his orders, but just sighed to himself a moment later.

The real Nie Huaisang grinned briefly, knowing his other self had won.

Nie Mingjue glanced over at Jin Guangyao, his eyes falling to the other's dust-covered robes and slightly out-of-breath panting.

'*He must have run here straight from Koi Tower.*'

And, if Jin Guangyao was genuinely trying to help Nie Mingjue here — if he was *truly* trying to make up for what he had done — then Nie Huaisang would have no complaints to give. He might actually be so grateful he'd kowtow before Jin Guangyao, showering him with thanks and praise. Despite Nie Mingjue's refusals and blatant disregard, Jin Guangyao was putting significant effort into improving Nie Mingjue's health. He was practically a saint.

If it was real.

Nie Huaisang sighed internally and heard a quiet external sigh from Lan Xichen, who was stuck in the same mess of thoughts as Nie Huaisang.

And the simulated Nie Mingjue might be following that line of thinking as well.

"Sit," he requested at last, gesturing to the spot he wanted Jin Guangyao to take.

Jin Guangyao complied, but, as he did, he looked over to where Nie Huaisang had departed to and added on, "Da-ge, if you're concerned for Huaisang, softer words would do no harm. Why act like this?"

Madam Jin internally scoffed: '*I can promise that whatever you do to end up with his brother's head affected him far more than nagging ever did. Guangshan uses flowery words almost as well as you do, but the women he leaves always end up damaged beyond repair.*'

But-

"Even when a blade's at his neck, he still acts like this," Nie Mingjue complained. "Looks like he'll always be a good for nothing."

Nie Huaisang didn't flinch.

But Nie Mingjue did.

While the younger brother was perfectly content with that reputation and took actions to encourage it, the elder wished his other self hadn't said it. Especially not to someone who wasn't family — who had killed Nie Wulin — who might use Nie Huaisang's weakness and their fraying relationship *against them*. Only an idiot would say that-

…Nie Mingjue could see what they meant when they said his other self needed to listed to the Pacification Tone.

As Nie Mingjue had come to that conclusion, the rest of the watchers had been listening to the simulated conversation continue.

"It's not that he's a good-for-nothing,"Jin Guangyao disagreed. "It's just that his heart lies somewhere else."

"And you know where his heart lies?"

"Of course, isn't that what I'm best at?" Jin Guangyao smiled. "The only person who I can't discern is you, Da-ge."

Wen Ruohan almost laughed.

'*Yes, that is what you're best at,*' he thought. '*To the point where you were able to simultaneously and flawlessly gain both my and the first jade's favor. Though, I do sympathize with your current plight. I, too, hadn't understood Nie Mingjue well enough to predict how much trouble his Sunshot Campaign would be.*'

He would think about that more carefully, this time.

Even Wei Wuxian seemed to be relating to what Jin Guangyao said.

'*Back when Jin Guangyao was working for him, he tried watching carefully, but Nie Mingjue refused every possible avenue. Women, liquor, riches? He wasn't interested in any of them. Arts, calligraphy, antiques… he saw them as nothing more than piles of ink and mud. The finest green tea leaves and dregs from a roadside booth? There was never any change in Nie Mingjue's expression. Meng Yao tried everything he could to find something Nie Mingjue enjoyed other than saberwork and killing Wen dogs, but he was simply an impenetrable iron wall.*'

"...This is a little sad, Da-ge," Nie Huaisang couldn't help but comment, his lips quirking up.

"Some of us have priorities focused on our actual *work*," Nie Mingjue said back sternly, still not having forgotten the ways Nie Huaisang had behaved at the Cloud Recesses in the early segments.

However, that scolding atmosphere fluctuated when Lan Xichen leaned over and whispered, "Still, Da-ge, Huaisang might have a point. Perhaps you should consider getting a hobby."

“What?! Xichen-”

“Mental health at extremes can affect physical health too,” Wen Qing calmly pointed out. “Especially for those of us who have *a family history of qi deviations*.”

There was nothing Nie Mingjue could say to that. It took all of Nie Huaisang’s self control to keep from cackling.

Shortly after, the simulated Jin Guangyao switched topic toward the reason he had come, asking, “By the way, Da-ge, where is Er-ge’s guqin?”

Nie Mingjue pointed him to the left, and Jin Guangyao moved swiftly to pick up the instrument. He began to play.

🎵🎵♪🎵

The sun dimmed in the sky, progressing forward in time, then became bright again, moving to a later day.

🎵♪🎵♪♪

The sky dimmed, then lit up, then dimmed, then lit up. Jin Guangyao continuing through the Purification Tone with expert skill. Its notes filled the air, and the power of the cultivation attached to it sunk through the watchers’ skin. If it had been powered by resentful energy, some of the watchers may have fallen asleep.

“Jin Guangyao would travel from Lanling to Qinghe every few days, playing the Purification Tone to Chifeng-zun each time,” Sizhui explained. “He tried his hardest, without speaking a single word of complaint. The Purification Tone was indeed effective.”

🎵🎵♪🎵

The watchers nodded, able to feel the traces of resentment in Nie Mingjue calming bit by bit.

“Well,” Wen Qing sighed, “I suppose you’re at least trying to make yourself better.”

As compared to the cold-faced *acceptance* they had found from Nie Mingjue when they first heard of his death, this was vastly preferable. Even the simulated Nie Mingjue had noticed that his reaction to Nie Huaisang’s fans was excessive, and he was now working toward a cure.

Unfortunately, they all knew it wouldn’t work out the way he wanted.

🎵♪🎵♪🎵

As the music continued to play, the watchers were shown flashes of the moments in between. Jin Guangyao and Nie Mingjue conversed somewhat each time, and, slowly, the flashes of hostility there dimmed.

‘*Perhaps re-establishing the Cloud Recesses was just an excuse,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*Maybe, in actuality, Lan Xichen actually wanted to offer them a chance to get closer.*’

♪♪♪♭

Lan Qiren, Lan Xichen, and Lan Wangji all flinched.

“Eh?” Jiang Yanli turned their way. “Is something wrong?”

“...That wasn’t the right note,” Lan Wangji responded. “He made a mistake.”

“Ah, I suppose A-Y… Jin Guangyao is new to this. Even if I wanted to offer them a chance to get closer to each other, I probably should have come to check in on them every once in a while,” Lan Xichen said.

A frown crossed Lan Qiren’s face. The mistakes Jin Guangyao was making were most certainly not the Purification Tone, but, somehow, the new chorus made still sounded slightly familiar to him.

These misplaced notes blended smoothly into the rest of the song, and, as it continued, became nearly unnoticeable. Despite that, the three Lans would still show slight signs of discomfort every time one of them showed up.

Then, an angry shout broke through the peace.

“Sect Leader Nie!”

“Wait-”

The two Jin disciples who tried to intervene were thrown off, and they didn’t dare to stop him after. He marched straight into the Blooming Garden, where Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao were discussing something over a pile of blueprints. Seeing who had barged in, Lan Xichen turned his attention in that direction.

“Da-ge?” he asked.

“Don’t move.”

Nie Huaisang frowned at the tone his brother had used. Nie Mingjue was easily angered, and, even if he knew how to control his temper as Sect Leader, he would also rarely hesitate to confront people he disagreed with. However, what Nie Huaisang was used to was a loud anger, full of (often one-sided) shouting and big, emotional hand motions.

This, right here, was a far more quiet, serious anger.

The kind Huaisang knew better than to oppose.

Slowly, Nie Mingjue turned to Jin Guangyao and ordered, “Come out.”

Jin Guangyao looked at Nie Mingjue, then glanced at Lan Xichen and smiled, requesting, "Er-ge, could you please excuse me this one time? I have some private matters to discuss with Da-ge. I'll have to ask for your explanation at a later time."

Lan Xichen's face clearly displayed his worry, but, presented with Jin Guangyao's request, caved in nonetheless.

As Lan Xichen watched this interaction unfold, he could see quite easily how his other self would instantly view Nie Mingjue as a violent aggressor and Jin Guangyao as an always-appeasing victim.

But, somehow, that didn't seem like the full story this time.

Jin Guangyao followed Sect Leader Nie outside the Blooming Garden, to the very edge of Koi Tower. As soon as they reached that edge, Nie Mingjue spun around and attacked.

"Ah!"

"Hey, what are you doing?!" Jiang Cheng shouted, flabbergasted.

Jin Guangyao dodged the first strike, proving how little effort Nie Mingjue had put into it, and raised a hand toward the surrounding Jin disciples, preventing them from responding.

"Da-ge, why are you so angry?" he asked. "Let's calm down-"

"Where's Xue Yang?!" Nie Mingjue shouted back.

All the watchers froze at that name.

'Xue Yang' was one they would never be able to forget. His tragedy, and the tragedies he inflicted on others, would be seared into their minds until the end of time. Which meant that this was right after Xue Yang had destroyed the Chang family.

The previous Sect Leader Chang had needed some punishment for what he had done. The current Chang family might need to be checked, to ensure that such a thing wouldn't happen again. But killing every last member of the family, down to the youngest child?

'Of course they were equal. My finger was my own, but those lives were other peoples'. Why, they're not even equal. They wouldn't be equal no matter how many of them I killed. It was only around fifty. How could that be equal to one of my fingers?'

And the Jin Sect….

The Jin Sect had protected him even after that.

Jin Zixuan suddenly felt very, very sick.

Meanwhile, Jin Guangyao had responded to Nie Mingjue at once, telling him the story that had been reported to the masses: "Xue Yang? He's already been locked inside the dungeons, imprisoned for life."

"Well clearly not!" Jiang Cheng muttered. "Fuck's sake, didn't they even say that Jin Guangyao killed Xue Yang immediately after he became Sect Leader?"

Unable to resist, Nie Huaisang parroted back, "Well, clearly not."

"What was it you said to me back then?!" Nie Mingjue shouted. "I wanted him to repay blood with blood, and yet you imprisoned him for life?!"

"...As long as he receives his punishment and can't offend again, perhaps paying 'blood for blood' and imprisoning him for life works out the same."

"Can't offend again," Wen Ruohan repeated. "How amusing."

As much as he hated to, Nie Mingjue couldn't help but agree.

"You.. do you even know what he's done?! Things are already like this and you're still defending him?!"

"I didn't defend him," Jin Guangyao disagreed at once. "I was also shocked by what happened to the Chang Sect. How could I have known Xue Yang would kill more than fifty people? But my father is set on defending him-"

"You were shocked?! Who was the one who invited him to the sect?!" Nie Mingjue shouted. "Who was the one that recommended him? Who regarded him so highly that he gained a grand position. Don't use your father as an excuse. How could you have not known what Xue Yang was doing?!"

"Right!" Jin Guangshan added on, spurred by Nie Mingjue's anger. "Honestly, that snake. He thinks that just because he betrayed and killed Sect Leader Wen, he can get away with anything. To think he would try to frame me like that."

Nie Mingjue wanted to nod in agreement. Like his other self, he couldn't tell when Jin Guangyao was lying, so now everything looked like a lie. However, he hesitated.

"...You are still Sect Leader," Lan Wangji calmly pointed out. "If you had insisted on executing Xue Yang, as per your agreement with Sect Leader Nie, then there would be nothing Jin Guangyao could do to counter that."

"Yes, yes," Jin Guangshan waved a hand dismissively. "But, as we saw with Lan-gongzi, Sect Leader Nie, and Sect Leader Wen, that boy has quite the silver tongue. I'm sure he whispered some sort of poison into my ears that changed my mind."

"...Are you sure about that?" Jin Zixuan couldn't help but ask. Jin Guangshan turned toward his son in shock, and Jin Zixuan slapped a hand over his traitorous mouth, unable to believe what he had just said.

And Jin Guangyao continued to insist: "Da-ge, that really was what my father ordered! I couldn't refuse! Now you want me to deal with Xue Yang — what am I supposed to say to him?!"

"There's no need for an explanation. Come back to me with Xue Yang's head in your hand!" he demanded. "Meng Yao… don't speak your pretentious words to me. Your whole act stopped working on me a long time ago!"

For the first time, the watchers were able to see what seemed to be genuine unease flash across Meng Yao's face.

"Honestly, does he know or not?!" Madam Yu snarled. "Why isn't the simulation just showing us what he really feels about Xue Yang. It can display thoughts, this shouldn't be that hard!"

"...Perhaps not knowing for sure is the point," Wen Qing speculated. "It's not as though we'll be able to know what people are thinking after we leave the simulation. With what we know now, what would be the best thing to do with Jin Guangyao?"

The watchers fell silent for a moment in thought.

"Investigating further," Nie Mingjue said at last. "I'm… my other-self is directing all his anger at Jin Guangyao right now. It's clouding my mind. We'd need to deal with Xue Yang first, who's the more immediate threat, then look into it as closely as we can."

Just like the future's Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were doing every time they came across a possible threat.

"The Chang Clan will be the first group we need to deal with," Lan Qiren said next. "We saw first hand what they do. Punishment will be delivered accordingly, regardless of the rank that perpetrator holds."

If someone saw Nie Mingjue's eyes look between Jin Guangshan and Wen Ruohan at those last few words, no one commented.

However, at that moment, Jin Guangyao finally seemed to snap.

"My 'whole act?' What act? Da-ge, you've always yelled at me for being too calculating and dishonorable. You say that you're a proud righteous person, and that you aren't afraid of anything. That proper men shouldn't need to play with schemes! Fine. That's fine. Your background is noble, and your cultivation is high. But what about me? Am I the same as you?!"

Lan Xichen stared, looking back and forth between the simulated Jin Guangyao, the simulated Nie Mingjue, and the real one, standing right beside him. He couldn't tell for sure, but, if he had to guess, he would say the words coming out of Jin Guangyao's mouth right now were the honest truth — in his mind, at least.

This, right here, was what he really felt.

“Firstly, my cultivation is nowhere near the level of yours. When I was born, was anyone around to teach me? Secondly, I have no prominent background. Do you really think I’m in a steady position, here at the Lanling Jin Sect? Do you think I can rise into power the moment Jin Zixuan dies?!”

The real Jin Zixuan flinched at that, and Madam Jin gave off a slight growl. This was exactly why she was so opposed to allowing one of those bastard children into the sect. Of course it was the position of Sect Leader he was after. Those brats were all so greedy for-

For….

“Are you crazy?! Jin Guangshan would rather bring in another illegitimate child than allow me to succeed him! You think that I should be as fearless as you? Well, I’m afraid of everything! You’re right, I’m terrified of other people. Because I’m not like you!”

The words seemed to come in one ear and out the other for Madam Jin, but the feelings — the desperation, the terror, the hate — lingered in her mind. Jin Guangyao wasn’t someone she could ever trust. Madam Jin fully believed that he would kill Jin Zixuan if he thought it would get him more power. Just think of vicious lie he probably told to get rid of Mo Xuanyu-

~~Just think of the conditions Mo Xuanyu had ended up in as a result.~~

Yes, Jin Guangyao was greedy. He was greedy for praise, and for political power.

(Because what would he have, without that?)

(Maybe, if she had just promised them security, her son wouldn’t *be* endangered by them.)

However, Madam Jin was the only one lost in thought at this time. Every other watcher sat up straight, eyes glued to the simulation before them, as Jin Guangyao shouted out his every thought.

“Yes, you can say all that, but I’m nothing like you! Someone whose stomach is full will never believe the pain of those who are starving!”

But the simulated Nie Mingjue was far less sympathetic than the watchers: “In the end, all you’re saying is that you don’t want to kill Xue Yang because you don’t want your position at Koi Tower to waver!”

“Of course I don’t! But, Da-ge, I have always wanted to ask you something. You’ve killed far more people than I, and yet, when I killed just a few cultivators out of desperation, why do you continue to bring it up?!”

Nie Mingjue was so enraged that he began to laugh: “Good! I’ll give you my answer! Countless souls have fallen under my saber, but never due to my own desires! Much less to raise my position in the world!”

“Then, Da-ge, are you saying that all the people you’ve killed deserved their deaths?”

When Nie Mingjue paused for a moment, a sudden spark of courage came over Jin Guangyao and he began to laugh. He walked a few steps closer to Nie Mingjue.

And Nie Huaisang frowned, watching the energy in his brother fluctuate. The longer they had been inside of the simulation, the more sensitive they had become to changes in resentful energy. Where before he would have only been able to see the images being shown in front of him, even Nie Huaisang was now able to notice something was wrong.

“Da-ge?”

“Hm?” Nie Mingjue responded, glancing back briefly. Nie Huaisang trotted over to his brother, phasing through to get even closer than should be physically possible, then stood on his tiptoes to whisper into Nie Mingjue’s ear.

“The song Jin Guangyao is playing for you isn’t working at all. I don’t know if it’s because of his words or other factors, but you seem closer to a qi deviation than ever right now.”

Nie Mingjue frowned at the comment, but didn’t object. He, too, had noticed how volatile and dangerous his other-self’s qi and demeanor was.

“After we leave the simulation, please let someone else handle him,” Nie Huaisang continued. “Even if you know better than to trust the Jin Guangyao of our world, I’d rather you don’t get directly involved in dealing with him.”

“Hm,” was all Nie Mingjue said.

Meanwhile, standing face to face with this tightly-wound Sect Leader Nie, Jin Guangyao whispered with an unnerving level of calm: “Then, Da-ge, may I ask just how you decide if someone deserves death? Are your standards absolutely correct? If I kill one but save hundreds, would the good outweigh the bad, or would I still deserve death? To do great things, sacrifices must happen.”

“What?!” Nie Mingjue snarled.

“Then why don’t you ever sacrifice yourself?” the simulated version snapped back. “Are you more worthy than them? Are you different, somehow?”

Jin Guangyao stared at him for a moment too long, before he quietly whispered, “Yes.”

‘It was only around fifty of them! How could that be equal to one of my fingers?’ Xue Yang asked.

Jin Guangyao looked up, his expression containing some pride, some calmness, and a faint trace of insanity: “Compared to them… yes, of course I’m different!”

Rage took over Nie Mingjue’s form, and the traces of poisonous resentment enveloped him whole.

The sound of a collision rang through the air.

Nie Mingjue had kicked Jin Guangyao, and said sworn brother hadn't resisted at all. He hadn't looked away or flinched as he was sent rolling like a pebble down Koi Tower.

Staring down at the fallen Jin Guangyao, resentment still swirling like a tornado within him, Nie Mingjue hissed, "No wonder, coming from the son of a prostitute."

"What?" Lan Xichen gasped out, unable to believe what he had just heard. Nie Mingjue looked shocked as well, and Wen Ruohan could understand why.

The interactions Nie Mingjue and Jin Guangyao had before everything had gone down proved that Jin Guangyao's family history didn't matter to Nie Mingjue. He didn't consider it shameful, and he respected Jin Guangyao's capabilities regardless. But, when bombarded by how different their moral compasses were, the genuine resentment within him poured out into the thing he knew would hurt Jin Guangyao the most.

Someone cleared their throat.

Wen Ruohan glanced to the side and saw his niece staring straight at Nie Mingjue, not giving him any room to look away as she said, "We will need to find a more effective way of dealing with your sect's issue. As soon as we leave the simulation, the first thing you do better be contacting the future to see if they have any ideas. Am I understood?"

Although he heard Wen Qing's words perfectly clearly, Nie Mingjue's only response was to look away.

The last thing he'd said had been wrong. He was out of line.

When Jin Guangyao finally landed, he'd rolled down more than fifty steps. Before long, he forced himself up, practically crawling to manage it. Despite that, he sent away the servants who looked ready to rush to his side. He dusted off his robes then stood, staring straight at Nie Mingjue.

Nie Mingjue's other-self had already known he needed to do something about his cultivation and his relationship with Jin Guangyao. That was why he had so easily agreed to having Jin Guangyao play the Purification Tone for him. And yet, after this incident with Xue Yang, it was clear that this solution would never work.

Silently, Wen Ruohan scanned over the situation one final time and thought, '*It seems getting the Nie Sect to keep quiet about what they'd done with Xue Yang isn't the only possible motive Jin Guangyao could have for permanently dealing with Nie Mingjue. Let's see how this plays out.*'

At that moment, Lan Xichen ran over, having heard the commotion.

"What happened?" he asked.

Jin Guangyao smiled: "Nothing, Er-ge. Thank you for your assistance."

"Get out of my way!" Nie Mingjue shouted.

“Da-ge! Sheath your saber first! Your mind is in turmoil.”

The watchers, who could see the changing resentment in Nie Mingjue’s soul, understood that quite well.

However-

“I’m fine!” Nie Mingjue insisted. “I know what I’m doing! He’s beyond hope. If things keep going, he’ll do harm to the world for sure. The sooner he’s killed, the sooner we can be at ease!”

“Da-ge, what are you talking about?!” Lan Xichen gaped. “These past few days, he’s been constantly running to and fro from Lanling to Qinghe for you. Is it only your word that indicates he’s beyond hope?”

‘*For dealing with Chifeng-zun, bringing up the good and bad others have done is a good tactic,*’ Wei Wuxian thought.

And, as expected, Nie Mingjue looked over at Jin Guangyao following those words. He was bleeding from an injury he had sustained during the fall, and another wound, which had been wound in bandages, reopened as well.

Lan Xichen looked over at him and said, “You can go back. I will talk to our eldest brother.”

The real Lan Xichen looked away from the screen, not knowing what to feel. He had such different information than his other self that it was hard to make a judgment.

“A-at the very least,” Jiang Yanli spoke up, voice quiet but heard nonetheless. “I think I can easily understand why Zewu-jun’s other-self would look at that situation and see Lianfang-zun as a victim. I’m sure Jin Guangyao’s never talked about whose life he values the most in front of Zewu-jun.”

“Certainly,” Madam Jin agreed. “But that doesn’t change the fact that *my sect* seems to be doing something with Xue Yang that’ll indirectly lead to Xiao Xingchen, A-Qing, and Song Zichen’s deaths.”

Because this Jin Guangyao wasn’t chief cultivator yet; he was just a member of the Jin Clan. It wasn't just Jin Guangyao’s fault.

Which was a harder situation to deal with than being able to point at one individual and blame everything on them.

Once Jin Guangyao had left, Nie Mingjue’s posture loosened. Lan Xichen pulled him along, and the two began to walk.

Meanwhile, Madam Yu fell increasingly silent.

‘Compared to them? Yes, of course I’m different!’

Which was a terrible moral position to take. The only one who might agree was Wen Ruohan, who valued people almost solely by what they could offer. It was wrong.

'*But valuing my own pride over Wei Wuxian's hand was perfectly justifiable, huh?*' she thought. '*When it was Wei Wuxian's hand at stake, the logical thing to do was to save the sect and sacrifice it. But when it's a mere maid demanding my submission, it's worth the lives of everyone at the pier?*'

She had already acknowledged (to herself, at least) that her values in that situation were misplaced. But to hear the*son of a prostitute* was saying such similar words…

Well, it dug the knife in another inch deeper.

"What do you think about what he said?" Jin Zixuan asked at last, not putting any tone into his voice. "About… about when ending one life can save hundreds."

"He's making excuses," Nie Mingjue said at once.

But Lan Xichen didn't fully agree: "Da-ge, putting aside what he does later for a moment, what he does during the Sunshot Campaign-"

"You really believe any of his excuses?" Wen Ruohan laughed. "Isn't it obvious by now that he was playing both of us? How can you possibly trust anything he says?"

Lan Qiren glared: "Played you? You attacked our sects — it would be inexcusable to side *with* you after that."

"And how many sects did I manage to destroy before any of you so much as *tried* to object?"

"*You-"*

Loud voices rose up from all sides, everyone trying to shout over each other to prove their stance. Nie Mingjue continued expressing his own doubts, but wasn't willing to side with Wen Ruohan on any argument. Nie Huaisang piped in as well, and then Madam Yu had taken some offense to something he had said, and now everything was spiraling out of control.

'*There is no one right answer to this,*' Lan Wangji thought, watching the simulated Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen's walk. '*When Jin Guangyao asked whether saving a hundred lives was worth one… that wasn't enough of a description of an event for any absolute statements to be applied. If someone is actively trying to kill 'hundreds' of people and you kill them, no one would blame you for the choice you made. But…*'

He paused, thinking back to the conversation he had heard before.

'*...If you kill your own child, and pin the blame on your political adversaries so that you can wipe their clans out…. Those Sect Leaders were opposing the watchtowers, and Jin Guangyao was able to put them up after he wiped the families out. If what I'm thinking really is what happened, then you could say that ending those lives saved many more.*'

However-

‘*In that situation, there were far too many other options. He could have gotten the same result with just a bit more effort. It doesn’t matter if the watchtowers save a million people, those murders would not be justified.*’

And, worst of all….

‘*Even if we decide that you were right to do what you did during the Sunshot Campaign, this philosophy you’re adopting of ‘I have no choice because it’s for a greater purpose’ cannot be something we normalize. To do great things, sacrifices must happen? So you won’t even try to look for ways that don’t involve sacrificing anything at all?*’

Although this was a much steeper mess of complexities than Yi City was, the ever-growing feeling of dread it gave him remained the same. Regardless, just as was true of Yi City, they needed to get all the information they could before coming to any real conclusions.

“Da-ge,” Lan Xichen began at last, “I feel that… you’re unaware. Our third brother is in a really terrible situation at the moment.”

All conversations stopped, and every eye turned towards the scene.<

“If we go according to his words, he’s always in an awful situation,” Nie Mingjue muttered back.

And that was true too. Jin Zixuan sighed.

“But who would deny it?” Lan Xichen continued. “A moment ago, he talked back to you, didn’t he? Do you really think that’s normal for him?”

Nie Mingjue couldn’t respond, silently agreeing that it was strange for Jin Guangyao to lose his composure like that.

“Madam Jin never liked him to begin with. After Zixuan-xiong passed away, it became commonplace for her to hit and scold him.”

Madam Jin flinched at that, then wondered a moment later why she was so surprised.

“These days, his father also refuses to listen to him. Every proposal A-Yao sends forth is returned, rejected.”

An image flashed before them. The numerous blueprints that had been left between Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao on the table — watchtower designs they were pouring over.

Jin Guangshan laughed nervously and sunk back, trying to avoid everyone’s eyes.

“For the time being, let’s not try to force him too harshly. I trust that he knows what he should do, so long as we give him enough time.”

“I hope so.”

Jiang Cheng laughed: “What he should do? What? Like declare that Xue Yang is dead when he’s actually running around getting Xiao Xingchen to massacre villages?”

Lan Xichen barely suppressed a wince.

“...He might have genuinely thought Xue Yang was dead, given the wounds he had when Xiao Xingchen found him,” Lan Qiren pointed out. But, as was always true with Jin Guangyao, there was no way to be sure.

(They needed to do what the simulated Wei Wuxian was doing now, and investigate in full.)

“Several days later, Qinghe,” Jin Ling announced.

‘*Oh, that’s a surprise,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, watching Meng Yao enter the school grounds. ‘*I would have thought he’d stay away for a while, after what happened with the staircase incident.*’

“He’s fearless to the point of shamelessness,” Nie Mingjue muttered. He didn’t trust Jin Guangyao, and didn’t really like him anymore either, but he was still more clear headed than his other-self. Xue Yang needed to be dealt with, but…

Using his mother’s position against him was in poor taste, to say the least.

That Jin Guangyao was still coming to help him even after that….

Nie Huaisang, on the other hand, narrowed his eyes. It *was* strange how much work Jin Guangyao was doing for Nie Mingjue. A wave of suspicion washed over the Nie heir.

Jin Guangyao waited at the edge of the field, while Nie Mingjue devoted his full attention to Nie Huaisang’s training. Exhaustion took over the young heir after just a few moves, and, upon seeing Jin Guangyao, his mind switched focus completely.

Excited for more gifts, he scurried over.

“Nie Huaisang, do you want this strike to land on your head?! Get back here!”

The words were the same, but the tone was so much harsher than he usually was — even compared to other times he’d trained Nie Huaisang.

It was hard to tell whether the cause of that was his anger at Jin Guangyao or the corruption filling his qi day by day.

“Brother, time is up! I’m going to rest!” Nie Huaisang responded easily.

“You’ve already rested. Keep on going until you learn it.”

Giddy with excitement, Nie Huaisang had a bounce in his step as he responded, “I won’t be able to learn it anyways. I’m done for the day! San-ge, show me what you brought!”

This behavior from Nie Huaisang was no different from normal. In fact, the watchers had seen him act almost exactly like this earlier in the segment. And yet, this time, Nie Mingjue snapped:

“Even a pig would have learned this by now! Why can’t you?!” he growled.

Nie Huaisang jumped at the words, practically doing a double take toward the simulated version of his brother. No matter how frustrated Nie Mingjue got with him, or how many times Nie Huaisang skipped training, Nie Mingjue had never said something even close to that.

And the real Nie Mingjue knew that just as well.

“I…” he began, then cut off, stunned. “I… that’s not what I-”

Shocked by the reaction, the simulated Nie Huaisang moved closer to Jin Guangyao — a sight which only made Nie Mingjue angrier.

“It’s been a whole year already, and you still haven’t learned this set! You stand on the field for just thirty minutes before complaining that you’re tired. You — you don’t have to excel, but like this you can’t even protect yourself! How did Qinghe produce such a good-for-nothing?! The both of you should be tied up and beaten once a day!” he spun towards his disciples. “Carry out all those things in his room!”

“What?!” Nie Huaisang stood up. “Da-ge, you can’t!”

Nie Mingjue could only gape speechlessly, not knowing what to say. These weren't from Jin Guangyao. It wasn't suspicion of Jin Guangyao causing this, it was a desire to hurt Huaisang. And sure, he'd made similar threats earlier in the simulation. This time, however, there was a look in his eyes that left no room for confusion.

A moment later, the disciples really did bring out the fans, porcelain, and paintings from his room, and Nie Huaisang panicked.

“Da-ge! You can’t burn them!” he protested.

“Da-ge, don’t act rashly,” Jin Guangyao advised.

Yet Nie Mingjue’s saber had already acted, and all the delicate objects in the center of the field erupted into flames.

“No!” Nie Huaisang shouted, running forward to them. Nie Mingjue reached out to try to stop him — forgetting, for a moment, that the flames wouldn’t hurt — and watched as his hand phased through his brother helplessly.

“Da-ge! Stop it!” Nie Huaisang protested.

But, in the simulation, these things had already happened. There was nothing the real Nie Mingjue could do.

And then, worst of all-

"Huaisang, be careful!" Jin Guangyao called out, pulling back the simulated Nie Huaisang, who had also been about to enter the blaze. Jin Guangyao had done that, not Nie Mingjue.

Instead, Nie Mingjue had been the one to set the fire.

He felt sick.

The antiques shattered, and the paintings crumbled before their eyes. Black ash took the place of the priceless pieces of art, and Jin Guangyao frowned at the smoke filling the air.

Nie Huaisang stared in wide-eyed shock. However, in comparison to his other-self, there was a different focus for that emotion. After all, *this* Nie Huaisang's pieces of art were still fine. That left him to be concerned over something else.

Like the fact that *his Da-ge* would never do something like this.

Nie Mingjue had always been worried about Nie Huaisang's ~~ability to protect himself~~ grades and had never had much interest in the things Nie Huaisang valued. However, he had also bought Nie Huaisang his first paintbrush, and had always (after a bit of complaining) caved in and bought Nie Huaisang every piece of art he wanted. Even when he got mad, there was never anything even *resembling* this.

In some ways, this slow poisoning of his mind seemed far worse than a simple death.

As Nie Huaisang thought that, the black smoke continued to rise.

Compared to most of the other watchers, Madam Yu's reaction was rather subdued. Somehow, under the surprise, was a level of normalcy that she couldn't quite explain.

No, that might not be true. It was more that she didn't *want* to acknowledge it. After all, what Nie Mingjue was doing right now was familiar territory to her. She loved her children more than anything in the world, but that didn't change the fact that she always disregarded Jiang Yanli's hobbies, filled Jiang Cheng's mind with self doubt and insecurity, and sowed discord whenever she stepped into the room.

(And *she* didn't have the excuse of an oncoming qi deviation to justify it.)

By now, the priceless pieces of art had become a pile of soot on the floor. Jin Guangyao turned around, pulling up Nie Huaisang's hands.

"Are they burnt?" he asked, calmly inspecting them.

What should have been Nie Mingjue's job — what*had always* been Nie Mingjue's job — was now being performed by a dirty, untrustworthy snake.

Nie Mingjue could not let this happen again. Whatever prize or reward it would take to motivate Wei Wuxian or the people in the future to look into this would be a cheap price to pay if it meant avoiding this for the rest of time.

“Please, go prepare some medicine,” Jin Guangyao requested next, speaking to the disciples. They left to do as requested immediately.

‘*They had to be ordered to do that?! Really? Not a single one of them thought of it?*’ Wen Qing scoffed, before amending, ‘*I suppose Sect Leader Nie’s reaction must have surprised them just as much as it surprised Nie Huaisang.*’

She sighed.

Meanwhile, the simulated Nie Huaisang was trembling. His eyes were wide as he stared at the charred remains, shock seemingly taking over. His hands shook slightly, and his heart beat wildly. The memories and feelings and years of work he had put into his collection had been burned away in an instant.

Because of his *brother*.

Slowly, Jin Guangyao put his arm around Nie Huaisang’s shoulders and whispered, “Huaisang, are you okay? You should stop watching. Go back to your room and get some rest.”

Nie Huaisang’s red eyes watered, but he still didn’t make a sound.

“It’s alright. I’ll buy you more, I promise-”

“I’ll burn everything you bring,” Nie Mingjue countered at once.

Nie Mingjue flinched at those words, stepping back and shaking slightly, just like his brother was.

Anger and hatred suddenly flashed across Nie Huaisang’s face.

“Fine! Fine, do whatever you want! Burn them!” he shouted.

“Huaisang!” Jin Guangyao stopped forward at once. “Your brother is still angry. Don’t-”

But Nie Huaisang wasn’t done: “Sabers, sabers, sabers! Who wants to practice that damn thing?! So what if I want to be a good for nothing?! Whoever wants to do that work can be Sect Leader if they care so much! I’m not learning it because I can’t learn it and ‘I don’t like it’ means I don’t like it! What’s the point in forcing me?!”

He kicked his saber to the side and ran away, ignoring Jin Guangyao’s shouts at him to stop.

Meanwhile, Nie Mingjue stood frozen in place, staring blankly at the area before him.

A broken laugh left him and he whispered. “I’m going crazy.”

Lan Xichen turned to him immediately, wanting to protest that, but fumbled when it came to something to actually say.

“...You knew this was a possibility, didn’t you?” Lan Wangji asked. “We will take more precautions against your incoming qi deviation in our world.”

But those words did little to shake Sect Leader Nie.

‘*I pushed Jin Guangyao down the same stairs as…*’ he trailed off, but his gaze traveled toward Jin Guangshan regardless. ‘*I called him the son of a prostitute, I burned Huaisang’s fans…*’

“...Do you think the mistakes you’ve heard in the Purification Tone were intentionally put there by Jin Guangyao?” Madam Yu asked, directing her question at Lan Qiren. “I certainly wouldn’t put that above him.”

“...It’s possible,” he admitted at last. “Even still, Sect Leader Nie is being corrupted at a shockingly fast rate. Misplaying just a few notes in the song shouldn’t be enough to cause such a strong reaction.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Nie Huaisang pouted, grumpily moving closer to his brother again. “We don’t know for sure whether Jin Guangyao was involved in Da-ge’s death, but he’s keeping his head! Da-ge’s body was severed instead of being put to rest! He has a lot more to explain than just Da-ge's death.”

There was a bit of silence afterwards, no one quite sure if the wrong word would make Nie Huaisang burst into tears. Nie Mingjue looked around somewhat awkwardly, before finally making eye contact with Wen Qing.

She gestured toward Huaisang, raising an eyebrow.

Feeling strangely scolded, Nie Mingjue stepped closer and whispered, “I’m-I’m sorry about what happened to… what I did to your fans.”

There was a slapping sound as Wen Qing facepalmed and groaned.

“I’m not upset about the *fans* right now Da-ge!” Nie Huaisang shouted back.

Seeing that the simulated Nie Huaisang was refusing to listen to him, Jin Guangyao began to follow after. Just as he stepped forward, though, another voice spoke up:

“Stop!”

The command was clear.

Jin Guangyao came to a halt, turning back to look at Nie Mingjue.

“You still dare to come?” he demanded.

With downcast eyes and a low voice, Jin Guangyao softly responded, "I came to acknowledge my mistake."

"Have you?" Jiang Cheng scoffed, making Jin Zixuan breathe out a short sigh.

'Lanling Jin was indeed the Sect with the thickest face,' Lan Sizhui had read out to them, once upon a time. 'Although, in Koi Tower, it promised all the Sects that Xue Yang would be executed, when it left Nie Mingjue's sight, it immediately changed Xue Yang's death sentence to a life imprisonment. Hearing about Lanling's decision, Nie Mingjue was enraged and pressured them again. The Lanling Sect rambled about, refusing to give him Xue Yang no matter how hard he tried. All the other sects watched from the sidelines, but, shortly afterward, Nie Mingjue passed away from qi deviation.'

And then Xue Yang had gone on to-

Yes, Nie Mingjue was quite clearly feeling the effects of his oncoming qi deviation, but that didn't mean Jin Guangyao was innocent either.

(And the same was especially true of Jin Zixuan's father, who was sitting, perfectly content, to Zixuan's right.)

Meanwhile, as Jin Guangyao faced Nie Mingjue, clearly proclaiming his remorse, the blue illusionary Wei Wuxian gave an impressed whistle.

'He's got an even thicker face than me,' he thought.

Meanwhile, Nie Mingjue just scoffed: "Have you ever acknowledged your mistakes?"

'Not at all,' Madam Jin thought, spitefully, before, 'Not that I have much room to talk.'

"Sect Leader! Lianfang-zun!" a voice called out from the side, saving Jin Guangyao from having to reply. "Young Master has locked the door to his room and won't let anyone inside."

Nie Mingjue raised an eyebrow at his brother, who gave an unrepentant shrug. If he hadn't known about Nie Mingjue's incoming qi deviation, he would have been just as mad about the destruction of his prized possessions.

Just as angry as before, the resentment practically bubbling under his skin, Nie Mingjue growled, "Let's see how long he can lock himself up for. How dare he defy me?!"

Nie Huaisang now looked even more unrepentant than before.

Jin Guangyao, on the other hand, spoke with a kind expression: "Thank you. Please give me the medicine. I'll take it to him later."

The bottle was handed over, and the disciple hurried out, not wanting to be caught between the pair of notable figures any longer.

"Just what are you here for?" Nie Mingjue asked at last.

Jin Guangyao looked surprised: "Da-ge, have you forgotten? I'm supposed to play guqin for you today."

But Nie Mingjue didn't hesitate at all.

"There's no room for discussion regarding Xue Yang," he declared. "Stop trying to flatter me. It won't work."

Not for the first time, a memory took over Nie Mingjue's mind. A-Qing — that strong, confident, clever, irreplaceable girl — screaming in agony as she was blinded in both eyes.

If Nie Mingjue hadn't died, how much longer would she have been able to live?

However-

"I'm not trying to flatter you," Jin Guangyao disagreed. "Secondly, if it's not working, then why would you care whether I'm trying to flatter you or not?"

Nie Mingjue fell silent.

"He has a point too," Lan Qiren said. "We can all see how badly the corruption is affecting you."

Nie Mingjue had no response.

"Da-ge, these days you've become stricter and stricter with Huaisang," Jin Guangyao continued. "Is the saber spirit… does Huaisang still not know about the saber spirit?"

"Why would I tell him so soon?"

"And how, exactly, does keeping it secret help?" Wen Qing snapped, glaring at Nie Mingjue with all the intensity of a mother bear. From the sidelines, Nie Huaisang enthusiastically cheered her on.

Nie Mingjue just sighed, annoyed, once again, that the simulation had decided to broadcast that little tidbit regarding the Nie Sect's cultivation style.

And, at nearly the same time, the simulated Jin Guangyao sighed as well: "Huaisang is used to being spoiled, but he can't be Qinghe's idle second young master his whole life. One day he'll realize that you're doing this for him, Da-ge. Just like I realized you're doing this for me."

Upon hearing that, the watching Wei Wuxian laughed.

'Bravo, bravo,' he thought. 'I'm not able to say such words even through two lifetimes, and yet Jin Guangyao can adjust his tone so that it doesn't sound strange at all. It even sounds slightly pleasant.'

But that wasn't enough to sway Nie Mingjue.

"If you really do understand, then come see me with Xue Yang's head in your hands," he instructed before turning away dismissively, fully prepared for the excuse that would follow. Except-

"Yes," Jin Guangyao said at once.

Nie Mingjue paused, then looked toward him again.

"Yes, Da-ge. If you give me one last chance, then, in two month's time, I'll come see you with Xue Yang's head in my hands!"

Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow, unsure of what Jin Guangyao thought he was accomplishing with this. Did he actually mean it? Was Xue Yang's survival a mistake on his part?

Or-

"And what if you fail?" Nie Mingjue wondered.

"If I fail then, Da-ge, you can do whatever you want to me."

'Wow, I'm actually pretty impressed,' Wei Wuxian thought. 'Even though Jin Guangyao was always scared of Nie Mingjue, he could still use a myriad of verbal techniques to manipulate Nie Mingjue into giving him another chance. I wasn't expecting that.'

Lan Xichen flinched slightly, fully aware of his own involvement in the mess.

The sky darkened and the sun vanished from the sky. The notes of the Purification Tone began to echo throughout the city.

🎵♪♪🎵♪♭

All three Lans flinched once again.

Nie Mingjue, meanwhile, let out a breath of air. He didn't like this. Even without undergoing these events personally, the things Jin Guangyao had done made it impossible for Nie Mingjue to feel comfortable around him. That said…

The rage that had been apparent in the simulated Nie Huaisang's expression was seared into his mind, and the way everyone except Nie Mingjue had gone to help him afterward stood out just as prominently. As the simulation had said, he had cultivated faster than all his ancestors, so he was falling faster than them too.

He wasn't thinking clearly anymore. If Jin Guangyao could help him with that, then Nie Mingjue wouldn't refuse.

(The one reassurance he had was that his other self was at least not so far-gone as to reject the help Jin Guangyao was offering. If he wanted even the slightest chance of becoming better again, the Purification Tone was a must.)

(Even if, apparently, it hadn't been enough.)

“Da-ge.”

Nie Mingjue glanced over, and saw Lan Xichen staring at the simulation with a stern expression. Every time the wrong note was played, the frown on his face became just a touch more stern.

“The Cloud Recesses hasn’t been destroyed by the war in our time,” Lan Xichen said. “I won’t be as busy. This time, I’ll make sure to be the one playing for you.”

Nie Mingjue’s eyes widened in surprise, and, upon feeling the watchful eyes of Wen Qing, made sure to nod.

“...Thank you,” he muttered back. Lan Xichen smiled in turn.

“One day, the Qinghe Nie Sect was holding a martial arts competition!” Ouyang Zizhen announced, with a level of enthusiasm that would be more understandable if he was seven instead of seventeen.

“I’m so jealous. The Nie Sect always holds the best conferences.”

“This is still in Chifeng-zun’s time, you idiot,” Jin Ling whispered back. “Stop bouncing! If Sect Leader Nie’s not in charge, then the usual tea ceremony and fan-painting events aren’t going to be included.”

“I guess-”

“Tea ceremony?”

“Fan painting?”

Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan both gaped, expressing their disbelief. That wasn’t really a martial arts competition then, was it?

(Nie Huaisang, on the other hand, seemed delighted by the prospect. His position as Sect heir should be more than enough to empower him to create a similar tradition in his own world, so long as his brother didn’t object. Wonderful; something to look forward to for when they left.)

Regardless of Ouyang Zizhen’s newfound disappointment, the simulation marched on. Nie Mingjue was walking through the grounds of the competition, personally ensuring that everything was as it should be. Despite the growing levels of instability the watchers could feel in his qi, everyone he passed bowed to him with the utmost respect. He walked to a quieter part of the grounds, seeking to check out something just beyond. A soft voice whispered something.

And Lan Xichen’s voice responded.

“Da-ge chose to make the oath with you. He must approve of you,” the first jade of Lan said.

Dejected, Jin Guangyao softly responded, "But, Er-ge, didn't you hear what he insisted be said in the oath? 'Face a thousand accusing fingers,' be 'torn limb from limb?' That was clearly a warning for me! I-I've never heard such an oath before!"

There was a beat of silence from the watchers, no one able to dispute that, before Nie Huaisang very quietly said, "Just a thought, but… maybe becoming sworn brothers with someone you don't trust wasn't the best idea you've ever had, Da-ge."

Nie Mingjue groaned, rubbing the spot between his eyes tiredly.

However, the simulated Lan Xichen responded, "He said, 'if one were to think otherwise.' Do you think otherwise, A-Yao? If not, then why are you worrying over it so much?"

"I don't, but Da-ge has already decided I do! What can I do against that?"

'Poisonous snake,' Nie Mingjue frowned. 'This is different from when you said Jin Guangshan wouldn't give you a fair trial. I would believe you if you would just… if you would…'

Nie Mingjue trailed off in his head, unsure of how to finish that.

"Da-ge has always cherished your talent," Lan Xichen softly pointed out. "He's hoping you will choose the right path."

Jin Guangyao seemed to shake his head: "It's not that I don't know what's right and what's wrong, it's just that sometimes I can't do anything about it. Nowadays, I have it bad no matter which side I'm on! I have to be on everyone's good side. I wouldn't care if it was someone else, but have I mistreated Da-ge in any way?"

"Yes!" Nie Huaisang said quite firmly, and even Lan Xichen had to tilt his head slightly in acknowledgement. It might not fully register to Jin Guangyao, but lying to escape punishment — breaking Nie Mingjue's trust in the process — was more than enough to be considered mistreatment, and that was without what had happened in Nightless City and with Xue Yang.

Jin Guangyao wasn't entirely wrong and the simulated Nie Mingjue wasn't entirely right, but pretending nothing had happened between them was a fallacy of the highest proportions.

"Always 'no choice,' huh?" Wen Ruohan muttered quietly.

"Er-ge, you heard it as well," Jin Guangyao muttered, voice trembling. "What did he call me?"

Lan Xichen sighed: "His anger was simply too great for him to think before he spoke. Da-ge's temper now is incomparable to how it was in the past. You must not provoke him again."

Lan Xichen frowned slightly at his other self. At this point… it really seemed like the best thing to do was to keep Jin Guangyao and Nie Mingjue from having to interact with each other. He understood what his other self was trying to do, but…

“Zewu-jun,” a soft voice came from his right.

Lan Xichen looked over, and saw Jiang Yanli moving closer to him, a kind smile on her face.

“I… you don’t have to be so hard on yourself. I think the fact that you’re trying to make things better is admirable,” she said. “You try to explain Jin Guangyao’s actions to Sect Leader Nie, and Sect Leader Nie’s actions to Jin Guangyao. Compared to just… staying on the sidelines while things get progressively worse, what you’re doing is much more admirable.”

Lan Xichen’s eyes softened in understanding, and he whispered, “Jiang-guniang, you’re not responsible for fixing your parents’ relationship. You did as well as you could.”

(After all, Lan Xichen didn’t have much room to speak in regards to his own family.)

“Still,” Jiang Yanli said, shifting awkwardly. “I… I think, with the information you had at the time, you chose as well as you could., too.”

“Thank you,” Lan Xichen said at last, and his smile became a touch more genuine.

Meanwhile, Lan Xichen’s other self had continued speaking: “These past few days, Da-ge has been deeply troubled by the saber spirit, and he’s had an argument with Huaisang again. They still haven’t made up.”

At those words, Jin Guangyao practically began sobbing: “If he says such a thing while blind with rage, then isn’t that just how he thinks of me on a daily basis?! Is it that because I couldn’t choose my background, and my mother couldn’t choose her fate, I’ll have to be humiliated by others for the rest of my life?! If so, then how is Da-ge any different from the people who look down on me? No matter what I do, to them I’ll always be ‘just the son of a prostitute!’”

Nie Mingjue looked away, wishing, once again, that he hadn’t said that.

Wei Wuxian, meanwhile, was even more impressed.

‘*Last night he was acting all friendly and innocent with Nie Mingjue, playing him the guqin. The complaints he’s giving to Lan Xichen now couldn’t be read at all in his expression.*’

Jin Guanyao’s face turned sour: “Da-ge, he… he-”

A kick slammed open the door, shattering it against the wall, and Nie Mingjue stormed inside.

“You! How dare you?!”

Jin Guangyao panicked and darted behind Lan Xichen, who opened his mouth to speak. Before he could, however, Nie Mingjue unsheathed his saber and attacked. Blocking the weapon with his own sword, Zewu-jun could only glance behind himself at Jin Guangyao momentarily.

"Run!" he shouted.

Jin Guangyao dashed out the door.

"Get out of my way!" Nie Mingjue ordered, chasing Jin Guangyao outside.

The real Lan Xichen did a double take: "Wait, is that-"

He cut himself off.

"What?" Jin Zixuan asked. "But that's-"

Although he had left fleeing, Jin Guangyao was walking back toward the simulated Nie Mingjue at a leisurely pace. Nie Mingjue slashed his saber, cutting the man in two and sending the blood splattering against the wall.

Jin Zixuan looked away but didn't object. Putting aside whether or not Jin Guangyao truly deserved this for a moment (which he very well might), as he was now, Nie Mingjue's wasn't even *capable* of properly judging.

Nie Mingjue's anger hadn't depleted at all. He rushed forward again toward the square. However, even in comparison to when he fought after being in Wen Ruohan's torture chamber, he seemed unsteady. Tripping, stumbling, looking this way and that. His breathing was coming out far too fast to be normal.

Nie Huaisang moved closer to his brother at once, and Wen Qing and Lan Xichen both frowned deeply.

'*He really is on the verge of a qi deviation, huh?*'

Despite the unusual lack of balance, Nie Mingjue did make it out onto the square. And there was--

Jin Guangyao!

Jin Guangyao!

Jin Guangyao!

Every face he could see was Jin Guangyao.

Jin Zixuan's eyes widened and Jiang Yanli gasped, "Wait, so it wasn't him that was cut down just now? Then who…"

Nie Mingjue gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to turn away. His other-self had well and truly gone insane. The Purification Tone hadn't managed to stop it, and even Nie Huaisang's anger hadn't been enough to snap him out of it.

The resentment he could feel within his others-self was boiling over now; it had won.

Nie Mingjue was experiencing a qi deviation.

And, as with everyone who succumbs to such a force, reason and logic could no longer be effective. He lifted the blade up, saw every Jin Guangyao turn to look at him, then swung down.

Blood covered the courtyard.

Jiang Yanli turned away.

Screams echoed throughout the city, but no one could stop Nie Mingjue's rampage. Lan Xichen, the only one who possibly could, wasn't aware that Nie Mingjue was undergoing a qi deviation, and would be far more concerned with looking for the real Jin Guangyao.

Which meant there was nothing to stop Nie Mingjue from mowing through the surrounding crowd of 'Jin Guangyao's like a soaring hawk cutting through air. Head after head came off, and the central grounds were soon covered in red.

♫♪♪

"Guqin music?" Lan Wangji realized.

♪♫♪♫♪♭♪

The second jade's brows furrowed at the additional mistake, and he concluded, "Jin Guangyao must be playing from a spot Chifeng-zun can't see."

The watchers all looked around, but couldn't figure out where the music was coming from. They had to agree.

Nie Huaisang frowned: '*Jin Guangyao… is he really trying to help Da-ge? Then why cut apart his body?*'

It didn't matter for the time being. The simulated Nie Mingjue's mind was now so clouded, he didn't even think to look for the source of the sound. Instead, he was preoccupied with cutting down each and every 'Jin Guangyao' he could see.

♫♪♪♫♪♫♪♭♫♪♭

A growl came out of the simulated Sect Leader Nie, and he grabbed his own head as if in pain. When he opened his eyes again, blood began to drip out.

After a shout of rage, he turned and decapitated down the next Jin Guangyao.

♪♫♪♭

The real Nie Mingjue let out a breath of air, rubbing his own temples as well. It was difficult to watch this, and the supposedly-calming music didn't seem to be working on even the real Sect Leader Nie. Nie Mingjue supposed that, unlike Wei Wuxian's cultivation, which was

aimed at spirits, the Purification Tone was currently meant to affect just his other self, so it made sense for him to not feel anything.

Then-

"Da-ge!" someone shouted.

Nie Mingjue's eyes widened at once.

"No, no-" he whispered, standing up. "Huaisang, get out of there!"

And yet, that voice seemed to calm the simulated Nie Mingjue for a moment. He shivered, then slowly turned around. Among the sea of Jin Guangyaos, there was one face that was different.

It was Huaisang's.

The real Nie Huaisang, staring at the simulation before him, felt his eyes water. A small bit of hope was beginning to settle in.

If Nie Mingjue could recognize him, if Huaisang could snap his brother out of this, then maybe-

Maybe there was something….

Maybe the corpse wasn't….

The simulated Nie Huaisang stumbled forward. Seeing that Nie Mingjue had stopped moving, Nie Huaisang beamed, tears still in his eyes.

"Da-ge! Da-ge, put down your saber! It's me!"

But, before Nie Huaisang could approach him, Nie Mingjue fell over.

"Da-ge!" both Nie Huaisangs shouted, running toward the collapsed Sect Leader.

At that moment, Nie Mingjue's eyes cleared up, and he finally saw the real Jin Guangyao. The man stood at the end of the corridor, not a trace of blood on him, and held a guqin aloft. Tears were streaming down his eyes.

'*The Sparks Amidst Snow on his chest almost seems to be smiling for him,*' Wei Wuxian thought.

Jin Zixuan hated the implications, but couldn't disagree. The Lans said he'd been playing wrong this whole time. It could be a mistake — it *might* have been an honest error — but, after everything they had seen from him, that was hard to believe.

(And either way, not a single person watching could doubt that Nie Mingjue's death would make Jin Guangyao at least a little pleased.)

"I'm sorry Da-ge!" the simulated Huaisang wailed, grabbing his brother's arm. "I won't make you mad anymore! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

But, no matter how much he pleaded, it didn't change the fact that Nie Mingjue's vision was growing darker and darker at every second.

"Da-ge!" Nie Huaisang shouted. "Da-ge!"

Everything became black.

And Nie Huaisang felt that last bit of hope inside him vanish.

"...ei Yi…"

The words were muddled, quiet, and impossible to make out. The blue illusion of Wei Wuxian looked around, wondering where they were coming from.

"...ei… ng!"

They were a bit clearer that time; desperate, too.

"Wei Ying!"

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened.

With a snap, he forcefully pushed himself out of the empathy he had been in, returning to his paperman form. The sealed head of Nie Mingjue was before him, eyes still bloodshot and open in anger.

'*I'm running out of time! I need to get back to my body!*' he realized.

In a different room of Koi Tower, the simulated Lan Wangji stared down at Wei Wuxian, worry clear even to those who had never been able to read Hanguang-jun's face.

Lan Wangji sucked in a breath of air, the tension in his body rising.

The paperman Wei Wuxian flapped his sleeves as though he was a butterfly, slipping out from behind the curtain. However, as he did, he noticed something in the corner of the room.

Jin Guangyao stood there, smiling, and unsheathed his sword.

Jiang Cheng stood up, shouting, "No, no, no-"

Instead of scolding him for the lack of composure, Madam Yu now seemed to contain the same degree of worry.

The paperman Wei Wuxian darted to and fro, dodging each attack by a hair's breadth. The tip of the sword nearly sliced him several times. If this continued, he'd end up dead for sure.

‘*This was a technique called paper metamorphosis,*’ Ouyang Zizhen had explained. ‘*Although it was quite useful, there were also many restrictions. There was a strict time limit, and, if even the slightest scratch ended up on the paperman, the soul would receive a similar degree of harm.*’

Jiang Yanli laced and unlaced her fingers with each other, having nowhere else to put the growing nervousness filling her body.

At that moment, however, the paperman of Wei Wuxian seemed to notice something to the side. There was a sword being kept there, held aloft like a trophy of war.

‘*That’s Suibian!*’ he realized.

“Suibian?!” Jiang Cheng gaped. “But why would the Jin… Lan-er-gongzi and I gave it back to….”

It was a little easy to forget, after having followed Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji so long, that his martial brother was still technically public enemy number one.

In this case, however, that turned out to be quite a blessing. The paperman flew forward, practically throwing itself onto Suibian’s sheath. At that moment, receiving the command, the blade sprung out and began to battle with Jin Guangyao’s sword.

Shock flashed across the chief cultivator’s face.

However, the new Sect Leader Jin managed to regain composure mere moments later, continuing his fight with the paperman-controlled Suibian instead. Jin Guangyao’s Hensheng wrapped around Suibian, its strange flexibility causing many unexpected results. The two swords began to battle in the air, leaving Jin Guangyao open to try to grab at the paperman Wei Wuxian directly. His grasp was dodged quite a few times, the paperman’s movements too unpredictable to assume, but a talisman flung by Jin Guangyao’s other hand suddenly burst into flame around Wei Wuxian.

‘*The soul will receive a similar degree of harm,*’ Jiang Yanli recalled, watching the surroundings become ablaze with light. ‘*A similar degree of… of-*’

Luckily, equally aware of that, Wei Wuxian acted fast. He maneuvered Suibian — who was still mid-battle with Hensheng — in front of Jin Guangyao. The light of the fire became a blinding beam directed at Jin Guangyao’s line of sight, allowing Wei Wuxian to flutter out of the room momentarily unimpeded.

‘*Time’s almost out!*’ Wei Wuxian thought nervously, not even bothering to hide his paper form as he flapped back to Lan Wangji at top speed. In any other case, the desperate swimming of the paperman through the air could have appeared comical.

Now, all the watchers were too tense to find any amusement.

By chance, at that moment, the door he was flying towards flew open. Lan Wangji, growing nervous, had wanted to take a look around. Wei Wuxian took that opportunity to throw

himself onto Lan Wangji's face.

Hanguang-jun froze.

That was just the sort of reunion Nie Huaisang had been hoping the two would have. Filled with trust, and a feeling that there was no greater reassurance than being with the other.

However, with his brother's death fresh on his mind, there was little room for him to feel happy about this.

The paperman covered Lan Wangji's eyes, shivering and trembling as it did. After a few moments of that, Hanguang-jun gingerly reached to pick it up and set it on Mo Xuanyu's unconscious body.

A short while later, the body's eyes trembled, and Wei Wuxian awoke with a gasp.

Relief filled Jiang Yanli's body, and she collapsed back into her chair in an unusually undignified manner.

"A-Li?" Jin Zixuan whispered in concern, unsure of what to do.

Blushing, Jiang Yanli sat back up, sending her fiance a hesitant smile. Now that Wei Wuxian was awake (in a human body) again, his chances of success seemed much, much better than before.

Blinking a few times to adjust to the light, Wei Wuxian pushed himself up. However, as soon as he did, dizziness seemed to overtake him and he stumbled into Lan Wangji.

(Who, of course, caught him at once.)

Wei Wuxian tried to pick himself up once more, only to collide the top of his head with Lan Wangji's chin. They both jumped at the sudden pain, and Wei Wuxian immediately began to rub both the top of his head and Lan Wangji's chin with a hand.

"Ah! I'm sorry, Lan Zhan! Are you alright?"

Jin Guangyao was still an issue. They needed to figure out what had happened to divide Nie Mingjue's body like that, discover why Jin Guangyao had his head, and hopefully rescue Qin Su. However, as he watched the interactions of the two before him, the real Nie Mingjue couldn't help but forget those concerns for a moment.

He and Wen Qing both gave ~~infuriatingly fond~~ sighs and shook their heads.

(At least not everything to come out of the simulation was bad.)

However-

"We need to go!" Wei Wuxian suddenly declared, grabbing onto Lan Wangji's hand and pulling him up. Hanguang-jun didn't resist at all, keying into Wei Wuxian's desperation and standing as well.

"Where to?" was all he asked.

"The Fragrant Palace! The bronze mirror there is the entrance to a secret room! His wife found out some secret of his and he dragged her inside, and she should be there right now! Chifeng-zun's head is there as well!"

While most of the watchers tensed up at the mention of Nie Mingjue's head, Madam Jin found herself far more concerned with the first thing Wei Wuxian had brought up. It wasn't as though she was completely indifferent to Nie Mingjue's plight. He had shown himself to be a righteous man — something that became especially obvious when Madam Jin compared his reaction to Xue Yang with her husband's — and her own son was getting along with Nie Huaisang quite well now, linking them further. It was just….

Compared to someone who was already dead, the still alive Qin Su weighed on her much more heavily. Jin Guangyao had been rumored to be faithful, devoted, and ever-loving towards his wife. Madam Jin had thought that, even if Qin Su wasn't Jiang Yanli, she had still managed to surpass Madam Jin as her successor in a way that definitely mattered. She wasn't being constantly cheated on by her husband; she was truly and genuinely loved.

But the Jin Guangyao they had seen interact with her before Wei Wuxian was pulled into empathy was not someone she could trust.

'I had thought that this era would be the end of women getting played with and thrown about by the Jin Clan's Sect Leader. Even if that turns out to not be true… maybe we can at least prevent her from dealing with the consequences.'

Otherwise, throughout the entirety of her other self's life, Madam Jin wouldn't have accomplished anything.

While Madam Jin's thoughts had been caught up in that, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had shot towards the palace, sweeping by everyone in their way. However, realizing that they couldn't stop this pair, the guards followed their training and shouted as loud as they could, attracting the attention of both Jin Guangyao and the myriad of important guests at Koi Tower that day.

The first person attracted by the noise appeared, his sword already unsheathed.

""A-Ling?!"" both Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan jumped, not having expected to see him. They both frowned slightly shortly after, wishing their son wouldn't need to see his beloved uncle's lies destroyed first-hand.

"Why are you here?" their son demanded, unsure of what to make of the situation. "Wait, that's my uncle's bedchamber! Have you come to the wrong place? No, you're intruders, aren't you?! What do you want?"

While Jin Ling had been speaking, many other guests had journeyed over as well.

"What happened?" one asked.

Another poked his head in hesitantly: "Why is there so much noise here?"

"This is the Fragrance Palace. Isn't it a bit… unsuitable for us to be-"

"But I heard sounds of alarms."

"Another giant spectacle," Madam Jin cursed, rubbing at her brows tiredly.

However, no sound came from within the palace. Wei Wuxian knocked on the doors.

"Sect Leader Jin? Madam Jin?"

Jin Ling glared and shouted, "Just what do you want?! Everyone's assembled here because of you! This is my uncle's bedchamber. His *bedchamber* — do you understand?! Haven't I told you not to make a mess?!"e

"Oh, of course," Jin Guangshan muttered. "He's still in Mo Xuanyu's body. In the eyes of everyone else-"

"Just be quiet, Guangshan!" Madam Jin hissed, quite effectively silencing her husband.

At that moment, however, Lan Xichen arrived, and the crowd fell silent. Zewu-jun and Hanguang-jun made eye contact, an entire conversation passing between them. Lan Xichen hesitated, before his expression became more complex, disbelief and concern warring within him.

Suddenly, a cheerful voice asked, "What's wrong? Was the reception during the day not good enough, so now everyone wants to host an additional banquet at my place?"

Jin Guangyao calmly walked out of the crowd.

Jiang Yanli shivered slightly. He seemed perfectly pleasant and kind, but his demeanor hadn't changed at all even while he was dragging the struggling Qin Su into the secret room.

Like with Hanguang-jun versus Lan Wangji, the older version of Jin Guangyao was even better at hiding his emotions than his younger self was.

However, Wei Wuxian didn't hesitate at all, clasping his hands together and beaming, "Lianfang-zun, what good timing! If you hadn't come, we wouldn't have been able to see what's inside the secret room of the Fragrant Palace."

"He's just coming right out and saying it?!" Jiang Cheng gaped. However, he didn't otherwise protest. Throughout the simulation, Wei Wuxian had maintained a fairly good track record when it came to getting results through shameless things like this.

"Secret room?" Jin Guangyao asked. "Why? Are secret rooms now a rarity? Any sect with a couple of scarcely used treasures would have a secret room, right?"

Lan Wangji opened his mouth to speak, but, before he could, Lan Xichen stepped in and asked, "A-Yao, would it be possible for you to let us in to take a look at your treasure

room?"

Jin Guangyao turned to look at him.

"Well done, Xichen," Lan Qiren said quietly. He had faith his nephew wouldn't allow his personal feelings to cloud the investigation, but getting that confirmed was nice as well. Although the simulated version probably should have given more thought to Nie Mingjue's concerns, he was at least listening to Wangji's.

(And in all honesty, when up against someone who was as good of an actor as Jin Guangyao, there was only so much you could expect.)

Jin Guangyao shifted uncomfortably, protesting, "Er-ge, since it's a treasure room, there are a few things inside that aren't meant to be seen by the outside. And you want me to open it all of the sudden…."

Watching Jin Guangyao give his explanation, Wei Wuxian's thoughts turned instead toward the secret room: '*It's impossible for Jin Guangyao to have teleported or otherwise moved Qin Su outside the room in such a short amount of time. She must still be in there.*'

Madam Jin and Madam Yu both nodded in agreement.

'*Wei Wuxian,*' Madam Yu thought sternly. '*You better save her.*'

"Er-ge, showing it to you would be one thing, but I don't think it's appropriate to display it to everyone."

"Still, I must insist."

"It's also quite inappropriate for me to bring any women I'm not married to inside. To ask such a thing…."

"I hope you'll excuse our rudeness then."

With every excuse Jin Guangyao gave, Lan Xichen simply became more determined.

Without saying a word, Nie Huaisang turned his eyes on his other self, who was watching the interaction with what seemed to be a growing level of confusion.

He hummed to himself thoughtfully, then turned back to the speakers.

Finally, it seemed like Lan Xichen became truly set in his decision.

"Open it," he ordered.

Jin Guangyao stared intently for a moment, then smiled: "Since Er-ge is so intent on seeing it opened, I suppose I have to open it for everyone to see, don't I?"

He opened the door with a wave of his hand and began to walk inside.

"Ha!" someone scoffed from the background. "People say that Gusu Lan values conduct and courtesy more than anyone else. I guess those rumors are just rumors after all. Barging into the bedchamber of a Sect Leader is good conduct, indeed."

Even though he heard every word, Lan Qiren didn't so much as flinch. Instead, his thoughts turned back to the past — to what would have happened in their world by now if it weren't for the simulation.

Wei Wuxian would get in trouble constantly. He would speak back and mock and tease. But, when it came down to it, he was as righteous as even the best Lans, doing what he could to help time and time again.

The simulated Lan Xichen was putting what was right over what seemed socially acceptable; he and Wangji had learned the values of Gusu Lan far better then Lan Qiren ever had.

However, not everyone was as dismissive of the words as Lan Qiren was. Wei Wuxian glanced back at the speaker for a few moments before his eyes lit up in recognition.

'*He came in shortly after we did. Didn't the people who greeted him call him Sect Leader Su?*'

The watchers did a double take. They recognized him from more than what Wei Wuxian had just said.

"...Wasn't he a member of the Lan Sect?" Jiang Cheng asked. "Yeah, isn't he the one who lost his sword in the abyss incident, which meant Wei Wuxian had to save him?"

Frowning in thought, Jin Guangshan added on, "And he shot Wei Wuxian in the Xuanwu Cave, didn't he?"

"He's also the one who sold out the Cloud Recesses to us," Wen Ruohan pointed out, enjoying the rage that briefly flashed across Lan Qiren's face.

As a Sect Leader, Su She wore all white, looking handsome and a touch arrogant as well.

'*Although his features could be described as fair, he isn't anything special,*' Wei Wuxian decided.

It would be quite strange for dismissive words like that to make Lan Wangji happy. In fact, it would be rather rude for him to gain pleasure from such a blatant disregard of someone else. Therefore, he wasn't happy.

Not at all.

"Forget it, forget it," Jin Guangyao shook his head. "It's not as though there's anything disreputable in here."

He stepped inside, still seeming quite calm (even with a minor air of awkwardness now around him). Jin Ling stomped in after, glaring at Wei Wuxian on the way for causing all of this.

"You would like to look at the treasure room, right?" Jin Guangyao confirmed. At their nods, he entered. Everyone piled in shortly after.

The room looked unchanged. There was a curtain covered in symbols hanging over the cabinet, and an iron table in the center. In addition, there was Qin Su, standing with her back to them.

Madam Jin relaxed, breathing out a sigh of relief, and Jiang Yanli gave a warm smile.

Lan Xichen appeared somewhat stunned, asking, "Why is Madam Jin here?"

"All of our possessions are shared," Jin Guangyao responded. "A-Su often comes here to look around as well."

'*Liar, liar, liar,*' Wen Qing thought, before sighing to herself over how redundant idea was.

'*He didn't move her?*' Wei Wuxian wondered, inspecting the scene a few times over. '*Isn't he scared she'll say something?*'

An ominous feeling began to run down the watchers' spines.

Wen Ruohan was a little impressed with Jin Guangyao's daring.

Wei Wuxian moved closer to her face and watched as she continued to breathe. Her expression was blank, but….

'*I don't think she's undergone an enchantment or poison,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*As far as I can tell, she seems perfectly conscious.*'

"Then… why isn't she running?" Jin Zixuan had to ask, turning to his mother for answers. She, however, remained stern-faced and silent.

They had more watching to do.

Growing concerned, Wei Wuxian walked back over to the cabinet and lifted the curtain. The head, which had been behind it just a few moments ago, was now gone. In its place, a lone dagger rested.

Nie Huaisang's expression darkened considerably.

(Unbeknownst to him, so did Wen Ruohan's.)

Lan Xichen had been staring at the curtain as well, a foreboding expression on his face. Upon seeing that it wasn't what he was expecting, relief took over.

"What is this?" he asked, gesturing toward the weapon.

"This is something rather rare," Jin Guangyao declared, picking the dagger up. "It was the weapon of an assassin, killing countless people during its use. If you look at the blade of the dagger, you won't see your reflection — you'll see the reflection of someone else.

Sometimes it's a man, sometimes a woman, and sometimes an elder. Every one of these reflections is a spirit who died at this blade. Due to its strong energy, I decided to seal it behind this curtain."

"Then… that means-"

"That's right," Jin Guangyao nodded. "This dagger once belonged to Wen Ruohan."

Everyone's gaze turned towards him, but the Chief Cultivator remained focused on the one who had spoken.

'*Yes, he played me quite well, didn't he?*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*I won't deny that I made many enemies who wouldn't hesitate to attack, but… to think that this person, who I helped in a way no one else had, would act like this.*'

If it had been for Lan Xichen, then it would have at least been somewhat understandable. Loyalty begets loyalty, and favors are returned. But Meng Yao had been motivated most strongly by *Jin Guangshan* — someone who would abandon him without a second thought.

~~*Just like with Wei Wuxian and the Jiangs.*~~

Once again, there was only one thing Wen Ruohan could think.

'*Truly… such a waste.*'

'*Everything looks perfectly normal,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*I guess part of the reason he prepared so many other treasures in this room was in case of an event like this.*'

Lan Xichen suppressed a slight shiver.

'*He really is thoughtful,*' the Lan heir thought. '*With how violent and unreasonable Da-ge must have seemed by comparison, I suppose it's no wonder my other self made the choice he did. I will need to be careful going forward.*

"Wait," Madam Jin suddenly spoke up. "What is she doing?"

While most of the watchers had been focused on Jin Guangyao, Madam Jin had been watching Qin Su. The new Madam Jin was still standing, just as blank faced as before, but her hands were beginning to twitch.

Jin Guangyao twirled the dagger in his hand demonstratively one more time, even flipping it in the air-

Qin Su snatched it away.

"Qin-guniang!" Jiang Yanli gasped, staring at her with worried eyes. "W-what is she…."

There was a complicated expression on her face. Pain, anger, humiliation….

"A-Su?" Jin Guangyao asked, suddenly seeming concerned.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji both ran towards her, trying to grab the dagger. Before they could, she stabbed herself in the stomach, stepping just out of their reach. She pushed it through all the way to the hilt, not leaving any chance for her own survival.

Madam Yu stared, wide-eyed, at the sight before her.

Wen Qing rushed to the girl's side.

"A-Su!" Jin Guangyao shouted, running close. He rushed forward and grabbed her limp body, and Lan Xichen immediately pulled out medicine. However, with the sharpness of the blade and the negative energy infused within, there was no point.

Qin Su's hand fell against the floor, and the last of the light in her eyes left once and for all.

There was a beat of silence.

Then, Madam Jin spun towards Jin Guangyao.

"*You!* What did you do?!"

"Miss Su!" Jiang Yanli screamed.

"What…" Jin Zixuan's eyes were wide. "I… what?"

Lan Xichen stood frozen.

"A-Su! A-Su!" Jin Guangyao shouted over and over again, clutching her body tightly. He cupped her face with one hand, trembling, as tears poured down his cheeks.

If this scene was the first thing they had seen, not a single one of the watchers would have thought there was anything off about Jin Guangyao. The idea that *he* was the one responsible would be…

(Well, perhaps Qin Su's accusations regarding their son were now even more credible than they had been before.)

"A-Yao…" Lan Xichen began at last. "Madam Jin… I'm sorry."

Jin Guangyao looked up and, with a shaky voice, asked, "Er-ge, what's going on? Why… why would A-Su suddenly take her own life? And why did you gather in front of the Fragrant Palace, and demand I open my treasure room? Is there something you haven't told me?"

At that moment, Jiang Cheng stepped forward. He had arrived late, but his expression left little room for uncertainty.

"Zewu-jun, please explain this. The rest of us here are still in the dark," he requested in a cold voice.

The real Jiang Cheng couldn't help but frown slightly at the reappearance of his older self.

The other sect leaders agreed with Jiang Cheng, turning toward Lan Xichen for answers.

After a pause, Zewu-jun began to speak: "...Sometime ago, a few disciples of Gusu Lan were on a night hunt. When they passed through Mo Village, they were attacked by a dismembered arm, full of resentful energy and killing intent. Using it as a compass, Wangji has been investigating, and discovered… that it was Da-ge."

Everyone in the treasure room fell into an uproar.

"Da-ge?!" Jin Guangyao gaped. "But Da-ge was buried. You and I saw that happen with our own eyes!"

But his shock had nothing on another's:

"Da-ge?" Nie Huaisang, now Sect Leader Nie, repeated. "You mean my Da-ge? Xichen-xiong, you mean my brother? Our eldest brother?!"

Lan Xichen nodded, and Nie Huaisang took a single, stumbling step forward. He dropped his fan, and his knees gave out.

"Sect Leader Nie!" someone shouted, and Lan Xichen rushed forward to catch him.

Nie Mingjue frowned, knowing how much of a shock this would have been for the simulated Nie Huaisang.

"Where's the medic?" someone called, coming to support Nie Huaisang as well.

Jin Guangyao's eyes were full of tears, but they now seemed red with anger.

"Dismembered," he repeated, half-disbelieving. "Dismembered?! Who in the world could have done something as insane as that?!"

"Well, I don't know mister 'let's keep Chifeng-zun's head as a trophy in my treasure room,'" Wen Qing mocked. "Perhaps someone with extensive power, money, and both personal and political reasons to get rid of him."

To the few who had been momentarily swept up in Jin Guangyao's gripping performance, her words served as a much-needed wake up call.

Meanwhile, Wen Ruohan raised an eyebrow. It was rare for Wen Qing to speak up so scornfully on matters concerning strangers. Then again, Nie Mingjue might not count as a stranger to her anymore.

At that time, Lan Xichen, who still lacked much of the information they had, could only shake his head: "I don't know. While we were searching for the head, the clues disappeared."

Jin Guangyao paused, as though slowly coming to a horrifying conclusion.

"You… Er-ge, you wanted me to open up my treasure room because you-you were suspicious Da-ge's head might be with me?"

A look of guilt flashed across Lan Xichen's face.

"Except it *was* with you," Lan Qiren growled. "Xichen, you can't allow yourself to fall for his tricks in our world, understood?"

"Ah, yes, uncle," Lan Xichen agreed. As he said that, however, his eyes went somewhat unfocused. He looked at the simulation, and yet seemed to be staring past it all the same.

Sure, they now knew for a fact that Jin Guangyao was terrifyingly good at acting. However, they still couldn't see through his lies. What would happen if someone else showed up — just as good at lying as Jin Guangyao, but not included in the memories being sent back in time.

"As Sect Leader Nie said, we'll investigate," said a hushed voice on his left. Lan Xichen looked over, as saw his younger brother standing next to him, concern obvious under the outward blankness.

"Wangji?"

"If something happens, we'll do a thorough investigation," he said. "We won't let this happen again."

From the side, Nie Huaisang and Jin Zixuan were nodding rapidly, and Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue both nodded once.

"...Right," Lan Xichen agreed, a small smile forming on his lips.

In the meantime, however, his other self was simply forced to stand there, having nothing to say in response to the betrayal that appeared in Jin Guangyao's eyes.

"...Forget it," Sect Leader Jin said at last, looking away. "Let's drop the matter. Though, Er-ge, how did Hanguang-jun know that there was a treasure room inside my bedchamber? And why did you think Da-ge's head was in my room? Koi Tower is quite fortified… if I had really done something, would I have let his head be found so easily?"

Lan Xichen paused, unable to answer his questions.

'*Not only can he not answer, but I can't find an answer either,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Who could have expected that, in such a short amount of time, Jin Guangyao would not only be able to move the head but also force Qin Su to take her own life before everyone's eyes.*'

It was indeed impressive.

Wen Ruohan shook his head, forcefully casting aside his thoughts about what could have been if he'd chosen Wen Ruohan's side.

Then, Jin Guangyao sighed: "Xuanyu, did you tell something to Er-ge and everyone else here? What's the use in making up these easily exposable lies?"

Jiang Cheng frowned, "Does he know the paperman was Wei-er… Mo Xuanyu?"

"Wei Ying was the first person to approach the Fragrance Palace," Lan Wangji pointed out. "He also has the lowest rank."

Although the son of a former sect leader, Mo Xuanyu's status couldn't hope to compare against Zewu-jun's, Hanguang-jun's, or that of the Sect Leaders and Sect heirs there. Madam Jin felt herself frown slightly at the reminder.

At that moment, the person who spoke next was Su She: "People who aren't from the LanlingJin Sect might have not heard of him before. His name is Mo Xuanyu. He used to be a disciple of the LanlingJin Sect. However, because of his indecent conduct, he was thrown out. He harassed Lianfang-zun. From what I've heard, nowadays he's been following around Hanguang-jun, having proven himself to Hanguang-jun's likings."

Lan Qiren frowned at the crude phrasing. He would be watching Su She very carefully once they left the simulation.

"He has been following after Hanguang-jun everywhere. Why would Hanguang-jun, who has always been known for his grace and righteousness, keep such a person by his side? It truly is difficult to understand."

With every word, the expression on Jin Ling's face darkened, and chattering broke out among the gathered Sect Leaders.

Slowly, Jin Guangyao set Qin Su's body down, standing up and placing a hand on the hilt of his sword as he said, "I won't bring up the past, so tell me the truth. A-Su's bizarre death… are you involved in it at all?"

'*Really, if any of his act was actually true… he would have been so much better than Guangshan,*' Madam Jin thought, a bitter smile forming on her face. Of course the one good Sect Leader the Jin Sect had was nothing but a liar and a fake.

~~*And she had to wonder… if she had raised him as her own, supported him with the power of the Jins, would she have been able to change him?*~~

Unfortunately, there was no way of knowing. The Jin Guangyao in the simulation wouldn't change just because they wished it, and he was the one Wei Wuxian needed to handle right now.

'*How expertly played,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*When he says it like that, of course everyone will think I kicked up a fuss by lying and that I had something to do with Qin Su's death. And what am I supposed to bring up in response? That I saw Nie Mingjue's head? How I snuck into the secret room? The mysterious person Qin Su met with before she died, or the letter that could just as easily be a fabrication? That would only make me look more suspicious!*'

While Wei Wuxian was trying to come up with a plan, Jin Guangyao unsheathed his sword. Lan Wangji moved in front of Wei Wuxian at once, unsheathing Bichen to block any attack. Seeing that, the other Sect Leaders began unsheathing their swords as well.

Wei Wuxian remained silent.

"Well you have to say something!" Jin Zixuan pointed out. "I mean… he has weighed it against you, but he can't have hidden Chifeng-zun's head *that* well. If they all look for it-"

"They would have to believe him to do that," Madam Jin pointed out.

"But-but the people here…" Jiang Yanli stuttered. "A-Cheng's future self is there! Maybe he would listen. And Nie-gongzi is there as well. They're some of the most powerful sect leaders present, and Zewu-jun is already on A-Xian's side, so…."

Both Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang looked away — one frustrated and angry, one scratching his cheek and slightly embarrassed — and did nothing to back up Jiang Yanli's hopes. Their future selves didn't even seem to really be friends anymore; the chances of them working together to force a proper investigation was less than zero.

(The people gathered here might be the future's sect leaders, but there didn't seem to be anyone all that interested in actually finding out the truth.)

(Wen Ruohan frowned even deeper, thinking, for a brief moment, that if he hadn't been so stupid — attacking the other sects in an altogether meaningless display of power — he might be able to actually do something to help.)

As more and more people prepared for combat, Wei Wuxian began looking around. Reasoning with everyone seemed impossible, so he needed to look for an escape route and a weapon.

Suibian laid waiting atop a cabinet. Wei Wuxian immediately grabbed it and unsheathed the sword. To his surprise, wide-eyed stares and gasps broke out among the gathered Sect Leaders, quite a few even stepping back further out of fear.

"It's the Yiling Patriarch!" Jin Guangyao revealed.

Jin Ling's eyes went wide.

"What?"

"...Oh," Lan Xichen muttered quietly. "Oh no."

In an instant, the blades of every disciple in the room pointed at him — including Jin Ling's.

Jin Zixuan stood up, "Wait, A-Ling, he-"

"What a surprise to see that the Yiling Patriarch has returned to this world and decided to make an appearance here. Apologies for the lack of proper reception."

Wei Wuxian still appeared confused. Luckily, he wasn't the only one.

"San-ge, what did you call him?" Nie Huaisang wondered, frowning slightly. "Isn't this Mo Xuanyu?"

Not lowering his blade at all, Jin Guangyao ordered, "Huaisang, A-Ling, come here. Be careful. Since he pulled his sword out, he's most definitely the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian!"

"I guess that explains his reaction to Wei Wuxian's sword earlier," Madam Yu sighed. "What a mess."

No one could disagree.

"Since the actual name of his sword is embarrassing to say, people usually call it 'Wei Wuxian's sword,' 'his sword,' or 'this sword.' The words 'Yiling Patriarch' evoked even more fear in all of them than finding out Chifeng-zun had been dismembered did. Even people who didn't intend on fighting had unsheathed their swords," Jin Ling explained.

And yet, despite the absolute disaster unfolding in front of him, Wei Wuxian remained calm. It wasn't arrogance — both he and Lan Wangji were fully aware of just how dangerous these opponents could be, and there were very few resources around for Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation. It wasn't as though Wei Wuxian thought this would be easy to get out of.

(Instead, it almost seemed like, as bad as things currently were, Wei Wuxian was just a bit numb to it all. Expectant.)

However, whether through genuine confusion or a desire to help, there was one person who kept trying to protest:

"D-don't tell me that anyone who pulls out that sword must be the Yiling Patriarch! San-ge, Hanguang-jun, there must be some kind of misunderstanding here, right?"

"There's no misunderstanding. He's undoubtedly Wei Wuxian."

"...At least *you're* asking for a further investigation," Nie Mingjue muttered. Nie Huaisang lit up at the slight praise, even though the watchers all knew none of the present Sect Leaders would listen to the words of 'the Headshaker.'

"Wait! Uncle, wait!" a sudden shout echoed. "Didn't my Shushu hit him with Zidian back on Dafan mountain? His soul wasn't wiped out, so there must not be anyone possessing this body, right? And so he can't be Wei Wuxian, right?!"

"A-Ling?" Jiang Yanli asked, staring in surprise.

Jin Zixuan stared for a moment too, before a large, proud smile covered his face. Although people probably wouldn't listen to him anymore than they did to Nie Huaisang, it was nice to see him try.

(Two people were trying to defend Wei Wuxian. That was a whole lot better than none.)

However-

"Dafan mountain?" Jin Guangyao asked. "That's right. A-Ling, now that you've reminded me, I'm recalling just what appeared on Dafan mountain. Wasn't Wen Ning summoned there?"

"Shoot," Jin Zixuan deflated, having to acknowledge how good of a point that was.

Having had his protest both dismissed and refuted, Jin Ling paled slightly.

"...It would seem that none of you know this, but back when Mo Xuanyu was at Koi Tower, he saw a copy of one of the Yiling Patriarch's manuscripts in my room. The manuscript involved a dark technique of 'sacrificing' one's body at the cost of your own soul as a means to summon a spirit to get your revenge. Even a hundred more strikes from Sect Leader Jiang's Zidian wouldn't lead to a different result. The person using the technique sacrificed their body willingly! It doesn't count as possession at all!"

Yeah, okay. There wasn't much that could be said now.

Still….

From the center of the room, the Second Jade of Lan softly exhaled before muttering, "We still don't fully know why the current world hates him so much."

The last they had seen had been right after the war. Sure, there was annoyance regarding his "arrogance" and concern over how dangerous he could be ~~now that he wasn't a needed weapon anymore,~~ but there had been nothing even resembling this.

What had actually happened at the Nightless City?

"But… since the use of that technique can't be proven, we have no way to confirm whether it happened, right?" someone pointed out.

"It's true that the use of the body sacrifice can't be proven, but his identity can. Ever since the Yiling Patriarch received a cultivation backlash and got torn apart by ghosts at the top of the Burial Mounds, his sword sealed itself."

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened in surprise.

"He didn't know?" Jiang Cheng asked, raising an eyebrow. How did that not come up? Surely, someone would have mentioned it when they next saw him wield his sword. Jiang Cheng had seen it happen first hand when Lan Wangji attempted after the sword was reclaimed. Wei Wuxian might have stopped carrying it around, but there was no reason for him to give up spiritual cultivation entirely. He loved flying on his sword.

He supposed that just went to show how much the world would have changed in the next few years.

Wei Wuxian's expression turned a bit more worried than it had been before.

"I believe I don't need to explain how a sword seals itself in detail. The sword is a spiritual weapon. It refuses to let anyone apart from Wei Wuxian use it, which is why it was sealed. And yet, just a second ago, 'Mo Xuanyu' here pulled it out!"

At those words, a dozen attacks were sent Wei Wuxian's way.

And yet Lan Wangji blocked them all.

Wen Ruohan nodded once in approval.

(Jin Guangshan just raised an eyebrow, somewhat impressed by what his bastard son had managed to do. If he had known the boy was this good at talking his way out of things, he might have accepted him in earlier. Well, there was always time to change that.)

Luckily for everyone, in the simulation, Jin Guangshan was already dead. Unluckily, Jin Guangyao's words had worked everyone up into a frenzy.

Attack after attack came Wei Wuxian's way, until Lan Wangji responded with his own and instantly blew a large portion of the Sect Leaders back with his sword glare.

"Wangji!" Lan Xichen shouted.

A few of the Sect Leaders who had been knocked over by Bichen's energy growled, "Hanguang-jun, you-"

However, while Lan Wangji had been buying time, Wei Wuxian had been hard at work. Without giving away what he was focusing on, he had sent a few traces of resentful energy to open the lock on the window lattice behind him. It contained metal bars, and everyone present had thought it was sealed shut. At that moment, the hinges connecting it to the wall were loosened and it fell to the floor.

Before it had even made contact with the ground, Wei Wuxian was out. He hopped through the window and landed on the ground a story below, sprinting as soon as he made contact. Hanguang-jun followed a half second after, bringing up the rear.

As they ran, dodging and instantly incapacitating anyone who tried to attack them, Wei Wuxian thought, 'I see. Jin Guangyao must have realized who I was the second he saw the paperman use Suibian. And so he quickly made up a series of lies, caused Qin Su to take her own life, and then forced me towards the cabinet Suibian was laying on top of so I would reveal my identity. Scary, scary. Who could have known that his reaction would be so fast, and his lies, so flawless?'

It was a massive understatement, but the watchers also couldn't deny that 'scary, scary' seemed like a perfect description of Jin Guangyao. It took him only a minute to come up with such a lie, and they still didn't know what he had done to make Qin Su take her own life.

Jiang Yanli clasped her hands together, privately saying a quick mournful prayer for Qin Su's soul.

Wei Wuxian turned a corner to head toward the exit, and Lan Wangji followed right after.

***My reputation's always been terrible, so this isn't my first time in a situation like this,'* Wei Wuxian thought as he ran, eliciting several frowns from the gallery. '*In fact, in this life, my mindset's pretty different from in my last one. Getting away first, and hoping to counterattack later, is going to be much more effective than trying to claim I'm innocent, only to get slashed by hundreds of swords.*'**

There was a certain, unmistakable levity to his words that didn't at all match the perilous situation.

Lan Wangji became even more silent than before.

'*His mindset is 'different' from how it was in his last life. In that he's not foolish enough to try something as 'ineffective' as convincing anyone of his own innocence.*'

And the sect leaders that had been around last time were the people who had been brought into the simulation.

'*Wei Ying… what happened to you?*'

The explanation for that was still a ways away though.

'***Everyone believed with the utmost certainty that I'd somehow return to seek revenge sometime in the future. With Jin Guangyao fanning the flames, no one will ever side with me,'* Wei Wuxian concluded, then, somewhat disbelievingly, glanced to the side. '*It's different for Hanguang-jun though. He doesn't need to come up with an excuse; people will do that for him. Even now, I'm sure they're all saying he was deceived by the Yiling Patriarch or something.*'**

Which meant-

"Hanguang-jun, you don't have to follow me."

"What?" Nie Mingjue asked.

Jiang Cheng gaped: "Why are you throwing away the only help you have?!"

And the simulated Lan Wangji didn't reply.

"You really want to go with me?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Think carefully. After you walk out this door, your reputation will be destroyed!"

The two had already flashed down the steps of Koi Tower. However, in their journey, they had been avoiding pursuers around every corner, unable to take the most obvious path out. As a result, someone had gotten there before them.

It was Jin Ling.

Jiang Yanli relaxed at once, relieved to see her son again. Despite the shock he had experienced, he did at least seem to be physically fine. Given how he spoke of Wei Wuxian while recording the narration for the simulation, Jiang Yanli could be assured their relationship would repair itself soon enough.

Of everyone who could have cut the pair off, he was by far the best option.

Wei Wuxian clearly felt the same. He breathed out a sigh of relief and moved to go around him. However, before he could, Jin Ling unsheathed his sword and blocked their way.

"You're… Wei Ying?" he demanded.

Everyone paused at the same moment as Wei Wuxian.

Jin Ling's unexpected actions had stalled them long enough for some others to arrive. Lan Wangji turned away, slashing Bichen through the air, using the sword aura to throw their pursuers back. Attack after attack came from a dozen cultivators, but not one of them could get by Hanguang-jun.

Meanwhile, the expression on Jin Ling's face was nearly indescribable. There was anger, hatred, doubt, hesitation, fear, distress-

Someone he had grown to trust turned out to be the person he had been raised to hate most.

"You really are Wei Ying, Wei Wuxian?!" he shouted.

What kind of a response could Wei Wuxian give, exactly?

The pain in Jin Ling's voice was infinitely greater than his hatred. Wei Wuxian's expression faltered, and he looked away for a moment.

But they were running out of time.

"Jin Ling-" he began, only to stop.

A sword had passed through his stomach. He glanced up, and, for a half second, he saw a younger Jiang Cheng standing there wielding the blade. A moment later, that illusion faded away, and he saw the truth.

Jin Ling had just stabbed him.

The world tilted, and Wei Wuxian fell to the ground.

"*Wei Ying!*" Lan Wangji shouted.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like my chapters are somehow getting longer and longer. I really didn't plan on this happening! ¯_(ツ)_/¯

Maybe we'll try to make the next chapter a bit of a more reasonable length.
:)

🎵 Shalalalala My Oh My, Looks Like the Boy Too Shy, Ain't Gonna- 🎵

Chapter Notes

> Hi everyone! Tintin, my beta reader, has been a little sick lately. They were a super huge help as always, so if you could give them some support I'd really appreciate it! Also: Warning! The following chapter contains Jin Guangshan (and everything that implies).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a knock at the door, and both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji glanced towards it. It was getting relatively late in the day (for Lans), the sun having just set, and most residents knew better than to approach the happy couple's home once night fell. Little Lan ears wouldn't be able to handle the sounds that would surely follow.

(Luckily, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji hadn't started quite yet.)

After hurriedly untying the knot around Wei Wuxian's hands and putting the responsible forehead ribbon back on his own head, Lan Wangji straightened himself up and moved toward the door, opening it without delay.

"Xiongzhang?" he asked, his eyes widening slightly when he saw who it was.

"Wangji," Wei Wuxian heard another voice greet back. "May I come in? It will only take a moment."

Hanguang-jun stepped aside, allowing Lan Xichen into the room. The first jade had a set of papers and scrolls in his arms, which Lan Wangji softly took from him without delay. There was a distinct air of delicacy around Lan Wangji's actions, as though Lan Xichen was made of something far more fragile than glass. Perhaps paper mache, or barely-wet sand, or something else along those lines; a medium able to be torn to pieces at a slight gust of wind.

After Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and the kids had checked the inside of the past's simulation, Lan Xichen had run out of his seclusion voluntarily upon hearing Wei Wuxian's less than ideal reaction. That was the first time he had left seclusion in quite some time, as well as the first ever unnecessary exit on his part. Since then, although occasionally making journeys, Lan Xichen had still mostly remained inside.

Which made his sudden appearance here quite surprising.

"Can we do something for you, Zewu-jun?" Wei Wuxian asked, watching as Lan Xichen sat down at the table before him. Lan Wangji sat to Wei Wuxian's left, putting down the

documents Sect Leader Lan had brought inside. Curious, Wei Wuxian leaned against his husband, observing the papers below.

“I was thinking about what Huai… what Sect Leader Nie said,” Lan Xichen confessed. “I still don’t think it would be right to punish Meng Yao for what Jin Guangyao did. Especially since, at the beginning at least, Meng Yao was far more… reactive. He only took action once confronted by others.”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t definitively say that was objectively false, so he nodded along and wrapped his hand around Lan Wangji’s now tightly-clenched fist.

“That-that said, I… I do think there was a transition. And maybe… me letting him get away with smaller crimes perpetuated the issue and led to what eventually occurred.”

“Jin Guangyao is responsible for his own actions,” Hanguang-jun said. “You cannot be expected to take accountability for the things he chose to do.”

A sad smile worked its way onto Lan Xichen’s face, but he nodded once and said, “I know. I just think that, maybe, if we had stopped the smaller instances, the larger ones wouldn’t have occurred.”

If they hadn’t let him get away with killing his Jin superior (or had at least gotten him a fair trial over it), maybe Jin Guangyao wouldn’t have framed and murdered whole clans to build his watchtowers.

Maybe.

“That’s still the same issue though, isn’t it?” Wei Wuxian asked. “We couldn’t immediately tell whether he was telling the truth, and he had no trust in the people in power, so he wouldn’t even let a trial occur.”

Lan Xichen nodded once, pursing his lips together slightly at the reminder, only to freeze when-

“Ow!”

All three heads turned toward the window, where that sound had just come from. They had felt the presences of two people for a few minutes now, but, given how far away the pair had been, hadn’t been worried about eavesdropping. However, just a moment ago, one of the presences had tried to sneak closer.

And, in the dark, had tripped over a log and fallen flat on his face.

“Are you alright, Jingyi?” Wei Wuxian called out.

“I’m fine!”

“Jingyi-” Lan Sizhui cut off and sighed, realizing that trying to hide themselves had been pointless from the start.

Silently as always, Lan Wangji stood up and walked toward the door, welcoming the pair inside. If not for Lan Qiren training perfect posture into the two of them, they would surely have had to drag themselves inside, heads hung low.

“Sect Leader, Senior Wei, Hanguang-jun,” they greeted.

Grinning, Wei Wuxian leaned forward and said, “You know, Sect Leader Lan was having a pretty important conversation with us. Don’t you think it’s a bit rude of you little Lans to eavesdrop? To say nothing of the *rules!*”

Lan Jingyi gaped, having no way to respond to *Wei Wuxian* of all people lecturing him about the Lan Sect’s rules, and Lan Sizhui seemed to wilt even further.

“Sorry, Xian-gege,” he apologized. “But… we’re not uninvolved. We helped!”

“That they did,” Lan Xichen confirmed. “I hope you’ll excuse their actions this time, on my behalf.”

Lan Jingyi relaxed at once, knowing that Hanguang-jun couldn’t be too disappointed in him if Lan Xichen said it was okay.

“They helped?” Wei Wuxian repeated. “With what?”

Gesturing to one of the scrolls he had brought with him, Sect Leader Lan elaborated, “These are mainly copies of the notes you submitted to the Lan Sect’s library regarding your most recent invention. The juniors helped me get access to them without alerting the rest of the sect, as would surely have happened if I had gone myself. I hope… we might be able to find a way to stop Meng Yao before he goes too far, but there are issues of how reliably we will be able to do that. You’ve brought up a few times how you’re trying to gain influence in the alternate dimension, but, even if you succeed, we won’t exactly be able to conduct a full investigation without going there. Then I thought… I thought maybe we could use the simulation. You’ve adapted empathy to work on living souls as well, and given it the ability to project that information to a crowd. We can display memories; there would be no need to rely on just his word when we can simply see what happened.”

“Ah. That would be very helpful. Though if he’s choosing which of his memories to show us, then it’s hard to trust them completely,” Wei Wuxian pointed out.

“I know, which is another part of why I called these two juniors here to help me.”

“What did you two do?” Lan Wangji asked them.

“Ah, Zewu-jun wanted to know how we’d managed to get memories about what you two had done inside the Cloud Recesses, where all spirits are blocked off,” Lan Sizhui explained. “We told him about the trick Xian-gege had shown us, of getting memories in the little traces of resentment lingering in even the most purified areas. Since, so long as there’s living people somewhere, there will be a bit of resentful energy too. It might be a lot more blurry and inconsistent than the spirit method, but it still works!”

Wei Wuxian was so, so proud of his little radish's big brain. True, Sizhui remembering that had sent who knew what into the past for the world to see, but still — he couldn't help but be proud!

Smiling, Lan Xichen continued, "After listening to their explanation, I thought… well, sending a spirit to follow after Meng Yao would be unreliable and an invasion of privacy, but using this trick of theirs might work. It's not someone watching him constantly, which would probably cause unnecessary panic for him, but it does give us the ability to see if we decide we need to."

"I see," Wei Wuxian said, falling into deep thought.

"I went into one of our libraries and found this," Lan Xichen said, pulling up one of the oldest-looking scrolls. "It details how to apply a talisman without sticking a physical piece of paper on something. It will need to be recharged every once in a while, but I thought if we combined it with what you've already made, then perhaps we could attack it to him in a way that would allow such information can be sent *back* to us. That way, those of us in the future can ensure that we agree with the choices they make on their end, and possibly use the influence you're gaining to push one way or the other. If Huaisang and I could have a failsafe for if something goes wrong and an investigation needs to happen… we could all be a bit more at ease."

Wei Wuxian reached forward to grab the frontmost scroll and opened it up so that both he and Lan Wangji could read it. He scanned his eyes over the page rapidly, growing more excited with every second.

"This… might actually work," Wei Wuxian grinned. "The privacy thing you mentioned will need to be dealt with since the past probably won't be happy if we can see everything they do, but I bet I could set it up in a way that would hide the information from us until someone on that side agreed to it. And hey, I bet Huaisang will be happy too. Maybe, if we show him this, he won't mind getting the position of Chief Cultivator tossed his way!"

Lan Wangji nodded in agreement, hopeful that would be the case.

"Not bad at all, kids," Wei Wuxian said, making the two juniors light up, before he turned to Lan Xichen. "Thank you. I really… this will help a lot. Thanks, Da-ge."

Lan Xichen smiled back, more genuinely than any other he'd given in the past few months.

On the other hand, a very different atmosphere had taken over the watchers in the past. The segment had ended, but most eyes were glued to where it had last been, unable to pull away. There were a few beats of complete silence.

…

"...I-"

Lan Xichen began, only to cut himself off, not sure what he was trying to say.

Madam Jin stared blankly, and even Jin Guangshan was gaping in shock.

To say nothing of how Lan Wangji looked.

Jin Zixuan felt dizzy, as if hallucinating or stuck in a dream. There was a washed-out look to the world, and he could hear a slight ringing in his ears, like he was being rapidly pulled underwater.

The watchers had been shown plenty of shocking things throughout the simulation. There was the Wen Sect's plans, the burning of the Cloud Recesses, the Massacre of Lotus PIer, and the Burial Mounds, most strikingly. Even in the future, things had happened. They had found Nie Mingjue's head, and Jiang Cheng's future self had used a dog against Wei Wuxian.

But the juniors — their stupid little narrators who kept throwing themselves into danger and having to be saved by Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji — had always been different. They were a spark of hope amongst everything else as the one thing that kept getting better and better — Jin Ling most of all.

'What, a donkey?' a boy in yellow groaned. 'I set more than 400 spirit nets, but I haven't been able to catch one ghost! I just find you idiots every single time!'

Those were the first words the non-narrating Jin Ling had said, and they conveyed quite a bit all on their own.

A captured young woman cried out, 'Please, Young Master! Do us a small favor and let us down!'

But Jin Ling just glared: 'You guys should just stay here! I don't want you messing around and getting in my way again!'

Those words had made the captured cultivators' faces fall, and the reason why had been immediately obvious to both Wei Wuxian and the watchers. There was a creature in Dafan Mountains. It was not known to anyone at the time that its identity was the Stone Goddess, so, for all anyone knew, it might have already been wandering around the mountain at the time, looking for prey. If those cultivators had happened to run into the creature while trapped like that, unable to move, they would be able to do nothing but wait for their souls to be sucked dry.

But Jin Ling was just a kid. And it probably wouldn't happen, given how much chance was required for the monster to just stumble across the captured people. And they were all cultivators; when they chose to go night hunting, they knew how dangerous it was. They were probably well prepared enough to defend themselves.

~~And Jin Ling was from the Jin Sect. He was the heir to one of the Great Sects! If what they were considering was his reputation and accomplishments as compared to their safety…~~

Looking back on it now, some part of Jiang Yanli couldn't help but recall Xue Yang.

(Because who would care about the finger of a child when a sect leader had somewhere he needed to be?)

It wasn't the same — the level of maliciousness Jin Ling showed was nowhere *near* what Sect Leader Chang had exhibited. However, in a hypothetical, different universe, she also wouldn't have been surprised to find out that Sect Leader Chang set up spirit nets as a child to cheat his way into getting fame. She didn't think her son could have ever done something as cruel as what Sect Leader Chang had done, but….

The initial traces were there.

And then Wei Wuxian had come into his life, and given him a chance to see things differently. With every time he saved Jin Ling's life, Wei Wuxian had made the boy reconsider his stance on the world. First the realization that maybe 'Mo Xuanyu' wasn't just a lunatic. Then Jin Ling had saved Wei Wuxian from Jiang Cheng, before admitting that perhaps two men *could* be together, so long as 'Mo Xuanyu' remained loyal to Lan Wangji and didn't go after his half brother. And then there was Yi City, and Jin Ling had to be saved from a demonic cultivator *by* a demonic cultivator, and 'Mo Xuanyu' became someone he could trust. Jin Ling relied on him, learned from him, and, slowly but surely, had begun making friends.

The watchers might not know everything that happened right before Wei Wuxian's death, but they could be certain that the rumors were far from accurate. How Wei Wuxian interacted with Jin Ling was some of the greatest proof of that. The Jin heir might not have known he was Wei Wuxian, but, given his future self's narration, it was all going to be fine-

"Er-right, the future!" Jiang Cheng exclaimed at once. "Wei Wuxian said he's been in contact with 'Mo Xuanyu's future self. So Wei Wuxian's obviously fine! He's not… he-"

"So at least Jin Ling didn't kill him?" Madam Jin asked. Jiang Cheng's mouth snapped shut at that.

None of them could get that last image — Wei Wuxian, collapsing at once, a sword having stabbed through his gut — out of their heads.

Most especially a certain Chief Cultivator.

"I knew it," he muttered. "Of course, my mistake for thinking he was the exception. Your family never fails to hurt Wei Wuxian in every way possible."

Madam Jin gaped at his audacity.

"*You* started the war!" Madam Yu shrieked, saying what they had all been thinking. "*Your son* is the one who threw him into the Burial Mounds!"

Nie Mingjue laughed, "And I hope you don't forget the Xuanwu your sect trapped him with."

"Of course," Wen Ruohan acknowledged easily. "Because he was *our* enemy; it wasn't our responsibility to protect him. It was, however, yours."

“Jin Ling is a child-”

“He’s a symptom of your actions,” Wen Ruohan scoffed. “Every bit of the resentment and hate within him is because of the lot of you. Wei Wuxian even saw the boy as Jiang Wanyin for a moment. If you’ve watched the simulation without covering your eyes, it should be clear that all your family ever *does* is-”

“Sect Leader!” Wen Qing spoke up, making quite a few of the people present turn to her in disbelief. What was even more difficult to believe was that, after her words, Wen Ruohan indeed cut himself off.

~~Because right now, he wanted nothing more than to tell them all where Jiang Wanyin’s new core had most likely come from. Wen Qing had stopped him from bringing it up because one of the last things Wei Wuxian would want was for that to be used as a weapon against the Jiangs. He had never agreed to them being shown any of this; the least she could do was keep everyone from hearing about it from *Wen Ruohan* of all people.~~

~~Wen Ruohan, on the other hand, had a fairly different reasoning in mind. Yes, it would hurt coming from him. He was almost positive he was right, and just the accusation would be enough to make the Jiangs rethink everything they had done thus far. Jiang Fengmian might be gone, but Wen Ruohan would be perfectly happy to tell him later and get the satisfaction all over again. However, from what he had seen so far, the simulation was choosing scenes quite carefully, and keeping certain things secret only to reveal them later, when it would have the strongest impact. And given how the Burial Mounds had been…~~

~~The Jiang family had seemed to make it their life goal to offend Wen Ruohan with their stupidity, but, for now, Wen Ruohan was willing to keep silent just a bit longer.~~

(Nie Huaisang, watching this all go down, wished once again that he had his fan, and hid an amused smile behind his hand.)

Then slowly, hesitantly, Jin Guangshan stepped forward.

“W-well,” he cleared his throat. “I must admit, I do think the Chief Cultivator has a point. That final scene shows us once and for all how corrupting Meng Yao’s influence on society was. He’s filled their minds with propaganda, until even Jin Ling would aim to kill someone who saved his life time and time again. We have to wonder how he got everyone to believe such ridiculous tales.”

“I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough,” Nie Mingjue said. “Given what those kids said when they first brought us into the simulation, the world in general realized their mistake, just a little too late.”

“Oh, right,” Jiang Yanli lit up. “This is A-Xian’s invention, isn’t it? And little A-Xian has been working with big A-Xian to make it better, and little A-Xian didn’t mention any sort of apparent injury or lack of health in big A-Xian.”

“Which doesn’t undo what’s happened,” Lan Wangji pointed out. Sure, Jin Ling was ‘just a kid,’ but it was hard for the juniors — who were on average less than a year older than him

— to view it that way.

“Well, we know Wei Wuxian survives,” Wen Qing said. “We know Young Master Jin comes to regret his actions, and we know Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji will end up safe. When we started watching the simulation, the first thing those juniors told us was that they were sending this information over so that we wouldn’t make the same mistakes our past selves did. For now, all we can do is continue to watch.”

Continue to watch, and see how the world they all-but-ruled ended up twisted enough to have resulted in the outcome they had just seen. Having decided on that, the watchers slowly began to settle down, many retaking their seats. They weren’t happy, but most just wanted to see the next part of the simulation as soon as possible and turned all their focus to where they knew the next part would come from.

Then, finally, the world began to change.

The first thing they heard from this segment were footsteps. They were light, but rapid and hurried. A high level cultivator was moving over a long distance as quietly as he could. The next thing they heard, nearly too quietly to make out, was a name. It was soft, whispered, as the speaker was barely-conscious due to his injuries.

“...Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Mn.”

Hanguang-jun’s breathing was beginning to come out heavily, but his response was as even-toned as ever.

Everyone relaxed slightly at the confirmation of the pair’s escape. The Lans, especially, felt their heart rates calm.

(Though most of Lan Xichen just wished his other self had prevented this from happening in the first place.)

“Lan Zhan-” Wei Wuxian began again.

“I am here,” Hanguang-jun continued. As they got farther and farther from Koi Tower, Lan Wangji allowed his footsteps to shift to a more even and less frantic pace, going for endurance rather than speed. The steady thumps echoed in Wei Wuxian’s mind, and he squeezed on tighter.

“At that moment, something that Wei Wuxian had never felt before sprouted in his heart,” Ouyang Zizhen read aloud, with no small amount of enthusiasm despite Jin Ling’s groan of embarrassment. “His chest hurt a bit, but it also felt a bit warm.”

And the spirits knew that, because they could feel the fluctuations in resentful energy caused by the Yiling Patriarch’s emotions. Now, with their new, ever-growing sensitivity to resentful energy, the watchers could feel it too.

An image was overlaid behind Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian, switching the background to one of Wei Wuxian's memories. The narration continued:

"Back in Jiangling, Hanguang-jun constantly came all the way over to assist Senior Wei, and yet Wei Wuxian felt like he hadn't appreciated the kindness at all. They had gotten into all kinds of disputes, and the two had often parted with disapproval."

And indeed, the memories shown proved that their reunion after Wei Wuxian's return from the Burial Mounds wasn't a one-time thing. The two apparently got into spats and arguments and shouting matches constantly, unable to fully understand each other during this time.

Lan Wangji frowned at the memories, and Lan Qiren quietly cursed his own past self for the simulated Lan Qiren's part in all this. Wei Wuxian hadn't even been serious when he brought up demonic cultivation initially. If Lan Qiren had been able to just-

He paused, unable to imagine himself having done anything else.

(He swore he could hear Cangse Sanren laughing at him from the world beyond.)

'*But I hadn't expected this,*' Wei Wuxian thought, continuing the story himself. '*Who could have known that, when everyone feared and flattered me, Lan Wangji would scold me right to my face, but, now that everyone spurns and loathes me, Lan Wangji stays by my side.*'

Lan Wangji nearly did a double-take, switching from guilt to shock so quickly that even the other juniors were able to see it.

Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng had nearly the opposite reaction, knowing full well what category his other-self probably landed in of those two. He might have not flattered Wei Wuxian much, but as for the other parts….

(Why had Wei Wuxian seen Jin Ling as him, in that moment?)

"Ah, I remember now," Wei Wuxian suddenly said.

Lan Wangji glanced back, asking, "Remember what?"

"I remember now, Lan Zhan. Just like this… I-I carried you like this before, didn't I? In the cave of the Xuanwu."

"Oh, *now* he remembers," Wen Qing muttered, giving a soft, tired smile. "Don't you think you should be focusing on recovering, Wei Wuxian?"

Now was really not the time for him to be thinking about things like this, but, having slowly grown used to Wei Wuxian over time, she found it hard to be surprised.

Regardless-

“That was nice,” Wei Wuxian muttered, the blood loss forcing him to slur his words together drunkenly. “You sang me a song. It got stuck in my head, you know. I kept humming it… even at… Phoenix Mountain.”

The world began to grow black.

“Wait. Wait wait wait — *what?!*” Jiang Cheng shouted. “What’s going on?!”

“Why is it getting dark?!” Jiang Yanli asked, turning this way and that.

Wen Qing frowned, “He must be falling unconscious. The next memory we see will probably be after he wakes up.”

Unfortunately for them, it wasn’t.

♩♩♪♪♪

“Is that… humming?” Lan Xichen asked.

Light began to appear, and a bustling, life-filled town formed around them. The very last place Lan Wangji would ever take Wei Wuxian when the whole world was out to get him.

“No,” Madam Yu shook her head. “No, this better not be a flashback-”

“I believe it is,” Wen Ruohan said, cutting her off. By the narrowing of his eyes, anyone would be able to tell he was less than pleased by this update.

A flashback? *Now?!* When Wei Wuxian had just been stabbed?!

~~A few weeks ago, at the request of the future’s juniors, a large group of spirits began putting the memories for the simulation together. When one of them brought up the idea of inserting a flashback here, the group’s subsequent laughter had frightened the youngest residents of Gusu into fleeing back into town, away from the unseen, cackling figures in the forest.~~

Red and yellow leaves fluttered by — not at all matching the season they had just been in — and were carried up by a soft breeze into a sunny sky.

“It was autumn in the hunting grounds of Phoenix Mountain,” Lan Jingyi explained. “Hundreds to thousands of cultivators gathered there, a place where demons and beasts often lurked, to hunt for an allotted period of time. Large sects would be displaying their skill, and rogue cultivators would also gather, eager to make themselves known.”

“Are you *kidding me?!*” Jin Zixuan asked. “A competition?! What we were watching in the future is a million times more important than that!”

“W-well, maybe it will be like the archery competition the Wens hosted?” Jiang Yanli suggested. “And-and it’ll lead to something more important?”

“Maybe,” Madam Yu said, though she sounded thoroughly unconvinced.

It was a strange sort of whiplash, to go back to something like this. They had started in this sense of normalcy, with the disciples being sent to the Cloud Recesses, but they most certainly hadn't ended there.

But the war was over. Things were going back to normal.

Supposedly.

~~The underlying feeling of dread throughout the watchers remained as strong as ever.~~

Within the most embellished and extravagant tower, the sect leaders, elders, and other high ranking members looked down at the pathway with their families. Behind them, rows and rows of maids carried fans, shades, and drinks, ready to offer support whenever requested. The women in the front rows covered their faces with small fans, remaining quiet and reserved as they gazed over the hunting grounds.

However, a moment later, that reservation disappeared.

"Oh," one gasped.

"Look, look," another whispered. "Over there!"

Excitement buzzed through the crowd. Women surged closer to get a better look, barely remembering to keep up appearances when faced with what was below.

"It's the Twin Jades!"

A slight, embarrassed blush appeared on Lan Xichen's face at the cheering, but he nevertheless appeared a little excited as he watched his and Lan Wangji's future selves ride in on horseback.

"In night-hunts, horses weren't actually needed when hunting down prey," Lan Jingyi summarized for them as the young women began to excitedly toss flowers down. "However, horsemanship was one of the arts that clan disciples were required to study. During formal events, entering on horseback was not only a symbol of respect, but would create an atmosphere of grandeur for the rest of the event."

Nie Mingjue levied a long look at Nie Huaisang, who had often declared his lack of interest in learning such things.

"Boiled down, there was no practical use — it was just for aesthetics."

Nie Mingjue seemed to falter at that description, while Nie Huaisang became increasingly smug.

"Well, it's-" Jin Zixuan began, only to pause as well, not really able to counter that.

Madam Yu rolled her eyes: "There's plenty of value in taking the time to give importance to important things. Would you rather go around showing disrespect to everyone you meet?"

“But no one uses it for anything else, right?” Nie Huaisang piped up, before turning to his Da-ge. “Even you’ve always said that you’d be willing to let me ‘flounce around on nothing more than a pony’ so long as I practiced my swordsmanship.”

“The issue is that you *didn’t* practice your swordsmanship even after agreeing to that,” Nie Mingjue scolded back.

He was about to continue but paused upon seeing the simulated Hanguang-jun suddenly raise his hand, stopping a flower that was coming from behind him. Well accustomed to receiving this sort of attention since they were thirteen, Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen were never anything other than poised while doing such processions.

What made this flower different, however, was who it was from.

Lan Wangji glanced behind and saw an impatient Jiang Cheng sitting next to a casual, seemingly-distracted Wei Wuxian. However, by this point, Lan Wangji had a far more thorough understanding of Wei Wuxian than his fifteen year old self had.

“Wangji? What’s wrong?” Lan Xichen asked, seeing that his brother was no longer moving forward.

“Wei Ying,” he said in response, feeling that was more than enough of an explanation.

(In many ways, it was.)

Jiang Yanli couldn’t resist a slight giggle at that.

“What?” Wei Wuxian turned around, as though suddenly being alerted to Lan Wangji’s presence. “Hanguang-jun, did you call me? What’s up?”

Innocent to a T.

“Oh no,” Jiang Cheng buried his face in his hands.

“Well, I am at least glad you two don’t seem antagonistic to each other,” Wen Qing commented, remembering their interactions in the last few flashbacks. No longer being at war ~~with her family~~ seemed to be helping them both.

Holding the flower out for Wei Wuxian to see, Lan Wangji coldly asked, “Was this you?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Wei Wuxian shook his head.

“Don’t believe him! It was him!” the maiden by his side shouted at once, smiling widely.

Wei Wuxian gasped and clutched at his chest, feelings of betrayal shining in his eyes as he said, “No, how could you treat a good person like this? I’m getting angry!”

Giggling, the maidens began moving back to their sects, knowing it was the Jiangs’ turn to move forward soon.

“Ah, like this, he really does look like the same A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli commented. With the similarities in Wei Wuxian and Mo Xuanyu’s appearance (especially given that Wei Wuxian styled his hair the same way he had when he was younger), it had almost felt like they were one identity, while the Yiling Patriarch was another. Like this, however, the softness she was used to seeing in Wei Wuxian was as apparent as ever.

She was glad to see it.

Then-

“Zewu-jun, Hanguang-jun, apologies. Don’t pay attention to him,” Jiang Cheng requested, throwing an annoyed look at an unrepentant Wei Wuxian’s way.

Lan Xichen smiled: “It’s fine. I will thank Wei-gongzi for his kindness behind the flower in place of Wangji.”

“Xiongzhang!” Lan Wangji hissed.

Lan Xichen turned to him and asked, “What? Don’t you think it’s sweet of him?”

“But… but he…”

“Well of course he means it!” Lan Xichen insisted, whispering just barely loud enough for Madam Jin to hear it and nod in unwavering agreement. “You’ve seen what he does after he comes back to life, haven’t you? From what I can tell, he’s quite interested.”

For the first time in a while, a pink blush formed on Lan Wangji’s ears.

The Lans rode off into the distance, and the Jiangs moved into position. As they did, Jiang Cheng glanced over at Wei Wuxian.

“Why are you throwing out flowers along with the girls?”

“Ah, Jiang-xiong,” Nie Huaisang sighed. “You’re so naive when it comes to matters of the heart.”

“I am not!”

“I think he looks nice. Can’t I throw a few as well?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Jiang Cheng pointed his nose in the air and huffed: “How old are you?! Who do you think you are, still playing tricks like that?”

“Tricks?” Madam Jin repeated, quite amused.

Nie Huaisang sent a smug ‘I-told-you-so’ look Jiang Cheng’s way, and there was nothing the heir could say in response.

“What, you want one too?” Wei Wuxian teased back. “There’s still quite a lot left on the ground. Should I get one for you?”

“Oh, get lost!”

At that moment, Jin Guangyao’s voice rang out: “The Qinghe Nie Sect’s Riding formation enters.”

Jin Zixuan couldn’t help but tense upon hearing his voice.

Nie Mingjue sat tall as the formation came in, unquestioned and confident as one could be. This time the women hesitated, then lowered their hands, unwilling to throw the flowers lest they anger such an intimidating man.

On the other hand, the males in the audience began cheering like crazy.

“Oh, how pitiful, Da-ge,” Nie Huaisang sniffled.

“Pitiful? What’s pitiful?”

Nie Huaisang just continued his silent mourning, realizing that things would be much easier for Nie Mingjue if he was interested in men. Then again, man or woman, Nie Huaisang had never really seen his brother show interest in anyone. The closest Nie Mingjue got to that was his favor of Meng Yao-

…

In any case, Nie Huaisang continued to send Nie Mingjue a pitying gaze.

Beside Nie Mingjue was Nie Huaisang, dressed with as much care as always. He wore a saber on his waist that was outshone by the glimmering jewels covering his clothes, and everyone present knew he wouldn’t be using that saber during the competition. If anything, he was far more likely to just head off to a place with a nice view and watch the sunset.

Wen Ruohan frowned, glancing between the still silently-sobbing Nie Huaisang and the simulated version before him. Through the simulation, there had been a few times that the Nie heir had seemed, strange as it was to believe, slightly dangerous to Wen Ruohan. Not physically, of course, but the feeling had been undeniable.

Looking at him now, that was nearly impossible to believe.

(Which, in some ways, just made him all the more concerning.)

Following them, the Jiang Sect came. Flowers rained down once again, making Jiang Cheng’s face darken and Wei Wuxian’s light up. He turned and waved at Jiang Yanli, who was sitting up in the grandest tower next to Madam Jin. Upon seeing that, Jiang Yanli brightened, said a polite (if quick) goodbye to Madam Jin, and walked to the edge of the balcony to join the others in throwing flowers at her shidis.

Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but allow a slight bit of pride to show on his face at that, and Jiang Yanli’s smile widened at her brother's obvious happiness. Meanwhile, Jin Zixuan began to smile as well, somewhat surprised to see his mother and fiance spending time together like

that. He had come to truly like Jiang Yanli, and he wanted her to like his family too. She seemed a little uncomfortable right now, but, given time….

(Those had been Madam Jin's exact thoughts regarding Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli for a few years now. The past Jin Zixuan had been quite adamant about that never happening, but, given how wrong he had apparently been, it didn't seem unrealistic to hope.)

When Jiang Yanli had gotten ready to throw the flowers, she had done so by reaching back as far as she could and then throwing the flowers as hard as possible, trying to make up for her weak cultivation with earnestness. For a moment she seemed to stumble, the force of the throw shaking her balance, but she steadied herself a moment later. The simulated Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian had reached out at the same time and caught the flowers together, both giving her soft smiles in return.

Wen Ruohan hummed to himself. Once again, he was reminded that, whatever he felt about the situation, *Wei Wuxian* was happy with the Jiangs. If he genuinely wasn't, he could have left at any time. His gratitude towards Jiang Fengmian most certainly played a part, but Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng also held special places in his heart.

With Madam Yu taken out of the picture, the situation might be different.

Wen Ruohan glanced toward the simulated sky, wondering how, exactly, Jiang Fengmian was faring alone.

(Then again, if he hadn't been able to stop his own wife from taking action, then he couldn't be trusted with Wei Wuxian long term. It was only a matter of time before something went wrong, and Jiang Fengmian would surely be as passive as always in the face of that.)

(And, most importantly, the world turned against Wei Wuxian while *Jiang Cheng* was his sect leader. Madam Yu wasn't around anymore; she couldn't be the cause. So then, what was?)

Suddenly, a row of cultivators wearing white, gold-lined robes rushed out, donning ivory armor and riding on broad stallions. At the front, wearing the most extravagant armor of all, was Jin Guangshan.

Up on the towers, Madam Jin stepped forward, patting Jiang Yanli on the shoulder and pointing below. A single horse ran forward and did a circle around the square. Its rider, wearing snow-white robes and a vermillion mark on his forehead, was Jin Zixuan.

He drew his bow, then, briefly, glanced toward the towers.

"Oh, a courting ritual?" Nie Huaisang perked up. "How very peacock-like of you, Young Master Jin!"

Jin Zixuan blushed bright, bright red, shouting, "That's not it!"

Jiang Yanli's cheeks turned red as well, but she sobered slightly as she pointed out, "Given how our last interaction in the simulation went, I don't believe this version of young master

Jin has a very positive opinion of me."

"I'll learn better!" Jin Zixuan insisted. "I'll see the error of my ways!"

Wei Wuxian didn't seem like he would agree.

"I can't believe it," he muttered. "He really is just a peacock."

"Watch it," Jiang Cheng scolded. "A-Jie is still watching from the tower."

Wei Wuxian shrugged: "Don't worry. As long as he doesn't make Shijie cry again, I won't pay any attention."

Jin Zixuan flinched slightly at those words, and, once again, internally promised himself that he would do anything in his power to win Wei Wuxian's approval. Jiang Yanli was more than worth that.

"...You shouldn't have brought her in the first place."

"The Lanling Jin Sect insisted on it. I didn't have the face to refuse."

Hearing that, Madam Yu couldn't help but scowl.

"Oh, so our Jiang Sect is that inferior to the Lanling Jins?" she wondered. "You're right that A-Li should attend such events, but that's hardly the reason why."

(She knew Madam Jin was no longer friends with her because her other self had advocated for Wei Wuxian letting Jin Zixuan die. That didn't change the fact that Madam Yu felt more than a little betrayed by her once friend.)

"Well now," Jin Guangshan laughed, "I'm sure Young Master Jiang's future self meant no such thing. Our families have been friends for years. Doing a few small favors doesn't mean one's better than the other."

"And besides," Wen Ruohan couldn't help but pipe in. "If the future Jiang Wanyin really does think the Jiangs are weaker, despite having the Yiling Patriarch on their side, then his current actions are no surprise. Wasn't the request of a *maid* enough for you to whip your head disciple and consider giving over his hand?"

"This and that are completely different," Madam Yu hissed, and Jiang Cheng paled at the reminder of that day.

Wen Ruohan tilted his head in acknowledgement, ending the conversation there. No one present was dumb enough to think Madam Yu had actually changed his mind about anything, though.

While they were speaking, and although no one was really paying attention, the simulation had continued.

In response to Jiang Cheng's previous answer, Wei Wuxian had grumbled back, commenting that Madam Jin was the one who had insisted on Jiang Yanli's presence (undoubtedly as a way to get her and Jin Zixuan to spend more time together). His thoughts made him so annoyed that it took the cheering of the crowd for him to turn his focus back on Jin Zixuan again.

The Jin heir had ridden into the target area.

Nervousness filled Jin Zixuan, and he turned his head to see if Jiang Yanli was watching. She wasn't.

Instead, she was looking with concern at her fuming mother. Given what had just happened between Madam Yu and Wen Ruohan, there was really no way she could be looking anywhere else.

Jin Zixuan blushed at how self-centered his own thoughts had been. Put into perspective, his other-self's demonstration now seemed much less important.

The crowds in the simulation, on the other hand, appeared more excited than ever.

"To enter this competition, there was a test one had to pass first," Lan Sizhui reported, as the simulation moved to display the row of targets in front of Jin Zixuan. "The seven rings on the targets represented the seven different paths available to participants. People who hit the smallest ring would be able to enter through the most favorable path, and each successively larger ring became paths with fewer and easier prey."

'*...Then hypothetically, if you fail to hit the target at all, would you not have to compete?*' Nie Huaisang wondered in exactly the same way his future self had when he had first heard of this.

Jin Zixuan took out an arrow, hooked it, pulled back and aimed, then shot.

Dead center.

A roar of cheers came from all around, and the simulated Jin Zixuan seemed to puff up in pride.

'*A war happened. I die, A-Li dies, A-Li's parents die, Nie Huaisang's brother dies, we still don't know why Lan-er-gongzi ended up whipped, and A-Ling just stabbed Wei Wuxian in the future,*' the real Jin Zixuan thought. '*This feels…*'

"Is something wrong?"

Jin Zixuan jumped slightly, then turned to his right where the voice had come from. Lan Wangji stared back at him evenly, waiting for a response.

"I just… I don't know, I feel a bit weird. It was an abrupt change, after what we saw with A-Ling and Wei Wuxian."

Lan Wangji nodded in agreement, not pressing further, but seemingly aware there was more than what Jin Zixuan was saying.

In the roaring noise, surrounded on all sides by the cheers for his other-self, Jin Zixuan couldn't help but stumble out "I-I don't really know why I feel this way. But this — I mean — we were talking about the horses earlier, you know. And how they were just theatrics. And there was that whole thing going on with Wei Wuxian refusing to bring his sword around for who knows what reason, and it just… it all feels a bit shallow, I guess. Three-fourths of us are dead in the future, and I don't really see why the simulation is showing us this."

Lan Wangji had been wondering the same thing. Nevertheless:

"There is still some value in celebration," Lan Wangji pointed out. "We need to appreciate what we have while we have it, don't we?"

Even as he said that though, his expression seemed to falter into annoyance when the simulated Jin Zixuan's victory lap passed in front of him. Jin Zixuan blushed deeper.

"But… you agree with me too?" he asked.

Lan Wangji pursed his lips minutely before nodding: "I do. It's something to consider, at least."

"Yeah," Jin Zixuan sighed.

(He was a little glad that the two of them had been speaking quietly enough to keep his parents from hearing. The more time he spent thinking throughout the simulation, the more his thoughts seemed to be turning in directions his parents wouldn't quite agree with.

(And the more that happened, the more he started to feel like that might not be such a bad thing.)

When the cheers finally died down, a Jin disciple stepped forward.

"If anyone still remains unconvinced, then try for yourself to see if you can shoot better than Zixuan!" Jin Zixun shouted.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng, who had remained unimpressed by the display, seemed to perk up at that. Although Jiang Cheng quickly talked himself out of it, Wei Wuxian turned considering.

'*Just a little while ago, at the LanlingJin Sect's flower banquet, an argument broke out between me and Jin Zixuan,*' he recalled, smiling as Jin Zixun turned and made direct eye contact with him. '*I see. I bet all this is here to provoke me.*'

"Oh, that's not going to go well," Nie Huaisang muttered.

"Hey, I did okay!" Jin Zixuan protested, more than a little embarrassed by what his cousin had said. "I didn't embarrass myself."

“Yet.”

Nie Mingjue groaned: “Huaisang, you’re not even going to *try* when it’s your turn.”

“Well of course not. Competing over archery is stupid anyways.”

There were protests from many of the juniors, and Wen Qing felt her smile turn a little whimsical. If her brother had been given a chance to perfect his technique in the years since the previous archery competition, he might have wanted to compete as well. Perhaps, in their world, he could.

(But in this one, the Wen Sect had lost the war, and she still didn’t know where her brother was.)

(Or when, exactly, he became a fierce corpse.)

But within the simulation, even Wei Wuxian wasn’t worried about that quite yet. The sects went one after another, their members aiming and firing at the targets without delay. Then, it was the Jiang Sect’s turn.

“Hey, Lan Zhan, want to help me?”

Lan Wangji glanced over questioningly, and Jiang Cheng grumbled, “What are you up to this time?”

Lan Qiren sighed, sensing the mischief in Wei Wuxian’s tone. Despite that, the teacher’s eyes were warm.

(Unpredictable though he may be, Wei Wuxian was never untrustworthy.)

“What is it?” the second jade asked.

“Can I borrow your forehead ribbon?”

“*What?!*” Lan Qiren shrieked, mentally taking back everything he had just thought about Wei Wuxian.

“Now, now, Uncle,” Lan Xichen grinned. “Given what the future Wangji does while drunk, I’d say Wei Wuxian has every right to take-”

“Not *in public!*”

However, as they all knew, the Wei Wuxian being shown at this point in time didn’t know what the ribbon signified.

“Ah,” Lan Xichen cleared his throat. “Young Master Wei, you may not know this, but…”

“Brother, there is no need,” Lan Wangji interjected.

“I bet Hanguang-jun would have said yes,” Madam Jin proposed.

Lan Xichen beamed at the thought.

Gritting his teeth, Jiang Cheng hissed, “You knew he wasn’t going to say yes. Why did you ask for his forehead ribbon? Want to hang yourself and commit suicide? I can lend you my belt. You’re welcome.”

“Ha! You can keep your belt,” Wei Wuxian replied, slipping a black ribbon off his wrist guard. “I wouldn’t want that even if I can’t have his forehead ribbon.”

“*You-*”

“If you have your own ribbon, why ask for his in the first place?!” the real Jiang Cheng growled, overcome by embarrassment. Knowing what the ribbon meant, he legitimately couldn’t believe Wei Wuxian had asked for it so openly. What if someone got the wrong idea?! Mo Xuanyu might be, but it wasn’t like Wei Wuxian was a real cutsleeve-

Before anyone had even realized what was happening, Wei Wuxian had tugged Lan Wangji close, kissing him on the lips.

That memory brought an even stronger feeling of discomfort to Jiang Cheng, but he was forced to amend that previous thought. It definitely seemed like there was more going on than just the feelings of Mo Xuanyu’s body.

And Lan Wangji made Wei Wuxian happy but-

Jiang Wanyin buried his face in his hands, not knowing what he was trying to say.

By this point, however, even the simulated Jiang Cheng had stopped talking, eyes widening as he realized what Wei Wuxian wanted the ribbon for. It had been tied around his eyes, blinding him completely.

“No way,” Jin Zixuan gaped. “He’s not going to-”

Wei Wuxian rode forward, aimed, and fired.

It hit!

It all happened so fast, no one had even been able to react in disbelief before Wei Wuxian won. There was a moment of silence, then overwhelming cheers — even louder than the ones that had appeared for Jin Zixuan — rang out through the grounds.

‘*Interesting,*’ Wen Ruohan thought.

What the Jins had been doing just then went beyond just Jin Zixuan and Wei Wuxian. Jin Zixun’s words and the lack of spoken opposition to them had been a way to show the Jins as the unquestionable leaders of the event. It was a far more subtle method than Wen Ruohan’s seating arrangements at the archery competition, but, overtime, it would be effective nonetheless. The Jins were funding the event as the richest sect after the war; they could set

things like this up however they pleased. No matter what happened on the mountain after, this was what the audience was watching so this was the part they would remember.

But, with a single shot, Wei Wuxian had just undermined that entirely.

The corners of Wei Wuxian's lips curved slightly and he gave a mock-bow to the crowd, casually tossing the bow back to demonstrate that he was finished. Seeing that Wei Wuxian's popularity had exceeded Jin Zixuan's, Jin Zixun snorted loudly, broadcasting his displeasure.

"This is only the opening archery event, and you're already acting so ostentatiously!" he scoffed. "You have your eyes covered now, but do you really think you'll be able to keep them covered throughout the hunt? When we're on Phoenix Mountain, we'll be able to see who's truly superior."

"Zixun!" Jin Zixuan protested, beyond embarrassed. "You can't just… please shut up."

He buried his face in his hands, and sank down deeper when Jiang Yanli gave a little laugh and patted the area around his head consolingly.

Meanwhile, Madam Yu couldn't help a slight frown. She didn't know why, but for some reason, after Jin Zixun spoke, she could hear her own words ringing out.

'A-Li, stop peeling that! You're the master here, not somebody's servant!' she had said.

The way Jiang Fengmian reacted every time she used that word brought her a bitter sort of amusement.

And the people in the future said much the same. Blamed him for far more. They said he was responsible for the destruction of Lotus Pier. They talked about how he 'bit the hand that fed him' and had been the main factor in her and Jiang Fengmian's deaths.

'You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!'

She had never been fond of Madam Jin's nephew. Jin Zixun's cultivation was atrocious, and he had never truly managed to accomplish anything except bothering the women around him. She and Jin Zixun were hardly comparable people.

(But they might be a little more similar than she'd like to admit.)

At that moment, a firework shot into the sky. The signal for the beginning of the competition was released.

A stampede of horses darted forward, Jin Zixun pushing to the front with a determination set in his gaze. His riding posture was impeccable — an obvious indication of having received the best training possible.

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng hadn't moved at all.

“Sect Leader Jiang, Young Master Wei,” Jin Guangshan moved closer. “What? You aren’t going to enter the mountain yet? If you’re too careless, Zixun might steal all your prey.”

A casual shrug: “No need to rush. He won’t be able to.”

The simulated Jin Guangshan was far from the only one to react with surprise.

However, that was only among the illusionary figures. The real Jin Guangshan, along with all the other watchers, remained unmoved. It would take a lot to surprise them now.

‘*Even after the war, my other self seems to have only a surface level understanding of what Wei Wuxian can do,*’ the real Jin Guangshan thought. ‘*That makes sense, I suppose. He probably wasn’t able to see it first-hand like we were. Still, we haven’t seen what the Stygian Tiger Seal is capable of when wielded by its master. He must know more about it than us. I’m surprised he’s still so skeptical.*’

Wen Ruohan glanced at the simulated crowd, who watched in blatant confusion as Wei Wuxian dismounted his horse and told Jiang Cheng to go ahead, still wearing the blindfold all the while. He had thought the same thing as Jin Guangshan, but his conclusion was slightly different.

‘*They must think the reports they received were exaggerated,*’ the Chief Cultivator thought. ‘*Everyone thought the same about Wen Zhuliu, until the sect leaders saw him in action. Zhuliu is at least from a family of cultivators; it must be that much harder to believe that Wei Wuxian, the son of a servant who* invented *his style of cultivation, is capable of so much.*’

He paused once more, looking up at the departing Sect Leader Jiang.

‘*If you would just-*’

“Take it easy,” Jiang Cheng called back over his shoulder. “Back down when it’s good enough.”

Wei Wuxian waved his hand casually, and the Jiang Sect departed towards the mountain.

And then, Wei Wuxian began to move as well.

The watchers were brought forward in time, getting various snippets of Wei Wuxian’s walk one after another. He ducked under the low-hanging branches of trees, hopped over large rocks, and spread his arms wide, balancing precariously on a fallen log as he used it to cross the shallow stream below. A blinding smile remained on his face the entire time, and the blindfold remained over his eyes just the same.

Lan Wangji swallowed, feeling all at once nostalgic and guilty, when he considered what his simulated self had done. The Lan Wangji being shown in the simulation might be older than the watching Lan Wangji was, but, watching now, the second jade couldn’t help but view his other-self as incomparably *young.*

There was a wall between this version of Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian, and, despite having received the title, the way this one acted was vastly different from how ‘Hanguang-jun’ did.

‘*Was this you?’ Lan Wangji coldly asked, holding out the flower.*

‘Thank you,’ Lan Wangji wished his other self had said. The Yiling Patriarch was still Wei Wuxian; if he had heard that, Lan Wangji had no doubt an enormous blush would have covered his face. Wei Wuxian would have tried to laugh the gratitude off, but anyone would have been able to see how it affected him.

If Lan Wangji had accepted the flower, and Wei Wuxian had seen-

‘Can I borrow your forehead ribbon?’ Wei Wuxian asked.

And, if Lan Wangji had answered ‘always,’ and taken it off in front of his Uncle and brother-

A blush, much like the one Lan Wangji had just been imagining on Wei Wuxian, appeared on his own cheeks and ears.

It had been beyond embarrassing to watch his future self tie his forehead ribbon around Wei Wuxian’s wrists, but, between that and the wall that existed between them now…

Lan Wangji couldn’t exactly say he preferred the latter.

(Now if only he understood why, every time Wei Wuxian expressed any interest at all, the far future Lan Wangji would back away. He even went so far as to knock himself out one time, and Lan Wangji didn’t have even the slightest idea why.)

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian had continued on his way, literally stopping to smell the roses whenever he could. The competition had been chosen at a very odd time, so it was surprising to see the plum trees in full bloom. They seemed to have somehow been bred to flourish all year round. Although Wei Wuxian couldn’t see them right now, his senses were more than good enough to tell they were there. To any outsider, he would appear to be a blind young master wandering through a garden, rather than a genius cultivator ready to hunt.

And then, a change occurred.

There was a hiss in the distance, and the sound of something slithering close by. The watchers, rather unexpectedly, were brought into first person point of view for the first time since the simulation began.

Even stranger, this point of view had a line of sight practically on the ground.

“What is this?” Madam Yu demanded, disliking the unexpected turn of events. Everyone else looked around as well, but couldn’t quite make out what was going on. Then, the snake reached its target.

Wei Wuxian was sitting down, having found a bunny mid-walk which was now situated in his lap. From their low hanging first person point of view, the watchers saw a line of

vertically stacked blocks appear next to Wei Wuxian, seemingly being used to measure his height.

The watchers' confusion only increased.

"...The spirits must have added the blocks in, right?" Wen Qing speculated. "To demonstrate what this being was thinking."

Jiang Cheng scowled: "Okay, but who would be thinking about-"

His question was answered a moment later, when Wei Wuxian seemingly noticed the being approaching him and they switched to a third person point of view.

"Wait-"

"Is that-"

"A measuring snake?" Wei Wuxian asked, sensing its presence despite the blindfold over his eyes. The snake straightened itself up before him, hissing dangerously.

Jiang Yanli looked around at the other watchers, confused by their reactions, and asked, "Is… is that bad? I didn't think a measuring snake would be a threat to A-Xian."

"Uh, it's probably not," Nie Mingjue agreed. "It's just a little unusual to see one right now. They said it's autumn, right? Measuring snakes are docile during this season, so it's actually pretty weird to see one out."

"This one seems rather young, too," Lan Xichen pointed out.

Jiang Yanli blinked: "Then… what is it doing?"

"Ah, well…"

While they had been speaking, the snake had done everything it could to explain. It lifted its tail, pointing at itself, then pointed towards the sky, head held high. It then pointed at the still kneeling Wei Wuxian. The bunny that had been on Wei Wuxian's lap ran off in fear.

Everything paused for a moment, and two black bars formed. One, at Wei Wuxian's height; the other, at the snake's. The snake's line ended up approximately three centimeters higher.

"I…" Jiang Yanli was befuddled. "It's not attacking."

"Right, cause it's docile right now," Jiang Cheng confirmed, completely without humor.

"Then what is it-"

Nie Huaisang snickered on the side.

But Wei Wuxian grinned as well. If the snake knew anything about his reputation, it might have known to not be so easily fooled by his seemingly defenseless form. For, at that moment, Wei Wuxian stood up!

"Ha! You wanna defeat me in height? You can't 'cause you're too short!" Wei Wuxian cackled, displaying even more arrogance than Jin Zixuan had, giving the snake a thumbs down.

"Are you seriously playing along with it?!" Jiang Cheng asked, and Jiang Yanli couldn't help but join Nie Huaisang's laughter.

Lan Qiren sighed, but seemed simultaneously unsurprised and also (slightly) amused.

The snake moved closer, doubtful, and reached itself up to its fullest height. The horizontal black lines appeared again.

Despite its best efforts, the baby snake was still too short.

There was a pause as that realization settled in.

Then, the tears came.

With a distraught cry, the baby snake began to soak the surrounding grass in salt water, sending full waterfalls of tears falling to the ground. Wei Wuxian appeared victorious and he cackled in glee.

Then a shadow covered him from behind, and the sudden change in temperature alerted him to a new presence. He slowly glanced back, making out the energy of the newcomer as best he could.

The watchers, who could actually see what was going on, saw an older snake with a gentlemanly goatee look down, looming over Wei Wuxian. The Yiling Patriarch paused, gave a blank smile, then turned forward again to avoid any form of eye contact.

A moment later Wei Wuxian had sprinted away, and the simulation showed the older snake chase Wei Wuxian through the forest. The pair began bounding over trees and ducking under branches at lightning fast speeds as the snake hunted down one of the world's strongest cultivators.

"You disgrace of a snake!" Wei Wuxian shouted as he ran. "I can't believe you would have your dad fight your battles for you!"

"It's a *snake*, Wei Wuxian!" Nie Mingjue shouted at him.

"Now, now, Da-ge, you mustn't discriminate," Lan Xichen said, not bothering to hide his smile. "A snake spirit is a perfectly worthy opponent to face."

"It's a *measuring snake!*"

“I’m with Er-ge, Da-ge!” Nie Huaisang piped in. “All battles are honorable! A tiger uses its full strength even when hunting a rabbit! And you never know. If the snake truly believes in itself, it might have a shot!”

“This is ridiculous,” Lan Wangji sighed.

A moment later, however, he would find himself frozen in shock. For, as Wei Wuxian continued running from the father snake, he managed to come across someone he recognized.

“Lan Zhan!!!!” he shouted.

The simulated Lan Wangji glanced his way.

“Wei Ying.”

“Help me!!!!”

The sight of the fleeing Wei Wuxian, followed closely by the gigantic snake, spurred Lan Wangji into action. He stepped forward, unsheathing his sword and glaring at his opponent.

The real Lan Wangji subconsciously felt himself preparing for battle as well. Throughout the simulation, there had been far too many instances in which he had failed to help Wei Wuxian. This was hardly something Wei Wuxian needed help with (in fact, Lan Wangji wasn’t sure why Wei Wuxian was doing this at all), but that didn’t change the fact that there was almost nothing he wouldn’t be willing to do to help-

Suddenly, something jumped on top of the simulated Hanguang-jun’s shoulders.

It was Wei Wuxian.

A green horizontal line formed. The grinning Wei Wuxian stood taller than the father snake.

“I…” Lan Wangji gaped. “I…”

But then — in a shocking twist — the snake straightened itself up further, and managed to stand even higher!

Nie Huaisang gave an only somewhat-exaggerated gasp.

Wei Wuxian was similarly shocked.

However, despite what many believed, the Yiling Patriarch’s best weapon had always been his brain. In a flash, an idea came to him. He pulled out Chenqing and raised it as high as he could.

It was just above the second snake.

“This is, legitimately, one of the greatest things I’ve ever seen,” Nie Huaisang laughed.

Not even Wen Qing tried to disagree.

“Oh dear, I won again!” Wei Wuxian exclaimed with a sigh, as if the ease of his victory was proving tiresome. “Who else is in your family? Call the longest one here!”

As he spoke, he swung back and forth. Given his position on Lan Wangji’s shoulders, that meant the impassive Second Jade was swaying back and forth as well.

And Lan Wangji had to try very, very hard not to think about their current position.

(Wei Wuxian jumping on Lan Wangji’s shoulders was a joke, just the same as asking for his forehead ribbon had been. He probably would have been equally happy climbing on anyone’s shoulders, given how open he was with physical contact.)

(And yet, that was still just a slight bit too much.)

A cloud of dust was suddenly thrown into the air, and Wei Wuxian froze mid-word. This time, a measuring snake as tall as a building — this one with a pure white beard — stared down at him.

(A still-crying baby and a trembling father stood farther back, lowering their heads in shame.)

“Woah, this is even more challenging!” Wei Wuxian exclaimed, hopping down from Lan Wangji. Despite the fact that his eyes were covered, the watchers could easily imagine the excitement shining inside.

The simulated Lan Wangji scooted away.

‘*That’s all for the best,*’ the real Lan Wangji thought, breathing out a sigh of relief. ‘*Not only was I not able to provide any real help, but I have no doubt my other-self was just as… distracted as me. Wei Wuxian is amazing and bright and irreplaceable, but he can also be very, very frustrating.*”

It would take the second jade every ounce of self control he had to turn his attention to what the simulation was actually focusing on again (and even more focus to make sure his ears weren’t still burning red).

“Alright then,” Wei Wuxian rubbed his hands together as if warming up. “Hey, Lan Zhan, why don’t we-”

He cut off, suddenly realizing that Lan Wangji’s presence was no longer behind him.

“Wangji-xiong!” Nie Huaisang protested. “How could you abandon your darling in his time of need?! He practically begged you for help — or are you not into that?”

“Huaisang!” Nie Mingjue shouted.

“It’s a measuring snake,” Lan Qiren pointed out. “All it’s doing is trying to be taller. During this season it won’t even attack anyone over it. This is a completely ridiculous, arbitrary demonstration that won't impact anything.”

“Which, if you think about it, isn’t too different from the horseback riding we do,” Wen Ruohan posited, and he was answered by an awkward silence all around.

At that moment, however, the watchers’ attention was ensnared by the simulation once again, as a tremendous rumble shook the surrounding trees.

An unknown man gave a tired sigh, “Damn, we chased those high level walking corpses for so long, and he just called them away with his flute.”

He was a Jin disciple, walking next to someone from a sub branch of the Wuyang Sect.

“Ha! I guess he’ll do anything to win the competition.”

“They’re… talking about Wei Wuxian?” Jin Guangshan asked.

Madam Jin hummed consideringly, adding, “I would have thought he’d wait until he was finished with the snakes before he joined the competition. Given the way he was meandering about, he didn’t seem to be in any rush.”

“Hm. Wei Wuxian really is ruthless and cold blooded,” the other agreed. “Hm?”

They both turned to the left.

And, slowly, something faded into existence.

It was a fierce corpse on its hands and knees. Or rather, a moment later, it was revealed to be two — one on top of the other. Then, a half second later, the third formed before their eyes. One by one, the simulation revealed a conceptually unimaginable tower of fierce corpses, teetering wildly as they grabbed onto each other like their (un)lives depended on it. At the top of this obelisk of disaster stood a delighted Wei Wuxian, who was working diligently to not fall down.

Wen Qing couldn’t even begin to describe what her emotional reaction to this sight was.

“I… What?” Nie Mingjue gaped.

Well, that did seem to sum it up fairly accurately.

With a confident stomp, Wei Wuxian secured his position.

“Haha!” His smile nearly blinded all who saw it. “I’m still the winner!”

Out of a deep respect, Nie Huaisang broke into a standing ovation.

The eldest measuring snake fell to the ground in defeat.

"...Yay?" Lan Xichen supposed, not quite sure how to respond.

The world faded to darkness again, and, when light returned, Wei Wuxian had resumed his journey along the paths of Phoenix Mountain, finally finished with his measuring snake side quest.

Most of the watchers just shook their heads in amusement, but Lan Wangji became even more silent than usual. He closed his eyes momentarily, his memories of what just occurred weighing on him with an unusual intensity.

(Throughout this part of the simulation, Wei Wuxian had called out to Lan Wangji over and over again. He had thrown flowers and asked for his forehead ribbon and *climbed on top of him* with almost no acknowledgment of what those things would mean. He wasn't trying to be cruel, but he was most certainly frustrating in the ~~best~~ worst of ways.)

After walking for some time, Wei Wuxian came across a shaded grove. He reached forward and patted a large tree, testing the sturdiness of its bark.

'*Here seems good.*'

With a hop, he jumped onto one of the higher branches and sat, leaning against the trunk. Pulling out Chenqing, he began to play.

🎵♪♪🎵♪♪♩

The notes spread through the forest, not going unheard by even a single person there.

🎵🎵♪♩

And the resentful energy jumped to his command without hesitation.

"Ah, I pity everyone else in that competition," Nie Huaisang said, pretending to wipe a mournful tear from his eyes.

'*That should be good enough,*' Wei Wuxian thought, leaning back. '*Now all I have to do is wait.*'

"S-some of us might do okay," Jin Zixuan attempted.

Nie Huaisang didn't disagree, but he did cast a look at Wei Wuxian, who practically appeared to have fallen asleep.

"I mean… I guess," the Jin heir had to concede.

Even if someone did manage to do better than Wei Wuxian, what did it say that they were so proud of doing better than someone who spent *thirty seconds* actually working on the hunt itself?

"I mean, of course it's this way," Madam Yu huffed. "Demonic cultivation works completely differently. It's hardly a fair judgment!"

Wen Ruohan laughed: “Are you trying to say that spiritual cultivation doesn’t stand a chance against the demonic kind?”

“For this kind of a competition specifically! It’s hardly a-”

She cut off abruptly.

Lan Wangji turned and glanced in her direction, wondering why she had stopped. Madam Yu stood frozen, mouth still open mid-word.

Lan Wangji looked to the left, then the right.

Everyone was still.

Except for him.

(And Jin Guangshan.)

“Oh? Is this the Concealment Zone?” Jin Guangshan asked. “I thought we had only made that activate for intimate scenes. Why is it in place now?”

“...The application Wei Ying added picked what scenes to skip ahead of time based on our request,” Lan Wangji pointed out. “Perhaps it just got confused-”

There was a crunch of leaves.

Lan Wangji glanced over, and saw his other self standing there.

“I…” he paused, suddenly growing uncertain.

‘*No killing intent,*’ the simulated Wei Wuxian observed. ‘*Who is it?*’

He waited for a bit, but no greeting came.

‘*I can feel their gaze on me. What? Not in a talkative mood?*’

The silence reigned.

“...You’re here for the hunt?”

“...”

“Well, you won’t find any good spots around me.”

The simulated Hanguang-jun paused, then walked a few steps closer.

Lan Wangji looked back and forth between his other self and Wei Wuxian, his composure slipping away by the second.

‘*Huh, this is kinda nice,*’ Wei Wuxian thought, still just as confident as ever. ‘*Most cultivators act a little scared of me these days. They won’t approach even when there’s a lot*

***of people around, much less when we're alone.*'**

The smile on his face was even more genuine than usual.

'I would've thought they were trying to attack me, if it weren't for the lack of malicious intent.'

Lan Wangji swallowed.

Wei Wuxian sat up, tilting his head in Lan Wangji's direction as he smiled, opening his mouth to speak. Then-

"*Mphf*-!" his voice was suddenly stolen. Hanguang-jun had come forward, slamming Wei Wuxian's back against the tree behind him due to his speed. When the Yiling Patriarch reached up to remove his blindfold, Lan Wangji grabbed his wrists, pressing them against the trunk as well.

His lips were now covering Wei Wuxian's own.

Wei Wuxian's leg, which had been raised to kick his attacker, suddenly faltered in his shock. The warmth of the other's mouth on his froze him in place, and the slight, fearful shaking of his attacker had him lowering his leg.

'*They're… kissing me?*' he realized. '*Although this maiden seems quite strong, she also appears to be scared. Easily embarrassed, too. She seems nervous.*'

Although Lan Wangji flinched slightly at the 'maiden' description, he couldn't deny the rest of it.

'*If she wasn't scared, there would have been no reason to approach me while I'm blindfolded. She must have had to muster up all the courage inside of her to even attempt this. Besides, her cultivation seems fairly powerful, so her sense of pride must be high as well. If I pull off my ribbon and reveal her identity, how ashamed would she be…*'

'She' would be mortified. Lan Wangji knew that if his other self had been caught while doing this, he would have shriveled up on the spot and died. It was a weakness, to give into temptation like this.

But if Wei Wuxian hadn't been so *frustrating* all the time — always flirting and teasing but never meaning any of it — if he hadn't constantly misunderstood what Lan Wangji was asking him to come to Gusu for — if he, himself, had just been able to explain better-

Lan Wangji knew, from the future, that Wei Wuxian was interested in him, too. But as far as this past version of him knew, the closest Wei Wuxian would get to discussing relationships with him was what happened with Luo Qingyang. What could he do but assume that any seemingly-flirtatious acts Wei Wuxian did toward him were just jokes — born out of an enjoyment of embarrassing the second jade of Lan.

So, to the Hanguang-jun of this time, Wei Wuxian was something untouchable in all the most painful ways; always flickering and shining before his eyes, but never close enough to truly

reach.

But now? Now Hanguang-jun's lips became more aggressive, switching from soft pecks around the edges to a more forceful penetration. Wei Wuxian's mouth had been relaxed all the while, so it gave way easily and allowed the other to intrude inside. A flush began to form on his cheeks, his still-trapped hands fidgeting as the seconds passed by.

'*It's hard to breathe,*' he thought, trying to turn his face away. However, Lan Wangji acted before he could, grabbing onto his face and turning it back, giving himself even better access. The hands which had been grabbing Wei Wuxian's wrists were now holding onto his chin and the back of his head, giving him full control. Wei Wuxian's hands, now released, moved as if to stop him, only to falter under the intensity of the experience.

'*I feel… dizzy,*' Wei Wuxian thought.

Heat began to fill Lan Wangji's body as well, and he could practically feel his brain turning to mush.

But Wei Wuxian was so-

He-

In the state Lan Wangji was in now, there was no way to properly finish that sentence. He could only continue to watch.

And listen.

(The sounds were almost worse.)

When Lan Wangji had first acted, Wei Wuxian's uneasy tension had turned into a startled intake of breath. It then became muffled exclamation of confusion, as Lan Wangji's lips covered his own. Slowly, though, as breathing became more and more difficult for him, the main noise in the otherwise silent area of the forest became short, cut-off gasps for air, intermixed with a few surprisingly high-pitched squeaks as Wei Wuxian's struggles increased.

Then, when Wei Wuxian started to feel dizzy, something else came. Lan Wangji had never personally heard it before, but he had caught a few troublemakers in previous years, and had picked up on a few details from their conversations.

The simulated Hanguang-jun stuck his tongue especially deep and Lan Wangji heard Wei Wuxian moan.

Once again he had to swallow, covering his mouth with one hand as he took a shaky step back. He wanted to cover his eyes but he couldn't bring himself to.

(Not that it would matter either way. This image of Wei Wuxian — red-faced, held in place, and practically gasping for more — would be sealed into his memory until the day he died.)

Wei Wuxian's body had become almost entirely limp, as though the sheer force of what he was experiencing was enough to bring him to his knees. He was shaking slightly, and Lan Wangji had never seen his skin glow in a more gorgeous red.

It was beautiful, and-

And…

And it was wrong.

'*What am I doing?*' Lan Wangji thought, and the flush in his ears vanished as though someone had poured a barrel of cold water over his head. '*I… what am I….*'

He took another step back, this time, in horror.

'*No matter how frustrated I was getting… no matter how much I thought I would never get a chance like this again… no matter how much it seemed like Wei Wuxian would never actually understand me….*'

Now, a feeling like nausea was starting to rise up in younger form of Hanguang-jun.

'*Wei Ying was blindfolded and tried to escape, at least at first. He didn't say yes. This version of me doesn't know what I know — he thinks Wei Wuxian didn't want this. Doesn't want him. And I… I pressed him against a tree and* took *him. This is worse than taking him to the Cloud Recesses. At least that was just for his own protection. This is…*'

By now, both of Lan Wangji's eyes were wider than they had ever been before, and the gravity of what his other self had just done finally set in.

'*This is assault,*' he thought.

It was wrong.

Lan Wangji looked to the side, and saw the frozen figures of the other watchers.

How would Lan Qiren react, if he knew his nephew had done this? If he had seen how his nephew, who he had raised with the utmost consideration after what Qingheng-jun had done, followed the worst of the rumors surrounding the sect leader. What sort of expression would he give? Would it be hate? Disgust? Horror?

(Shame, despite the fact that this was Lan Wangji's sin, and not his own?)

Wei Wuxian made another whimpering sound.

And Lan Wangji flinched.

(Because it didn't matter if it seemed like Wei Wuxian was accepting it. He hadn't *known* that when he started, so that didn't make it okay.)

And how would Lan Xichen react? He had been so supportive of their relationship. First, in terms of getting Lan Wangji a friend, and later, maybe more.

But now….

And what about the Jiangs? Lan Wangji had been so furious at them when he saw how they treated Wei Wuxian. When Madam Yu whipped him for no reason, and when Jiang Wanyin had choked him that day in the rain…. When the future Jiang Cheng used a dog to torture Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji had been ready to fight.

But if they knew about this, *they* would be the ones up in arms, ready to protect Wei Wuxian.

(From him.)

How Jiang Yanli would react wasn't even under question.

And, over time, everyone else had grown attached to Wei Wuxian too. Nie Mingjue, Nie Huaisang, Wen Qing, Madam Jin, Jin Zixuan, Wen Ruohan — and what did it say that even Wen Ruohan would have the moral high ground over him in this?

With Wen Chao and Wen Xu gone, the only one who might react differently would be-

Lan Wangji paused, then turned. His gaze fell on the only other still-sentient person in the room.

Jin Guangshan.

"Oh my," the old Sect Leader whispered. "I certainly didn't expect this from you."

Lan Wangji couldn't move a muscle in protest.

There was a wet sound in the background, the two bodies still in contact.

"Perhaps we're more similar than I'd realized," he said.

All Lan Wangji could do was shake his head.

"Come now, you don't have to be ashamed of it," Jin Guangshan said, stepping closer. "You're clearly an amateur here, but that's nothing that can't be fixed with practice. Come on, look at how much he loves it."

And, despite his better judgment, Lan Wangji couldn't stop himself from glancing over once again.

The blindfolded Wei Wuxian was breathing heavily, unable to even lift his limbs as Lan Wangji kissed him over and over again. The bright red color covered his whole body now, and went wonderfully with the black of his robes. Short whimpers left his mouth every once in a while, and, if they weren't covered, his eyes would undoubtedly be-

Lan Wangji looked away.

Jin Guangshan laughed, but it wasn't mocking in the least. It was consoling; understanding. A parent trying to show a child the truth of the world, but understanding why they were having trouble and accepting it all the while.

"We can discuss this later," he offered.

Lan Wangji was no more pleased with that suggestion than the previous one. Jin Guangshan just smiled.

'*I already thought it was quite something when Wei Wuxian forced a kiss on the drunk Lan-er-gongzi,*' Jin Guangshan thought. '*He had been drunk as well, but that was still quite an interesting thing to watch. And now, we find out that Hanguang-jun did the same thing to Wei Wuxian even earlier — and much more thoroughly too.*'

He glanced back at the simulation.

The Yiling Patriarch had proven himself time and time again to be an unparalleled resource. He was a one-man army and could completely flip the tide of a war if he wanted to. Best of all, the complete and total lack of political ambition he had meant whoever gained control of him had nothing to fear on that front.

A perfect weapon, and an ideal tool, so long as you could master it.

(And master it Lan Wangji did.)

A single kiss was enough to leave that monster weak-kneed and panting. The complete and total domination Lan Wangji had over the situation was more than Jin Guangshan had even dreamed of, and offered a few new ideas in itself.

Yiling Patriarch aside, Jin Guangshan knew he did prefer the female form. However, Lan Wangji didn't, and was more than attractive enough on his own. Wouldn't it be quite something, if Jin Guangshan were to be on a bed with his usual girls, and, right next to him, there was Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian?

And there were so many more ways to gain control than Lan Wangji realized! They might have seen the second jade use his forehead ribbon before, but that truly didn't even scratch the surface of what was possible. There was a world of potential out there, and Jin Guangshan could teach Lan Wangji each and every bit of it.

(He wondered how long it would take Lan Wangji to make Wei Wuxian cry. If he was taught properly, Sect Leader Jin was quite confident they could make that happen in less than ten minutes.)

A quiet chuckle escaped him once again, and a thousand possibilities filled his mind.

Jin Guangshan was delighted.

And that, more than anything, told Lan Wangji that he had done something very, very wrong.

At that moment, Lan Wangji bit down on Wei Wuxian's lower lip, making his breath hitch once again. They paused, the simulated second jade staring at the Yiling Patriarch with wide, desperate eyes. Then, after lingering for a moment longer, he let go and ran.

Wei Wuxian slumped to the ground, unable to keep himself up anymore. He panted, leaning on the tree to slowly regather his energy. He was exhausted and still a little stunned, as though he had just had an encounter with a mythical creature.

He pulled the blindfold off, and saw that no one else was there.

Suddenly, he clutched at his chest, noticing that the flower he had tucked into his robe was gone.

At that moment, the dried flower that the drunk Hanguang-jun tried giving Wei Wuxian appeared in Lan Wangji's mind.

Another thing Lan Wangji had taken. A reminder because he was sure he would never let himself do this again.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, fists clenched tightly by his sides. "I… I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

That wouldn't make up for it, but he didn't know what else to say.

Jin Guangshan hummed for a bit then shrugged to himself, figuring he'd focus on wearing Lan Wangji down later when he had more time. A beat later, however, as the simulated Wei Wuxian continued leaning on the tree trunk for support, a thought occurred to both him and Lan Wangji.

With this new information, something was suddenly making a lot more sense.

'Then you can stay like this for the whole night,' the simulated Hanguang-jun said, having just paralyzed Wei Wuxian.

'Oh?' the real Jin Guangshan had muttered. 'Are you going to have your way with him?'

But Hanguang-jun hadn't. They had really just slept.

And the simulated Lan Wangji did the same thing again, while drunk.

The next morning, too hot, Wei Wuxian had started taking his and Lan Wangji's clothes off. When Hanguang-jun saw that, he had panicked and flung himself out of bed,

'You were so bold last night, Hanguang-jun,' Wei Wuxian had teased. And despite being undeniably attracted to Wei Wuxian, those words had made the simulated Lan Wangji look disgusted and horrified all at once.

(Not at Wei Wuxian, but at himself.)

And then there was that most recent time, when Lan Wangji had knocked himself *out after Wei Wuxian kissed him. Because he wouldn't have been able to hold himself back. He wasn't*

willing to lose control again.

This was more than not wanting to follow after his parents' footsteps. This was about him, and whether he could control himself.

It had confused all the watchers to see Hanguang-jun reject all of Wei Wuxian's advances.

It wasn't confusing anymore.

Wei Wuxian touched his lips, muttering, "How could this be. That was my…"

'First kiss' was left unfinished.

'*His first?*' Lan Wangji's eyes widened. '*But, he… but he was always….*'

Well, as he'd realized earlier, most of Wei Wuxian's flirting didn't mean anything.

But that would mean he took Wei Wuxian's-

"It really is nothing to be ashamed of, young master," Jin Guangshan said, a warm smile on his face. "These instincts are perfectly natural. And besides, looking at Wei Wuxian, I'm sure anyone would understand."

Lan Wangji practically did a double take, spinning towards Jin Guangshan, eyes wide open in shock.

"Ah, it's rare to see you so expressive," Sect Leader Jin commented idly. "Like I said, you really-"

"Enough," Lan Wangji snapped back. "With all due respect Sect Leader Jin, a statement like that is highly inappropriate."

"You don't agree?"

"Not at all."

Jin Guangshan just laughed: "That might have fooled me before this scene, Lan-er-gongzi, but I'm afraid that white jade act won't work anymore. You see…"

He stepped closer and, if they had been able to touch, would have run his fingers comfortingly through Lan Wangji's hair.

"There's no need for you to fear judgment from me. I understand. More than anyone."

Lan Wangji stepped back, not responding — *unable* to respond, after what his other self had just done. But then-

"-fair measure of skill!" Madam Yu finished, unfreezing from the Concealment Zone and snapping both Lan Wangji and Jin Guangshan out of their thoughts. Everyone looked around at each other.

“Eh? Wangji, you moved,” Lan Xichen observed.

Wen Qing frowned: “Was it the Concealment Zone?”

Jin Guangshan glanced at Lan Wangji, waiting for him to answer. A few seconds passed, before Lan Wangji gave a single, shaky nod.

“Oh?!” Nie Huaisang jumped up, seeming quite excited. “Wangji-xiong, what happened? Did you sing a song to each other? Confess your feelings under an auburn sky? Kiss?!”

Lan Wangji flinched.

“You did! You did!” Nie Huaisang jumped. “What happened? What happened?”

“It’s not his responsibility to tell you!” Nie Mingjue growled.

Madam Jin nodded, “Let’s just give the happy couple some privacy. It appears the simulation is still going on.”

And, at that moment, something important did occur.

‘*Lan Zhan?*’ Wei Wuxian realized, spotting Lan Wangji in the distance.

A moment later, the second jade swung his fist and split a tree in two.

“Huh?!” many of the watchers shrieked.

“Lan Zhan, what are you doing?!”

“Maybe he’s overcome with happiness?” one watcher suggested.

But when Hanguang-jun spun around, his eyes appeared bloodshot and frightening.

Wei Wuxian was a little startled, blinking before teasing, “Wow, how scary.”

“Huh?” someone asked, again. Jin Guangshan seemed uncharacteristically content to let them all wonder among themselves, so many of the watchers turned to Lan Wangji.

The Second Jade remained silent and unreadable to a degree that, previously, only Hanguang-jun had seemed capable of. When Lan Xichen looked at him, he was only able to see a brief flash of guilt before Lan Wangji turned away.

“Wangji?” he asked.

Lan Wangji just shook his head.

Wei Wuxian took a step forward.

“Go away!” Hanguang-jun shouted.

Jiang Yanli looked back and forth between the simulated and real Lan Wangji in abject confusion.

Equally lost, Jin Zixuan suggested, “Is Wei Wuxian… not a good kisser?”

Nie Huaisang gasped, horrified Jin Zixuan would suggest such a thing.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian harrumphed: “I just came here and you already want me to go? Do you hate me that much?”

Lan Wangji could only shake his head hopelessly.

“Stay away from me!” his simulated self shouted again.

Confused, Wei Wuxian took a single step back.

“Hey, Lan Zhan, what’s wrong? It’s rare for you to lose your composure like this. Are you okay? If you’re not okay then say so, yeah?”

‘*Kind, nice, caring, generous, stupid…*’ Lan Wangji buried his head in his hands. ‘*Wei Ying, I… I didn’t-*’

Lan Wangji unsheathed Bichen, slashing through the air and sending the trees surrounding him toppling to the ground.

“...Lan Zhan?”

There was nearly a minute of silence.

Now both Jin Guangshan and Lan Wangji knew that this was when Hanguang-jun’s refusal to initiate anything beyond friendship with Wei Wuxian began.

‘*What a shame,*’ Jin Guangshan thought. ‘*He could have made quite an amazing show if he’d just kept on a little longer.*’

“...Nothing,” Lan Wangji responded. He began walking away, and dodged when Wei Wuxian, still concerned, tried to follow him.

Frowning, Wei Wuxian protested, “Don’t look at me like this. I just want to see what’s wrong with you. You’re acting too strange. You really haven’t been poisoned? Did something happen to you on one of your recent night hunts?”

“Nothing happened.”

“Clearly something did,” Lan Qiren said, glancing back. “Wangji?”

“I… I will tell you, uncle,” he promised. “Just… please give me some time to process this first.”

Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren both frowned at that response, but, upon making eye contact with each other, mutually decided to not press just yet.

“Lan Zhan, have you ever been kissed by someone?” Wei Wuxian suddenly asked.

Lan Wangji stopped in his tracks.

“Huh?” Jiang Cheng was too confused to even be mad at Wei Wuxian’s ridiculous question. “Wait… didn’t you two just… you know.”

“Not… exactly,” was all Lan Wangji could say.

Then, in a voice as cold as ice, Lan Wangji responded, “Why are you asking me that?”

Wei Wuxian grinned, face full of understanding, and sympathetically said, “You haven’t, have you? I knew it. I was just asking. You don’t have to be so angry.”

“What makes you so confident?”

“What do you think?” Wei Wuxian laughed. “You always seem so stiff, who would dare kiss you?”

Lan Wangji’s breathing stopped momentarily.

“Of course, I wouldn’t expect you to initiate a kiss either. I think you’ll have to keep your first kiss until the end of your life!” he declared, laughing.

“And yet, the future Wei Wuxian does kiss you,” Lan Xichen pointed out with a laugh. Rather than embarrassing Lan Wangji, however, those words seemed to only make him fall into deeper thought.

“What about you?” the simulated Lan Wangji wondered.

“Me? Of course, I’ve had loads of experience!”

“What? When?!” Jiang Cheng asked at once.

Jiang Yanli laughed, pointing out, “A-Cheng, this is years in the future. It probably just wasn’t shown to us.”

“Did the concealment zone activate for a kiss between Wei Wuxian and someone other than Lan Wangji?” Madam Jin speculated aloud, turning to her husband. He just smiled, refusing to answer.

“I suppose Wei-xiong has always been quite popular,” Nie Huaisang pointed out. “Don’t worry though, Wangji-xiong. I’ve never seen him talk about anyone like he raves about you~”

Lan Wangji still made no comment.

(They were wrong — Wei Wuxian had confirmed that himself with his reaction to having his 'first kiss' taken — but the current Lan Wangji hardly had the presence of mind to correct their assumptions.)

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji continued walking together, the wind blowing flowers past them gently. Despite not knowing the identity of the person who had just kissed him, Wei Wuxian couldn't help but cast his gaze on Lan Wangji once again.

A memory formed.

A bustling of street activity could be heard, and a crowded street formed below a tavern.

"One month before this," Jin Ling declared. "At Yunmeng."

"Ah, this one's pretty!" a girl suddenly declared. She and Wei Wuxian appeared, surrounded by a few other girls who were also looking at the flowers.

Her friend frowned back, "Eh? I think this one's prettier!"

"Do you know what kind of flower this is?" a third asked.

The eldest-looking one hummed for a moment before speculating, "I think it's an azalea."

Lan Wangji barely restrained himself from flinching. Wei Wuxian might have confirmed that he had never kissed anyone before, but that didn't mean he wasn't interested. Would anyone be able to look at this — a handsome and powerful man surrounded on all sides by beautiful women — and not reach the obvious conclusion?

'*I took his first kiss,*' Lan Wangji thought.

He looked over at the young women laughing in the nearly-abandoned tavern hall.

'*It wasn't mine to take.*'

"Shopkeeper!" Wei Wuxian spoke up at last. "Bring me two more jars of wine."

"Ah? Y-yes. Yes!"

Hearing that, Wen Ruohan frowned slightly.

Right as the shopkeeper hurried downstairs, they heard another customer's voice call out, "Shopkeeper-"

"W-what are you doing coming up?! Quick, go downstairs!"

"Huh?" Jiang Cheng asked.

Wen Qing's frown soon matched her uncle's.

“Huh? Shopkeeper, why is your forehead all sweaty?”

“Don’t you know? That customer upstairs is a demon!”

The hushed voices of the pair weren’t quiet enough to fool a cultivator’s ears. Wei Wuxian’s gaze gained a dull sheen. He looked far from surprised.

The abject fear in their stances and tones was hardly unusual to the Chief Cultivator. Wen Ruohan had heard people talking like that about him thousands of times before.

But the difference was that he *wanted* people to look at him like that and his actions and reactions justified their fear.

“But… Wei Wuxian would never do anything to them,” Jin Zixuan pointed out.

“That doesn’t matter,” Wen Qing shook her head. “They don’t know that. The rumors have gotten out of hand.”

“But-”

“Haven’t you noticed that all the other cultivators are sitting downstairs because they’re avoiding him? I hear those women beside him aren’t even human! They’re probably flesh-eating ghosts, getting hungrier by the second!”

At this, the watchers had to look around the hall again, reassessing it with the new information they had received. They could indeed hear a bustling street outside and a crowded hall below. But, with all the unknown women all hanging around Wei Wuxian, they hadn’t thought there was something keeping people away.

(And, even more so, would have never suspected that ‘something’ was Wei Wuxian.)

Come to think of it, the energy had felt a little strange in here. It had been hard to figure out exactly what that meant, given how new their sensitivity to resentful energy was. But, if the girls here weren’t human at all, what they were feeling would make perfect sense.

They turned to the newly identified ghost girls again.

“Hey, this one’s not bad!”

“That one’s so pretty!”

“No, no, look at this one! It’s got so many petals!”

“I love that color!”

“Oh dear,” Nie Huaisang muttered, giving an exaggerated sigh to himself. “Well, as everyone knows, I rank first in the ‘cultivators who are most terrified of ghosts’ rankings. If so many brave and noble cultivators are reacting like this, I’m sure I’d be petrified in my boots if I was there, too terrified to move. How fearsome.”

“Wait, wait, look at this one! It’s so big!”

“Really? I think the little ones are cuter.”

They laughed playfully, and a few eeps of terror could be heard from below.

Nie Mingjue clicked his tongue in disgust. Nie Huaisang was fully prepared to receive another lecture from him for his cheek.

Which was why he had to do a double take when Nie Mingjue instead grumbled, “Cowards, the lot of them. If they just got to know Wei Wuxian, this wouldn’t be….”

He trailed off, but his thoughts continued.

‘*My sect doesn’t do demonic cultivation, but it’s not completely unrelated either. What was it Wei Wuxian said? That everyone fears and respects me, but people only fear him?*’

He recalled the terror in Wei Wuxian’s eyes as he was thrown about by spirits in the Burial Mounds.

And then he recalled his own reasons for learning his techniques.

He didn’t regret it. He had defeated the Wens, which almost automatically made those riskier techniques worth it. But when comparing himself to Wei Wuxian….

At the very least, the difference in reaction shouldn’t be this big.

“Young master, I like this one the best!” the youngest girl said, displaying a five petaled flower to Wei Wuxian.

“What are you girls playing? Where did you get that many flowers?” he asked.

The rest of the ghost girls paused in their discussion, the eldest turning to Wei Wuxian to excitedly explain, “From that seller down at south street. We saw that his flowers were pretty, so we took them back.”

“...Took?” Wei Wuxian asked, voicing many of the watchers’ thoughts.

The giggling of the ghost girls resumed: “We saw him peddling at an alley from afar. We waited until he walked farther down the alley into an area where nobody else was around, and then floated in front of him and *d*id *this** wit*h o**ur** t**ong*ue**s!”**

Nie Huaisang and Jiang Yanli both eeped at the gross distortions of their faces the girls made, and even those used to fighting ghosts appeared momentarily taken aback. The girls had seemed indistinguishable from humans a moment ago.

But Wei Wuxian didn’t so much as blink, merely raising an eyebrow as the girls continued to describe their little prank.

“The seller was scared witless. He even left running without his flowers!”

Wei Wuxian shook his head and gave a half-laugh: "Why do you girls want so many flowers?"

The laughter this time took on a far more sweet, longing tone.

"Obviously to express my affection to a gentleman," another girl declared. "Young Master, you have a good view from your spot on the balcony. Help us find someone! If you see a good looking man, you have to tell us!"

As the discussion of romance was continuously brought up, Jiang Yanli couldn't help but sneak a glance toward Jin Zixuan, only to find that he was already looking at her. They both jumped a little as they made eye contact, not having expected the other person to see them, and then blushed simultaneously and stared down at the ground.

Meanwhile, bullied into it by the spirits he supposedly commanded, Wei Wuxian glanced out at the street with an appeasing, "Sure."

At the beginning, it really had seemed like Wei Wuxian was using his ghosty powers to gather a harem of girls around himself. Jin Guangshan had certainly thought that was the case. But now-

"He's… acting more like a father to them than a master," Madam Jin pointed out, disbelieving.

Upon hearing that, Wen Qing mentally added on, '*That's no surprise. Even as everyone calls him A-Ning's master, no one who sees them interact would ever be able to describe their relationship as something other than friendship. The sects may curse the lack of respect he had while he was digging up graves during the war, but he may have more respect for the dead than anyone else.*'

Not that she expected the public to understand that. If they couldn't even eat in the same room as Wei Wuxian, how were they ever going to learn the first thing about him?

"Hey, did you know?" one of the ghost girls suddenly asked. "These flowers, apart from looking pretty, each have a meaning of their own."

"Meaning?"

"They do?" Nie Mingjue asked, causing Nie Huaisang to sigh heavily and make an exaggerated tutting sound a few times.

"Da-ge," he shook his head. "Oh my, I was wondering why you never understood the deep meaning hidden in my paintings. This certainly does explain a lot. Is the only one you know about the Sparks Amidst Snow Peony for the Jin Sect?"

Got it in one. Nie Mingjue had thought the Jin Sect's white peony having a special symbolic meaning was an exception among flowers, not the norm. The people who had educated Nie Mingjue had seen his lack of interest in the subject and didn't think he'd need to know anything more than that, despite his role as the young master of a great sect.

(With Nie Huaisang, the exact opposite had occurred.)

Which was why he was able to easily nod along as the initial ghost girl explained, "For example, this purple magnolia. Its meaning is 'To fall for your charming looks.' It is truly suitable for confessing your affection toward a handsome gentleman."

Once again, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan individually turned to look at each other to gauge the other's reaction, and, upon making eye contact, had to immediately look away.

"Then, what about the one I'm holding?" another asked. "What's its meaning?"

"Weigela!" Nie Huaisang immediately called out, overwhelmed by his own excitement. "For futures!"

"The one you're holding is Weigela," the ghost girl explained, examining the long stalk covered in small, pink flowers more closely. "It means 'Wishing you a bright future.'"

"That one sounds nice," Wen Qing commented, thinking it might be a useful gift in a platonic aspect as well. Wen Ning had always liked flowers, and maybe Wei Wuxian would too.

"Then what about this one?"

"Daphne. It means 'Wishing you good luck.'"

Which, like any of the other flowers mentioned, would have been a far more appropriate way for Lan Wangji to express his feelings.

(Well, *anything* would be more appropriate than what he had actually done.)

Wei Wuxian had thrown him flowers last time. Was it really too much for him to have tried to do the same back?

(It was. Because, for the past Lan Wangji, there was always an underlying question of whether Wei Wuxian was just messing with him, like he had been in their youth.)

(But the Hanguang-jun of thirteen years later would have thrown some back, because all that would matter to him would be that he wanted to.)

"What about this one?"

"A carnation. 'My heart aches for you.'"

"This one?"

"Tulip. 'I declare my love.'"

"This-"

"What about that one? On the right side corner of the table?" Wei Wuxian asked. "A peony?"

Suddenly turning much less excited, the ghost girl explained, "Ah, this one. Its meaning is, 'Wishing you will return my feelings,' or 'To part with a heavy heart.' That's why it's also called the 'farewell blossom.'"

Nie Huaisang's hands practically itched with how much he wished he had access to his paints right then.

However, at that moment, there was a new voice heard. This time, from outside.

"Isn't that Hanguang-jun?" a passerby couldn't help but ask.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian wondered, glancing back. "Why is he here?"

All the watchers looked below, watching as Hanguang-jun walked through town, ignoring the many whispers his mere presence initiated.

"Hey, didn't you girls say you wanted to gift these flowers to a man who looks handsome? There's one right down there."

Lan Wangji did a double take, not at all expecting the comment, and Jiang Yanli, Nie Huaisang, and Madam Jin all breathed in an excited gasp of air.

(Lan Wangji might have even blushed over it, if it weren't for the small laugh Jin Guangshan gave out at Wei Wuxian's comment.)

"Who is it?" a ghost girl asked.

"His title is 'Hanguang-jun.'"

"Eh? But we don't know him."

But Wei Wuxian wasn't concerned: "Go look for the most handsome person on the entire street. That's him."

Lan Xichen smiled brightly at the comment, but faltered when, upon looking over at his brother, he found none of the excited, embarrassed happiness he expected.

"...Wangji?"

"I'm fine," Lan Wangji said at once, understanding immediately what was concerning Lan Xichen.

"...I see."

On the other hand, having received instructions from Wei Wuxian, the girls became excited to give it a try.

"Let's go, let's go," one of them requested.

"Alright!"

“Yes, let’s go!”

“Take a flower! Quick, quick!”

“Do you think he’s more handsome than Young Master Wei?”

They rushed downstairs, startling and terrifying the shopkeeper, who had been on his way up.

“G-gongzi,” he said at last, upon making it to the top. “Your wine.”

“Thank you.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Uh… Young Master, if you have nothing else to order…”

“You may go down.”

“Ah, yes. Yes!”

He scurried away.

Wen Qing couldn’t help but look on in disgust for a moment. It wasn’t fair. The shopkeeper was just a civilian. He would indeed be in danger if Wei Wuxian got genuinely mad, and it was far safer for him to err on the side of caution and listen to the rumors the other cultivators shared.

It still left a bad taste in her mouth.

(She wondered how people looked at the Wens, once the war was over. Whether her brother, a fierce corpse, would be able to interact with society ever again.)

“Gongzi,” a soft voice began. “Let me pour your wine.”

It was the eldest looking of the ghost girls.

“No need. I’ll drink from the jar,” Wei Wuxian said cheerily. “Hm? How come you didn’t go downstairs?”

“I… I was already engaged when I was alive.”

Several people felt their eyes widen at that. They knew full well that the ghosts were once human (one of their main solutions for ghostly problems was to free them of the regrets they had while they were alive), but they had never heard one talk so openly about it like this before. People could communicate with the dead through inquiry, and interview the people the deceased had known while they were still alive.

But these sorts of whimsical, longing statements?

The effect Wei Wuxian had on the dead was as shocking as ever.

Wei Wuxian finished a long gulp from the jar in his hand, setting it down with an exhale.

“You’re holding that peony,” he observed. “Do you like those ones?”

“Mn. I like the meaning behind peonies.”

Wei Wuxian hummed: “To return feelings or… to part.”

From below, laughter rang out.

“Aiyo! I see there are girls out to catch Hanguang-jun!”

“Indeed! I’ve never seen second young master Lan look so troubled!”

The kids glanced over at Lan Wangji with mischievous smiles, but found him staring blanky forward, even more humorless than usual.

Jiang Cheng, who had found himself lost in thought more than a few times throughout the simulation, looked away, deciding to give Lan Wangji some privacy.

(He might be the person who would one day take Wei Wuxian away from him, but he had also been *there* for Wei Wuxian, in times where Jiang Cheng just… wasn’t.)

“Hey,” Wei Wuxian said, suddenly perking up in interest. “Can you give me that flower?”

The ghost girl nodded, handing it over. As soon as she did, Wei Wuxian turned and threw it.

“Lan Zhan!” he shouted.

Now, at long last, this seemed to be enough to make Lan Wangji snap out of his thoughts. He looked up, watching wide eyed as the blossom floated down in front of him.

“Wei Ying?”

The simulated Hanguang-jun looked up, seeing the peony fall toward his head, and caught it.

“Hanguang-jun, what a coincidence!” Wei Wuxian called out, practically lighting up in excitement.

“It’s you,” Lan Wangji observed.

“It’s me. The only person who would do such a senseless, shameless thing is, of course, me!” Wei Wuxian grinned. “Why are you in Yunmeng? If you’re not in a hurry, why don’t you come up for a drink?”

Exhaling once, Lan Wangji turned and walked away. As Wei Wuxian watched him depart, his expression changed from playfulness into something that couldn't quite be described as sadness, but wasn't contentment either. His smile remained, but took on a much more longing feel. Not mourning and not sympathy. Nostalgia, perhaps.

'*He really ignored me,*' Wei Wuxian thought, giving a little laugh.

'*I'm sorry,*' Lan Wangji thought. '*I won't ignore you. I'll give you all the attention you want, I-*'

The image of Wei Wuxian being pushed up against a tree filled his mind again, and his train of thought came to a grinding halt. That wasn't the kind of attention he should have given.

Once again, the actions of Hanguang-jun after the thirteen year time skip suddenly made a lot more sense.

Yawning, Wei Wuxian picked up the jar of wine again, drinking every last drop.

"I'll order another jar of wine for the young master," the ghost who had stayed behind offered. Wei Wuxian sent her off with a smile, before leaning back casually against the wall, lost in thought.

Then, footsteps began to echo.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian asked, seeing the man reach the top of the stairs.

'*Oh,*' Lan Wangji thought. '*I didn't leave.*'

That feeling brought with it the slightest bit of worry. After all, the last time the simulation had shown him and Wei Wuxian alone together-

His gaze turned toward Jin Guangshan, who had perked up with interest upon realizing the same thing.

"Mn." Hanguang-jun held out the colorful objects in his hand. "Your flowers."

"You're welcome," Wei Wuxian nodded once. "I gave them to you as a gift, so they're your flowers now."

Hanguang-jun looked down at the flowers in his hand, then slipped them into his sleeve with a nearly imperceptible sigh.

And, at that moment, the flashback faded away. They returned to the competition, where Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian were walking through the woods.

Wei Wuxian laughed to himself: '*When I threw a flower at him earlier today, he seemed so annoyed. Especially in comparison to how calm he was last month. It seems our dear Hanguang-jun is off his game today. Given what happened to those poor trees, he definitely had some pent up frustration in him before.*'

“The frustration’s probably because of you!” Jiang Cheng pointed out with a shout. He was quite right about that.

(Even if the frustration was of a different variety than he currently realized.)

Lan Wangji’s ears turned scarlet with shame.

Then, there was a rustle in the distance. Reacting immediately, Wei Wuxian grabbed Lan Wangji and pulled him to the side, hiding both of them in the thick bushes below. Right as the simulated Lan Wangji opened his mouth to ask what was going on, he heard voices and fell silent. He and Wei Wuxian looked toward the source of the noise.

Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan stood together, walking through the forest.

“Not again!” Jin Zixuan groaned, burying his face in his hands.

Jiang Yanli blushed as well, and, noticing the uncharacteristically frosty way her other self was interacting with him, sent her fiance a few mental apologies.

(Jin Zixuan, upon noticing the same thing, began saying his apologies out loud at rapid speed, knowing full well that Jiang Yanli had nothing she had to apologize for.)

Wei Wuxian clicked his tongue: ‘*I should’ve known Madam Jin would make Shijie and Jin Zixuan come out alone.*’

The speed of Jin Zixuan’s apologies increased, despite Jiang Yanli’s flustered attempts at getting him to stop.

“What happened between you and Jin Zixuan?” Lan Wngji asked, noticing the animosity.

Wei Wuxian snorted.

At that moment, from a figure they couldn’t see, there was an awkward clearing of a throat.

“Following the, um, ‘soup incident,’ Madam Jin-”

Ouyang Zizhen’s words were cut off when Lan Jingyi whispered, “She wasn’t a Jin yet.”

“Well, what else should I call her? 'Jin Ling’s mom?'”

The blush on Jiang Yanli’s cheeks deepened, and even Jin Zixuan finally got so embarrassed that he couldn’t keep up his endless tirade of apologies. Madam Jin smiled at the sight.

And Jin Guangshan, watching from the side, gave a little laugh.

At once Lan Wangji’s eyes snapped toward him, having become hyper-sensitive to everything Jin Guangshan did following their previous discussion. Sect Leader Jin noticed

that action immediately, and his smile widened.

“The topic of romance is rather prominent in this segment, isn’t it?” he asked.

A sinking feeling of guilt returned to Lan Wangji at once, and the armor of apathy he wore began to show its cracks.

“...Isn’t it weird to call her just ‘my mom?’ She’s going to be watching this.”

“Oh, right. Totally forgot about that.”

“How did you forget?!” Jin Ling snapped. “You know what? Fine! Just call her my mom!”

Lan Qiren took a deep breath in.

‘*The first few times they had arguments like this they at least made sure to whisper. I never thought a time would come when I’d miss those days.*’

“After that incident, Sect Leader Jiang and Senior Wei brought Jin Ling’s mom back to Yunmeng. She showed no interest in spending time with Jin Ling’s dad, and ignored every attempt he made at communication. On the contrary, Jin Ling’s dad began to ask more and more about her after the sunshot campaign ended, either out of guilt or due to Madam Jin’s scoldings,” Ouyang Zizhen concluded. “Though it better have been out of guilt! If he only did it because of his mom… that would be so unromantic.”

Jin Zixuan deeply hope it was indeed because of that.

Which was very slightly supported by the awkward walk pattern his other self was caught in. His right hand would come forward when his right foot did, and his left hand came forward when the left one did. This stiff, unpractical style of movement simply oozed nervousness at every instant.

The glare in Wei Wuxian’s eyes remained unsympathetic, however.

“Those who heard of the incident said it was simply the result of a misunderstanding. Now that it had been clarified, there was no need to hold any grudges. No harm, no foul, after all. But Senior Wei disagreed. He, um… he hated Jin Zixuan, considering him to be a conceited male princess, an ostentatious peacock, and a blind man who looked only at appearances. He didn’t believe at all that Jin Zixuan would realize his mistake and suddenly take an interest in Jin Ling’s mom. Senior Wei was sure he’d just been scolded by Jin Ling’s grandmother too much and was responding accordingly.”

Jin Zixuan flinched at every word, hating the fact that his future son was listening in, but unable to really blame Wei Wuxian either.

Madam Jin, on the other hand, frowned deeply. She had long-since acknowledged that there must be more to the story and that Wei Wuxian wasn’t the sort of person who would kill for nothing, but the lines being narrated to them now made her son’s eventual fate impossible to forget.

‘*Wei Ying, I understand your feelings, but… you would be the first to agree that’s nowhere near enough reason to kill someone.*’

“But no matter how Senior Wei felt about it, in order to not put Jin Ling’s mom in a difficult situation, he had no choice but to remain hidden.”

Hanguang-jun was still waiting for an explanation, but Wei Wuxian could only put a finger to his lips and shake his head, not having time to explain.

Although this went unnoticed by most of the watchers, Jin Guangshan and Lan Wangji couldn’t help but notice the way the later’s other-self’s eyes lingered on Wei Wuxian’s lips for a moment, observing the still-wet skin.

At that moment, the future Jin Zixuan brushed a few trees away, revealing a monster’s corpse. He bent down for a moment, observing it closely.

“It’s dead,” he reported.

Jiang Yanli nodded.

“It’s a measuring snake,” he added on.

The young lady of the Jiangs looked back at him from where she’d turned away, asking, “What?”

“A beast from the Naman area. When it sees someone, it’ll straighten itself up to see if it’s taller. If it is, and it’s searching for food, it’ll devour the person. However, given their lack of aggressiveness during this season, it’s just as likely that this one was killed by another animal. It’s not a big deal. It only looks scary.”

Which was common information among cultivators. Even a non-practicing one like Jiang Yanli would have heard of this so long as she grew up in a cultivating family. Her blank gaze was quite telling.

The only significant thing about it was that it was probably the grandmother of the snake family Wei Wuxian had run into earlier in the segment. She was at least a week dead, so it was probably unrelated to the hunting competition.

Other than that, there was nothing strange about it.

But Jin Zixuan’s explanation continued on: “I-if you go to the LanlingJin Sect’s hunting ground, you can see all sorts of rare prey!”

‘*Who would want to go to your hunting ground?!*’ Wei Wuxian thought with a glare.

“I just so happen to be free next month! I could take you there, if you want!”

Not even making eye contact with him, Jiang Yanli responded with a blank, dispassionate, “Thank you for your kindness Young Master Jin, but there’s no need to bother.”

Madam Jin couldn't resist giving a long, drawn out sigh. Well, at the very least, she supposed she would prefer her son to have this level of proficiency in wooing someone over him taking after her husband.

Meanwhile, Jin Zixuan cleared his throat and, for the hundredth time that hour, bowed down: "I-I'm sorry for making you uncomfortable, A-Li. I… I mean, I don't regret trying to get to know you after what happened, but maybe this wasn't the best, I mean — anyways, it won't happen again!"

Hearing that, Jiang Yanli couldn't help but smile.

"Thank you for saying so, A-Xuan," she said, her eyes softening with appreciation. "It may have not been the current you, but apology accepted."

Jin Zixuan smiled.

(And Lan Wangji frowned, wishing his other self had exercised the same levels of consideration in regards to Wei Wuxian.)

But the simulated Jin Zixuan wasn't ready to give up.

After an additional beat of awkwardness, Jin Zixuan continued, "I-if you take a closer look, scales can be seen on this measuring snake, and its fangs are longer than its jaw. It's probably a mutant, given that these traits don't usually appear on measuring snakes during this season. Most people would find it difficult to deal with it. They won't be able to shoot through these scales…. But still, it really isn't much. None of the prey here is that difficult. It wouldn't be able to hurt people from the LanlingJin Sect at all."

As his words got more and more prideful, the stiffness of his walking also increased. His knees weren't even really bending anymore, and his arms still came forward when the foot below them did.

Jiang Yanli giggled slightly, but then-

"It's for the best if hunts don't hurt anyone," the simulated Jiang Yanli responded, barely speaking above a murmur.

Jin Zixuan wilted again. At her words, he recalled the slight disagreement he'd had with the real one.

(After danger had been shown time and time again, Jiang Yanli started considering whether it would be better for Jin Ling to not become a cultivator at all. In their world, and so long as he had proper supervision, becoming a cultivator was less dangerous for someone than being powerless, but the thought had still been there. Jin Zixuan hadn't been able to understand it at first.)

(And the simulated Jin Zixuan still couldn't understand this.)

"What value is prey that can't hurt anyone? There's no honor in catching something like that," he declared, but those words seemed to only make Jiang Yanli even less

interested than before. "...You don't like watching hunts?"

Jiang Yanli nodded.

"Then, why did you come this time?"

'*Because of Madam Jin being the one who invited her, of course!*'

'*He genuinely didn't realize?*' Jin Guangshan thought, somewhat disbelieving. '*I could understand it if he hoped having more public appearances with her would put political pressure on her to officiate something with him — or at least believe that she should, which would make it easier to gain access to other things too. But with this… did he really come here hoping she would have a good time?*'

He wasn't being malicious, just naive and stupid.

Jin Guangshan had essentially never been so disappointed in his son.

But now Jin Zixuan seemed to understand. His face turned from red to white.

"...Do you not like watching hunts, or do you just not like being with me?"

"And he gets it at last!" Nie Huaisang shouted from the side.

"Huaisang! Not helping!" Nie Mingjue shouted back.

"Ah, no…" Jiang Yanli trailed off.

'*Shijie's worried Jin Zixuan only invited her due to Madam Jin's pressure, and doesn't really want to have her with him, so she's trying to not trouble him,*' Wei Wuxian thought, his scowl growing deeper. '*But what would Jin Zixuan know about that?! He's probably never been so ashamed in his life. Not only is this the first time he's been refused by a maiden, but he invited her out and was coldly refused.*'

Jin Zixuan's nervousness seemed to switch to anger.

"Fine, then," he said, turning away.

Jiang Yanli hesitated, adding, "I'm sorry."

"What would you have to be sorry for? You can think whatever you want to. I wasn't the one who wanted to invite you anyways. It's fine if you don't want to be here."

It appeared Jiang Yanli's fears had been confirmed.

Wei Wuxian clenched his fists, watching and Jiang Yanli's lips began to tremble at those words. However, she didn't truly respond except to bow lowly to Jin Zixuan one last time.

"Please excuse me," she said.

Madam Jin just rubbed her temples. They were happy together — Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli *ended up* happy together, and the real ones were getting along wonderfully — but this situation, brought about by her other self's schemes…

She had been fine getting married to a man she didn't love for the influence and power it would give her. Those feelings changed slightly with every bastard child that appeared, but, when she was young, she had been confident in her decision.

However, it now seemed obvious that Jiang Yanli didn't feel the same way. The young lady of the Jiang Sect was a different person than her, and would desire different things.

Despite having her best interests in mind, Madam Jin and Madam Yu had not managed to help her at all, it appeared.

But that view of the situation wasn't enough to explain Jin Zixuan's current reaction. As, while Jiang Yanli was walking away, he suddenly seemed to snap out of something.

"Stop!" he shouted, and, seeing that she wasn't willing to, he rushed up to her in an instant. He reached forward to grab at her hand, before a shadow suddenly threw him back.

He landed on his feet, but skidded a meter across the dirt.

"Wha-" he cut off, looking up. "Wei Wuxian! Why is it you again?!"

Watching this, Madam Yu was more silent than Jiang Yanli could ever remember her being before. In all honesty, she had been expecting her mother to criticize her, Wei Wuxian, or Jin Zixuan . If the fracture in Madam Yu's friendship with Madam Jin mattered more to her, then she would berate Jin Zixuan for his insistent actions. If the power and alliances of the Jiang Sect mattered more, she would scold Jiang Yanli for ruining that. If she was too distracted to focus on such implications, then she would admonish Wei Wuxian for all the world to hear.

Instead, she had just been silent.

(In fact, she had been surprisingly quiet the last few segments.)

All she had done was move slightly closer to Jiang Yanli as things went on.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian stood between the pair, blocking Jin Zixuan's access to Jiang Yanli with a terrifying glare:

"Ha. I hadn't even gotten to speak before you said my part for me. Let me ask: Jin Zixuan, why is it *you* again?!" Wei Wuxian demanded.

"Attacking me for no reason…." Jin Zixuan stood up straight. "Have you gone mad?!"

"What do you mean 'for no reason?'" With a sweep of his hand, Wei Wuxian sent a wave of resentful energy forward, bending the surrounding trees back and sending Jin Zixuan skidding a bit more. "What do you think you're doing trying to grab my Shijie to satisfy your own damaged pride?!"

A fight began.

Wei Wuxian was protecting Jiang Yanli from Jin Zixuan, in a way no one could really criticize while being aware of their history and what Jin Zixuan had just tried to do.

(And especially not while being aware of Jin Zixuan's father.)

But Madam Yu knew, from the glimpses the simulation had shown, that when the engagement between her daughter and Jin Zixuan was first dissolved Madam Yu was far from happy about it. She had gotten into an argument with Jiang Fengmian, and had blamed the situation on his preference for Wei Wuxian.

His *preference.*

'A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him.'

Had she whipped Wei Wuxian over this? She probably wouldn't admit to it, but it was far from impossible that the frequency and intensity of her punishments would have increased in the days following the dissolution of the engagement. She didn't have any proof of that happening, of course, but if someone told her it had, she wouldn't be surprised.

Despite the fact that Wei Wuxian was protecting *her daughter* from something Madam Yu forced her into.

(She and Madam Jin had forced both Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan into this. Was it really any surprise that their relationship was nearly ended so many times?)

Meanwhile, both the physical and verbal fight continued.

"Trying to grab her to satisfy my pride?" Jin Zixuan repeated. "Then what? Should I just let her randomly walk around a monster infested mountain alone?"

"You think that excuses what you've done? Why was she here in the first place? To have a walk with you, right?"

"My mother-"

"Don't think you can get out of this through that! You tried to grab her while she was walking away!"

Jin Zixuan looked down at that, unable to respond.

'*I shouldn't have grabbed her,*' he thought. '*I should have made sure she got back safely, but grabbing her went too far. But I'm not like my father. I don't know how to make her want to stay with me. I was just trying to… trying to….*'

Although he wanted his thoughts to go on, he felt himself growing fixated on one very specific part of his protests.

Jin Zixuan wasn't like his father. He didn't know how to make Jiang Yanli want to stay with him.

But he also couldn't say for sure that his father *wouldn't* grab a woman who was trying to walk away from him.

'*No… no A-Die might not be loyal to A-Niang, but he's not like that,*' Jin Zixuan told himself. '*I mean… he's said a few things that… are along those lines… especially in regards to Wei Wuxian. But he sees Wei Wuxian as a source of wealth and power. A weapon. Which is a problem in its own right! It's just not… he wouldn't….*'

The more he thought about it, the more he couldn't help but feel like trying to grab Jiang Yanli was actually the closest he had ever been to acting like his father.

(And the simulated Wei Wuxian might be thinking the exact same thing.)

At that moment, the attack Jin Zixuan had launched towards Wei Wuxian was parried away by another sword glare. Both opponents turned to look at the source of that attack.

"Hanguang-jun?!"

The simulated Lan Wangji moved to stand between the three of them, maintaining his silence.

"A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli called out, rushing over and grabbing Wei Wuxian's arm now that the area was no longer a combat zone. Before she could continue, however, the thumping of a large number of footsteps approached.

"What happened?!" the person at the front of that crowd shouted.

"Woah, look at this!" Lan Jingyi's voice suddenly exclaimed. "It seems like Jin Ling's dad fought Hanguang-jun at once point!"

"Huh?"

The watchers looked around, realizing a half second later that what they were hearing was (meant to be) narration, and wasn't actually part of the scene.

"No way," Jin Ling said back. "Hold on, let me read!"

There was a rustling sound as papers were handed over.

"It turned out that, during the fight, Hanguang-jun and A-Die's sword glares shot into the sky, startling the cultivators near them. They could tell at once that two people were fighting, so they all rushed over to see the strange deadlock of four people in the forest," Jin Ling read aloud. "Huh. Did they really fight? I never heard anything about that!"

"I suppose they must have," Sizhui said. "I don't see any other way to interpret that line. However, if we haven't heard about it, perhaps it was a small matter."

“Weird,” Ouyang Zizhen commented.

“Yeah.”

The real Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan glanced at each other, then looked away. They were fairly sure that however weird it was to find out your teacher and father got into a fight, it was nowhere near as weird as hearing your future son and students reacting to something about you that you yourself hadn’t experienced yet.

At that moment, the crowd finally reached the scene of the fight, and Jin Zixun was in the lead.

“Zixuan! Is Wei Wuxian making trouble for you again?!” he called out.

“None of your business. Don’t worry about it for now,” Jin Zixuan responded, not taking his eyes off Jiang Yanli and Wei Wuxian.

At that moment, deciding he’d had enough, Wei Wuxian grabbed Jiang Yanli and started to leave with her.

“Stop!” Jin Zixuan protested.

“What? You really want to fight? That’s fine with me!” Wei Wuxian snapped back.

Growling, Jin Zixun stepped forward and shouted, “Wei, just what do you mean to say by going against Zixuan so many times?!”

Many, both in the crowd and among the watchers, expected Wei Wuxian to snap at him as well. He was obviously infuriated by Jin Zixuan’s actions, and the additional provocation from Jin Zixuan’s own cousin could easily be the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Instead-

“Who are you?” Wei Wuxian asked, turning to look at Jin Zixun with his brows furrowed in genuine confusion.

There was a beat of silence.

“Huh?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“I…. You don’t know who I am?!”

“Why would I know who you are?”

After clearing his throat, Lan Sizhui explained, “When the Sunshot Campaign first broke out, Jin Zixun insisted on defending the back lines due to an injury.”

“Huh?” Jin Zixuan added on, unintentionally making the exact same expression Jiang Cheng had.

“He didn’t have the chance to see what Senior Wei was like on the front lines, most of his knowledge coming from rumors instead. Assuming that all the rumors were exaggerated, he had paid him no mind.”

There were muffled snickers of amusement in the background. It appeared that the juniors had also had their fair share of experiences of people underestimating Wei Wuxian.

“However, just a short while ago, Wei Wuxian had summoned all the dark creatures in the forest with a whistle, calling away the fierce corpses Jin Zixun had been about the capture, and causing his efforts to be wasted. His anger at Senior Wei was higher than ever.”

Recalling the simple, casual string of notes the blindfolded Wei Wuxian had given, the Lan Qiren sighed.

“If it really is that easy for Wei Wuxian to do that, then we’re going to need to figure out a different kind of competition to hold in the future,” he said, rubbing his temples.

All they’d accomplish would be boring Wei Wuxian (and embarrassing themselves) otherwise.

However, Sizhui’s explanation wasn’t done yet:

“On top of all that, Wei Wuxian was asking who he was right to his face, stirring up a strange sense of indignation within him. He knew who Wei Wuxian was, yet not only did Wei Wuxian not know him, he had asked who he was right in front of everyone. The more Jin Zixun thought about it, the more irritated he felt.”

Which, considering Jin Zixun’s complete inability to hide his emotions, was pretty obvious just from looking at him.

Jin Zixuan flushed in second hand embarrassment.

Jin Zixun opened his mouth to speak-

A golden light flashed in front of them. A middle aged woman, dressed in shimmering golden robes and exquisite jewels, landed in the middle of the gathering. The numerous people accompanying her landed shortly after.

At that moment, both the real and simulated Jin Zixuan uttered the same phrase.

“A-Niang?!” they asked, eyes wide.

“Don’t gape,” Madam Jin scolded back, frowning disapprovingly. The real version of her son shrunk back a little.

“Aunt,” Jin Zixun realized.

“Mother, what are you doing here?” the simulated Jin Zixuan asked, before, a moment after, glancing down at his own sword and realizing their fight must have been visible from the watchtower. “I — why did you bring so many people over. There’s no need for you to interfere during the hunt.”

“Stop being so full of yourself,” Madam Jin snapped back. “Who said I’m here for you?!”

She looked around, making many of the cultivators who had been posturing and strutting just a few seconds before shrink back in shame. Finally, her eyes landed on Jiang Yanli, who had stepped back and hidden behind Wei Wuxian some time ago.

“A-Li, what happened to you?” she asked at once.

Jiang Yanli smiled slightly. Even before the simulation, when her and Jin Zixuan’s relationship was still made up of one-sided attempts and cold, distant courtesy, Madam Jin had always felt like an aunt to her.

(Well, calling her a ‘to-be mother in law’ might be more accurate.)

Their personalities didn’t mesh well, but the care could be felt regardless. With Jiang Yanli’s mother dead in this future….

It was nice to know she still had this.

The Jiang Yanli within the simulation, on the other hand, was a bit more uncomfortable than her real counterpart was. She had done her best to avoid attracting attention until then, but Madam Jin’s words had turned the entire crowd towards her. Nevertheless, after a half second she managed to pull herself together, sending Madam Jin a flawless polite smile.

“Thank you, Madam. I’m fine.”

Narrowing her eyes, Madam Jin immediately asked, “Did that damn little brat bully you again?”

“No,” Jiang Yanli shook her head at once, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

Jin Zixuan shifted awkwardly in the back.

And the real one did the same from his seat, recalling the many, many disastrous encounters the two of them had gone through in the past.

Unfortunately, the simulated Jin Zixuan’s shifting attracted his mother’s hawk-like eyes.

“Jin Zixuan! Do you want to die?!” she snapped.

Feeling the sound was familiar, Jiang Cheng slowly glanced back at his mother, only to accidentally make eye contact with her and hurriedly look away.

Madam Yu just scowled.

But the simulated Madam Jin was far from done:

“Are you insane? How could you have allowed the situation to go this badly?! What did you tell me before you came here?”

He jumped. “I-”

“No matter what your son told you before he came here, Madam Jin, everything will be fine so long as he and my Shijie avoid each other from now on,” Wei Wuxian interjected, a few spark of resentful energy turning his eyes a glowing red.

Lan Qiren frowned at that, but, shortly after, forced himself to relax. He could feel what the energy was doing. Wei Wuxian might be annoyed, but he had control over his powers. This was a cold anger, allowing him to command resentful energy with the upmost accuracy.

Additionally, despite the confrontational tone Wei Wuxian had used, Madam Jin didn’t seem to mind. She simply acknowledged Wei Wuxian’s point, before hurrying past him to Jiang Yanli’s side, making sure the girl was okay.

(Because Jiang Yanli’s happiness was more important to Madam Jin than her pride.)

And on the contrary-

‘If I had known Wei Wuxian would do something like this, I would have made him stay in Lotus Pier no matter what! Would Wen Chao have dared to do anything to the two young masters of the GusuLan and LanlingJin Sects?!’

And he would have. They all knew he would have. But-

‘Even if he did, that’d just mean they ran out of luck. Since when was it his turn to play hero?!’

Madam Yu had been scared then. And rightfully so. The Wens were coming — even if they would have come with or without Wei Wuxian’s actions — and they did, indeed, manage to nearly destroy Lotus Pier. She had died. It made sense that she was reacting like that.

And it made even more sense that Madam Jin was furious at her for saying that.

(The look of abject shock and betrayal that Madam Jin had gained upon hearing her words remained seared into Madam Yu’s mind.)

However, although Madam Jin didn’t care about Wei Wuxian’s rudeness, someone else saw it as an opportunity.

“Wei Wuxian, my aunt is your senior! Speaking to her like that is a bit presumptuous of you, don’t you think?” Jin Zixun accused, looking to resume the argument Madam Jin’s arrival had disrupted. The men by his side nodded in agreement.

But Wei Wuxian remained unfazed:

"What I said wasn't directed at Madam Jin," he explained. "Your cousin has spoken in regard to my Shijie with harsh words time and time again. If the Yunmeng Jiang Sect was one that would just roll over and tolerate that, then we wouldn't be called an elite sect!"

For a moment there, Madam Yu could almost see her husband standing behind Wei Wuxian, nodding in approval.

"Tell me, how am I being presumptuous?"

"How are you being presumptuous? How is any part of you *not* presumptuous?" Jin Zixuan growled back. "Today, during such an important hunt involving all our sects, you really had fun showing off, didn't you? One third of the prey was taken by you! I bet you feel pleased with yourself, don't you?"

Shocked whispers broke out among those who hadn't yet heard of Wei Wuxian's achievement.

The viewers, on the other hand, were much more subdued.

"Uh, yeah," Nie Huaisang said. "Shockingly, when you tell a *demonic cultivator* to capture *resentful creatures*, that kinda thing happens."

Lan Xichen appeared confused: "Did they really… not realize this was going to happen?"

Any of the watchers could have guessed how this was going to end the second they heard what the competition would entail.

But Wen Ruohan seemed unsurprised.

"Demonic cultivation is a new creation," he pointed out. "They'll fear it and covet it in equal measure, but they won't even try to understand. It's no wonder they were surprised by this outcome."

Lan Qiren and Madam Yu turned to glare at him, disliking the arrogance of his comment. Though, if you asked him, what he had just said would go without saying.

(After all, people had responded to Wen Zhuliu in the exact same way — and he hadn't even *created* the technique.)

And yet, the surprise of the people in the simulation was palpable. Their gazes refocused to be entirely on Wei Wuxian, with awe, bitterness, jealousy, and greed all mixed in.

Finally, growing impatient with the continuous whispers, Lan Wangji asked, "One third of the prey?"

The resentment of the cultivators who had accompanied Jin Zixun seemed to triple in intensity. However, it also looked like an opportunity.

'*Doesn't Hanguang-jun hate Wei Wuxian?*'

'*I heard they had a terrible relationship.*'

'*Then maybe-*'

"It looks like you haven't heard yet, Hanguang-jun. A little while ago, while we were hunting on Phoenix Mountain, we kept searching and searching, only to eventually realize there wasn't even a single fierce corpse left!"

Nodding in agreement, another cultivator stepped forward and added on, "We only realized what happened after we sent people to the watchtowers to ask Lianfeng-zun. Less than an hour after the hunt began, a flute melody sounded all throughout Phoenix Mountain, and all the corpses went and walked into the nets by themselves!"

"Walking corpses are one of the three main groups on Phoenix mountain," a third added. "With them gone, only the Yao and Guai are left!"

"As for the ghosts… Wei Wuxian alone summoned away all of them…."

'*The whining of the incompetent,*' both Nie Mingjue and Wen Ruohan thought. Luckily, neither of them bothered to speak their thoughts aloud, or they would have realized the other thought the same thing and gotten annoyed as a result.

Finally, the loudest whiner of them all, Jin Zixun, concluded, "You care nothing for others and only for yourself! Is that not presumptuous enough!"

"Zixun!" Jin Zixuan shouted, his anger and embarrassment all colliding into a cyclone of rage. "Just stop! You — don't talk to him like that! Didn't Sizhui just say you claimed to be injured and insisted on just defending the back lines during the war?! What is that if not selfish and cowardly?!"

"A-Xuan, that's your cousin," Jin Guangshan scolded.

"Cousin or not, he's right!" Madam Jin hissed back. "Trust me, I'll be watching Zixun carefully when we get out."

Seeing that public opinion among the watchers was pretty much in agreement on the matter, Jin Guangshan backed off quietly.

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian began to laugh.

"Really? And who was it that said the archery competition was only a warm up, and that our real skills would be shown on Phoenix Mountain?"

Scoffing, Jin Zixun continued, "What you're relying on is the crooked path! That's not the result of *your* talents! You're just playing a few tunes on the flute! With how much

you blatantly disregard the rules, it isn't any better than tricks and schemes!"

Lan Wangji took a long, slow breath, reminding himself that getting annoyed at the simulation would be more than futile.

The simulated Lan Wangji frowned, but restrained himself as well.

"Zixun, that's enough," Madam Jin said at last, having finally confirmed for herself that Jiang Yanli was alright.

But, fed up with Jin Zixun's comments, Wei Wuxian laughed: "Fine, then I haven't the faintest clue what you would count as 'real ability.' Please, unsheath your sword and wield it against me, so that I can see for myself exactly what you're talking about."

Jin Zixuan had grown up with his cousin. They had been by each other's sides for years and seen each other progress every step of the way.

Which was why he could say without a shadow of a doubt that Wei Wuxian could be blindfolded, have both hands tied behind his back, or hop around the entire fight on only one leg and he would *still* win, even without using demonic cultivation.

It appeared Jin Zixun had realized the same, as he merely gaped for a few moments before scoffing.

"Ha! It's only natural that you don't think you're in the wrong-"

"Zixun!" the real Madam Jin snapped, infuriated both by Jin Zixun's actions and the fact that her command was being ignored.

"We all know this isn't the first time Young Master Wei has decided to disregard the rules. You didn't bring your sword today or to the flower banquet held just a little while ago. It's such a grand event, and yet you care nothing for courtesy. In what regard do you hold those of us who have also come to this competition?"

Everyone tensed, and Wen Qing and Lan Wangji's feelings on the matter were made crystal clear by their ice cold glares.

And then, in response to Jin Zixun's accusation, Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji and said, "Lan Zhan, I forgot to say this earlier, but, in regards to you blocking that attack for me, thank you. Seriously."

A beat passed.

Nie Mingjue very nearly snorted, but quickly managed to cover it up with a cough. It was a good thing he did, because if Huaisang had heard him laugh at that, he would have taken it as an open invitation to be a menace for the rest of the simulation.

And then, at long last, Jin Zixun realized the insult he was being given. He gritted his teeth, glaring harshly at Wei Wuxian.

“So a disciple of YunmengJiang is worth nothing more than this-”

“Zixun!” Madam Jin snapped.

“Excuse me?” Madam Yu questioned. “What accomplishments does he have to be passing judgment in such a way?”

“Ah, apologies, Madam. That child is getting a little carried away, it seems,” Jin Guangshan said, hoping to lessen her rage.

‘*Child?*’ Lan Xichen thought. ‘*If I’m right about the age the one in our world is, isn’t this version currently in his early thirties?*’

Cultivators could live longer, so the age they would continue to view other cultivators as children was much higher than in the outside world. That said, he couldn’t help but feel like this was pushing it a little.

And unfortunately, Wei Wuxian’s anger was far from appeased.

“Discipline?” Wei Wuxian asked, tilting his head. “The crooked path?”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji whispered.

“A-Xian?” Jiang Yanli asked, a little surprised by the reaction he was giving.

A bit of resentful energy filled the air. Many of the surrounding cultivators took a step back.

And Nie Mingjue paused and wondered, once again, what the crowd would look like if he were the one reacting like this.

(Well, first of all, if someone had tried to say that his style of cultivation didn’t count in competitions, he would have fought them for his honor right then and there. On the other hand, no one would dare say something like that to him.)

(And even more-so, if he had somehow been unable to defend himself, someone would have come to his aid. It wasn’t that Lan Wangji and Jiang Yanli weren’t on Wei Wuxian’s side, it was that defending Wei Wuxian was different from defending a sect heir or leader.)

He breathed out a long sigh.

‘*No wonder Wei Wuxian’s furious.*’

Which, despite the smile on his face, Wei Wuxian most definitely was.

“Do you know why I don’t bother carrying my sword? It’s because I want you all to know that sword or no sword, even just using what you call the crooked path, there isn’t a single one of you that can stand up against me.”

Hearing this, Nie Huaisang couldn't help but laugh. "Isn't one of the first things we heard about Wei-xiong that he killed five thousand people? Seems like they believe this threat of his, by the end."

Jiang Cheng gaped: "But for him to just *say* that-"

"Wei Wuxian! You're only the son of a servant! How dare you be so bold?!"

Madam Yu froze.

Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth together. The surrounding resentful energy was still perfectly under his control — notably present, but suppressed and subdued. However, with every word from Jin Zixun, his anger became-

"A-Xian!"

Wei Wuxian stopped from where he had been reaching for his flute, turning around to face Jiang Yanli.

"Shijie?"

"A-Xian," she said. "Come stand behind me."

"I…" Jiang Cheng blinked. "A-Jie?"

"A-Li?" Jin Zixuan asked.

Both were clearly extremely confused.

Because in their minds, the danger lied in what Wei Wuxian was capable of, and what Jin Zixun might provoke him to do. Why would Jiang Yanli put herself *between them*?

Wen Ruohan leaned back in his seat, just as confused as them.

Then, before Wei Wuxian could move, Madam Jin stepped forward.

"A-Li," she said. "Don't interfere with their business."

However, with an apologetic smile toward Madam Jin, Jiang Yanli walked into the center of the conflict, standing in front of Wei Wuxian.

"A-Li, what are you doing?" Madam Yu demanded. "Why do you always go blank in the head when that brat is involved!"

Jiang Yanli tensed slightly at the anger being directed her way, but then, glancing over at her other self — a woman who could stand tall even before some of the most powerful people in the world — stopped. She paused for a moment, then turned back to look her mother in the eyes.

"I'm sorry, A-Niang," she said. "But I…"

She thought back to the accusations being thrown Wei Wuxian's way and the dirt smearing his name. She considered the unfair standards people held him to, and constant, never ending use of his parents' positions against him.

And how blackened his name was, thirteen years later.

She looked directly at her mother again and concluded, "I don't think I'm wrong for stepping in now."

"What?"

The simulated Jiang Yanli respectfully saluted Jin Zixun and the others. Some returned the salute, but most were too bewildered to bother.

She stood up tall.

"Young Master Jin, from what you said, am I to understand that A-Xian took a third of the prey at Phoenix Mountain all to himself, an action which was in defiance of the rules? I… I must admit I hadn't known. I apologize to you in his place."

She bowed.

"Shijie!" Wei Wuxian protested.

Madam Yu felt her hackles raise.

'*I knew that daughter of mine was too soft. Look at this! All she's doing is lowering her and the sect's position! And, of course, because of Wei Wuxian. She and Jiang Fengmian are the same. How can she expect anyone to respect her after this?!*'

Jiang Yanli remained there, head lowered, but a shake of her head prevented Wei Wuxian from coming to her aid. Jin Zixun appeared quite smug at the sight.

(Jin Zixuan, who had been watching from the side, had to look away at this.)

"Maiden Jiang, you really are kind and understanding," Jin Zixun laughed. "What your shidi did was unacceptable and caused us a lot of trouble, but I can see you recognize that. Then, for Maiden Jiang and Sect Leader Jiang's sake, an apology won't be necessary. The Yunmeng Jiang Sect and Lanling Jin Sect are as close as siblings after all."

"As close as siblings?" Jiang Cheng parroted. "What was all this about then?"

He was furious. At Jin Zixun's words, at that fact that his sister had to bow to him, ~~at Wei Wuxian, for causing it all.~~

But then:

"However," Jiang Yanli rose, "I may have not participated in a competition like this ever before, but I think I would have heard if someone had ever gotten in trouble for

hunting *too much* prey. May I ask, you accused A-Xian of breaking the rules — what rule, specifically, did he happen to break?"

The Jins paused, their smiles frozen in place.

And Jin Zixuan's eyes widened.

"Oh," Wen Qing said, pleasantly surprised. "I see."

"Hm," Wen Ruohan hummed, leaning back in his chair and scanning over Jiang Yanli once again.

When Madam Yu was angry at Wei Wuxian, Jiang Yanli would try to intervene. However, her interventions were almost always distracting Madam Yu or getting her father involved. Confronting her mother directly wasn't something that worked in the Jiang household.

But right now, she wasn't just a daughter. Her position was high enough to make her equal to anyone here, so long as she didn't let herself fall.

"Both my paternal grandmother and Jiujiu held my mom in high regard," Jin Ling said with no small amount of pride. "Jin Zixun wasn't sure how much force to use when he confronted her, as she had never gone against him before. And, more importantly, there was no rule he could use to back up his own argument. There was nothing he could say."

At that moment, however, Sect Leader Yao jumped in: "Maiden Jiang, that's not how one should phrase it. There are some rules that, although they aren't written out, are understood and followed by everyone involved."

"Yeah!" someone else shouted.

"How much prey was on Phoenix Mountain in total? There were less than 500 targets, right? And how many people came to this hunt? At least five thousand! We're fighting for prey to begin with. If he takes so much for himself using wicked means, what can other people do?"

Wei Wuxian glared, shifting to step forward only to pause when he saw Jiang Yanli's hand gesturing for him to hold back.

"It's best if you don't say anything," she whispered.

"What?" Lan Xichen asked. "Why shouldn't he-"

"I assume because he's 'only' the son of a servant, in their eyes," Wen Qing glared. "They can't respond back to criticism from Maiden Jiang because, as Jin Ling said, she has Madam Jin and Sect Leader Jiang on her side. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand…."

"He has me on his side too!" Jiang Cheng insisted. "Just because Jin Zixun doesn't know about it doesn't mean it's not there! This isn't the far future me, this is… that Jiang Cheng's

only a little older than me."

And sure, he'd choked Wei Wuxian after the Massacre of Lotus Pier and blamed him for what happened, but everyone here knew he didn't really mean that.

~~Probably.~~

Meanwhile, protests had continued.

"He can't just be allowed to get away with this!"

"There's a spirit of competition involved. He's practically spitting on it."

"If he hadn't done that, I would have been able to get at least one!"

"Eh?" Jiang Yanli appeared confused. "But… it isn't his fault others weren't able to catch any prey."

The man who had just spoken floundered, unable to respond.

"Isn't the hunt all about true strength? Even if the ghouls are gone, there are also Yao and Guai. Even if he hadn't gotten one third of the prey — even if he hadn't come to the hunt at all — those who are incapable of getting anything would have remained so."

"Ooh!" Nie Huaisang gasped, wishing once again he had his fan to hide behind. This was honestly one of the most entertaining conversations he had ever witnessed.

(Nie Mingjue sighed at his brother, but didn't really object.)

"Although A-Xian's methods were different from other people's, it's still an ability powered by cultivation. You can't call it the crooked path just because it deprived you of your prey, can you?"

The faces of the people in Jin Zixun's camp darkened.

And yet, looking at the high quality robes she wore, whose vibrant colors identified her with the Jiangs… looking at Madam Jin, who stood watching from the right… looking at Jin Zixuan, who continued not taking their side….

They gritted their teeth.

'*I can't say anything in response,*' they all thought.

Jiang Cheng clicked his tongue: '*You shouldn't be able to spout drivel about Wei Wuxian either! He… he does have my support. I'm sure of it!*'

Wei Wuxian just didn't need as much support as Jiang Yanli did. That was why none of them had thought that in regards to him.

(Except, if you were to ask Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian had very clearly needed support, and he was only now getting it from Jiang Yanli.)

Lan Wangji frowned.

'*We're not in the same sect, not even friends, but… I should have done more too.*'

(Though, considering his other self had just *kissed* Wei Wuxian, who knew what was going through Hanguang-jun's mind at that point in time.)

"Besides, hunting is hunting, so why are you bringing the matter of discipline onto the table?" Jiang Yanli asked. "A-Xian is a disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect. He grew up with my brother and I. Calling him 'the son of a servant,' I'm sorry but… I won't accept this. And thus… I hope Young Master Jin Zixun will apologize to Wei Wuxian of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect!"

"I… she must be joking," Jin Guangshan gaped.

"A-Li, why are you being so serious?" the simulated Madam Jin asked. "It's just a small matter. Don't get so worked up."

"Madam, A-Xian is my younger brother. To me, him being humiliated by others isn't a small matter."

Brother.

Just brother. Not martial brother or brother-like friend or 'my brother's friend.'

Brother.

Jin Zixuan stared; Lan Xichen was speechless; Nie Mingjue's eyes were wide; Jiang Cheng was stunned; Lan Qiren was gaping; Lan Wangji couldn't take his eyes away.

'*Oh, well played,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*Simply bringing up hypocrisy wouldn't stop them — it certainly wouldn't be enough to stop me, at least, and bringing up classism with that lot would have an even smaller chance of working. But by making him your brother… by turning him into a true member of the gentry through your protection… there's much less Jin Zixun can do. Attacks on him are attacks on the Jiang Sect now. That was exactly the way for someone in your situation to go about this.*'

She was still far too passive for his tastes, and, more impactfully, far too *normal*. He would never really be interested in her as she was by herself, but…

'*I suppose I'm starting to see why Wei Wuxian respects her so much. Although she doesn't capture my interest, I can't necessarily say he's wrong for thinking so anymore.*'

Fascinating.

Finally, caving into Jiang Yanli's request, Madam Jin looked over and said, "You heard her, Zixun."

“Auntie!” he protested.

Nie Mingjue was legitimately getting fed up with the sound of his voice.

‘*He’s not going to do it unless I force him,*’ Madam Jin realized. ‘*If he does apologize, he’ll definitely throw a few tantrums after he’s returned to Koi Tower. I almost want to just hold him down by the neck and force him to say sorry!*’

Jin Guangshan shivered, very familiar with his wife being in such moods.

At that moment, however, two new swords came down from the sky .

“Xiongzhang,” Lan Wangji greeted.

“Brother,” the real one said as well.

Lan Xichen smiled in response, though felt his internal happiness fade upon seeing who landed with him.

“Meng Yao,” Nie Mingjue observed.

And indeed, it was. The same man who had smiled pleasantly while Qin Su accused him of killing their child was now giving the exact same smile as he and Lan Xichen landed. Seeing that, Madam Jin frowned.

“Still smiling? Such a big thing happened, and you’re still smiling?! Just look at the hunt you organized you good for nothing.”

Several people did a double take, stunned by the whiplash of Madam Jin’s interactions with Jiang Yanli versus Jin Guangyao. Right now, she was clearly fuming.

Both Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen couldn’t help but frown slightly, despite everything, and the real Madam Jin felt a complicated twist in her stomach as she watched her other self’s reaction.

(Jin Guangyao would go on to do reprehensible things, and had already done several actions that were extremely difficult to justify.)

(However, none of that played a part in why Madam Jin was treating him that way.)

Having retracted his smile at Madam Jin’s scoldings, Jin Guangyao asked, “Mother, what is going on?”

Madam Jin narrowed her eyes: “What’s going on? Can’t you see for yourself? Aren’t you supposed to be good at reading the atmosphere?!”

When faced with the abject hate Madam Jin seemed to direct Jin Guangyao’s way, several people gained slightly awkward expressions.

(Even Madam Jin had to admit it beared a striking resemblance to things Madam Yu had told Wei Wuxian. The main difference was that Wei Wuxian *wasn't* Jiang Fengmian's bastard child, someone had just made that up.)

(Unfortunately, that distinction didn't necessarily mean that Madam Jin was justified now.)

And, at that moment, Jin Zixun decided to explain: "One third of the prey on the mountain is gone! What are the five thousand people on the mountain supposed to hunt for?"

He was about to continue, but Lan Xichen spoke up first: "Lianfeng-zun has already set about expanding the area of the hunting grounds. Please calm down, everyone."

Jin Zixun frowned, looking as though he wanted to continue complaining, but held himself back.

'*Now that Zewu-jun's spoken up, I can't exactly say any more.*'

Jiang Yanli showed no reaction to the abject difference in Jin Zixun's reaction toward her and Lan Xichen's words, but the first jade of Lan frowned at it. He couldn't exactly say he was surprised to see this, but it bothered him nonetheless.

Seeing that, Nie Mingjue couldn't help but mutter, "Makes you wonder what they would have said if either of us had been the ones to use demonic cultivation, huh?"

Lan Xichen's frown deepened at those words, but he couldn't write them off either.

Finally, Jin Zixun threw his arrows onto the ground.

"Ha! This hunt is a farce! Nevermind, it'll make no difference whether I participate or not. I quit."

Jin Guangyao hurried to interject, "Zixun, it'll soon be arranged. It'll take at most an hour for the hunt to resume-"

Sect Leader Yao scoffed: "Young Master Jin, that's really not necessary."

Jin Zixun nodded, adding, "This hunt has really lost all sense of fairness. Why should I wait? Please excuse my absence."

He and his entourage hopped onto their swords and flew away in a frustrated manner that would have surely manifested itself as angrily stomping if they'd had to walk away. Jin Guangyao's calls after them were ignored. Even those who hadn't immediately left looked quite uncomfortable.

After a moment's pause, Jiang Yanli turned to Madam Jin and bowed: "I apologize, Madam Jin. I made trouble."

Madam Jin waved her hand dismissively: "You could never make trouble for your mother in law. Scold that dumb brat however you want. It's not like I care about him. If

you're still mad, I can help you beat him up."

Although the simulated Jiang Yanli, having spent a significant amount of time with Madam Jin, seemed unsurprised by this offer, the real one couldn't help but give a startled laugh at Madam Jin's enthusiasm.

Jin Zixuan, meanwhile, was beyond mortified.

'*Zixun, you were acting like a toddler!*' he thought, body nearly going purple in embarrassment. '*I can't believe A-Li had to see that! I can't believe you did that to Wei Wuxian! You were basically acting like Wen Chao was during the archery competition!*'

He was legitimately considering trying to melt into the floor.

Meanwhile, Jiang Yanli had turned down Madam Jin's offer with as much grace as ever. However, seeing how far the situation had escalated, it seemed all for the best to depart.

"...Then, I'll take my leave first," she said at last, bowing one more time.

"To the watchtowers? Then I'll get Zixuan to walk us back."

As Madam Jin offered that, she glanced over at her son, who stood some distance away and was looking at the ground.

Seeing that, Jiang Yanli faltered.

The real version of Jin Zixuan had managed to surprise her time and time again. He had been nervous and awkward, but earnest and sweet, too. As for the simulated version…

He had stepped in to defend Luo Qingyang in the Xuanwu cave, but, no matter how many years passed, his lack of interest in the simulated Jiang Yanli seemed constant.

'*The real A-Xuan has been kind, and I… don't think he's faking the interest in me he's shown,*' she thought. '*But the simulated one… how long will it take for him to at least like being with me? With how awkwardly he was walking in that earlier scene… I suppose if he's just here on his mother's orders that makes sense, but…*'

How was she supposed to enjoy spending time with someone who so clearly didn't want to spend time with her?

And, glancing back at Jin Zixuan for just a moment, Jiang Yanli seemed to come to the same conclusion.

"There's no need, Madam Jin," she said. "I'd like to speak with A-Xian for a little while. He can walk me back."

At those words, Madam Jin paused and looked Wei Wuxian up and down skeptically. Her gaze was cautious, and her displeasure was obvious.

“A young man and a young woman… you two can’t stick together all the time if no one else is present.”

“A-Xian is my younger brother,” Jiang Yanli answered evenly.

And Jin Zixuan was very, very glad about that. It wasn’t that he thought he wouldn’t stand a chance if Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli were interested in each other, but….

Wei Wuxian, furious with his dismissal of Jiang Yanli, had pushed Jin Zixuan up against a wall.

Jin Zixuan had been equally antagonistic, suggesting, ‘If she’s unsatisfied, tell her to get rid of the engagement!’

‘You-’

‘What? Am I wrong? If you like her so much, why don’t you talk to her father? If you want her, I don’t think he’d object.’

…Well, perhaps that was just another reason to be glad Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji seemed to have fallen for each other at first sight.

But Madam Jin, unaware of that, remained firm.

“A-Li, please don’t be angry. Tell me what stupid thing that stubborn brat of mine did to you this time-”

Jin Zixuan flinched.

“I’ll tell him to make it up to you properly.”

However, at those words, the real Jiang Yanli’s smile dimmed even more. She couldn’t help but remember how her meetings with Jin Zixuan before the simulation always went. He would be cold, curt, and, while polite, clearly uninterested.

You couldn’t really control whether you were attracted to someone. She couldn’t blame him for how he felt.

But, try as she might, she hadn’t been able to make him more interested in their engagement, either.

And yet they kept being told to spend time together, and his annoyance had always shown through.

“...That’s really not necessary, Madam Jin,” Jiang Yanli said. “Don’t force him.”

“How could I be forcing him?” she shook her head. “He’s not being forced at all.”

At that moment, Wei Wuxian bowed and said, “Please excuse my absence, Madam Jin.”

Jiang Yanli bowed as well.

They were ready to leave.

The awkwardness was palpable. Many of the watchers looked away.

“Wait!” Madam Jin insisted, reaching forward to grab Jiang Yanli’s hand and stop her.

“Madam Jin? Please-”

“Maiden Jiang!”

Jin Zixuan jumped, hearing his other self’s shout. As the simulated Jin Zixuan approached, he felt his mood drop.

‘*Just go away,*’ he thought to his older self. ‘*All you ever do is make everything worse.*’

Wei Wuxian, similarly, was not interested in his conversation.

“Come on, Shijie. Let’s go,” he said, trying to pull her along. But-

“That’s not it, Maiden Jiang!” Jin Zixuan yelled at the top of his lungs. A fierce blush began to spread across his cheeks.

Confused at those words, Wei Wuxian, Jiang Yanli, and many of the watchers (both simulated and real) turned towards him.

“What isn’t it?” the real Jiang Yanli asked, confused.

“That’s not it Maiden Jiang! It wan’t my mother! It wasn’t a result of her actions! I’m not being forced to spend time with you at all!” he shouted, and then, breathing in, roared, “It was me! I was the one who wanted you to come!”

Silence reigned supreme both within the simulation and throughout the watchers.

Then, a little laugh.

“Oh,” Nie Huaisang said, a far-too-wide grin on his face. “I see.”

And then, suddenly, the meaning of Jin Zixuan’s words seemed to click for everyone.

(Including Jin Zixuan himself.)

He stumbled back. One step, two steps. Three. Slowly, he looked around, as if suddenly realizing there was an enormous crowd of people there, all watching him move.

He froze.

Then, with a shout, he fled.

“You idiot! Why are you running away?!” Madam Jin demanded. “A-Li, we’ll continue our talk later. First, I have to catch him!”

She broke off into a mad sprint.

And, watching this whole scene, the simulated Jiang Yanli suddenly laughed. It wasn’t the distantly polite smile she had kept the whole time, nor an act to keep up appearances. It was a real, genuine laugh.

There was a strange amount of amusement all around, mostly from the surprise that had just happened. They might have known Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan ended up together by the end, and they might have been aware that Jin Zixuan did seem to be nervous around her before, but…

“That was… spectacularly awful,” Nie Mingjue bluntly said.

The words pierced Jin Zixuan’s chest like an arrow.

Jiang Cheng humphed: “Well, it’s the least A-Jie deserves.”

Madam Yu nodded in agreement.

“Perhaps we should take up Young Master Nie’s suggestion about teaching rules for romance and courting during the disciple exchange,” Lan Qiren sighed. “I, for one, am not interested in seeing things like this anymore.”

A second arrow struck Jin Zixuan’s heart.

Slowly, as calm as ever, Lan Wangji walked over to Jin Zixuan. The actions his other self had taken with Wei Wuxian were not things he could or should forget about, but he needed more time to think it through. For now, though, there was one thing obvious to him.

“I understand,” he said, looking at the abject embarrassment coloring the Jin heir’s whole body.

And with that, the third shot landed! Jin Zixuan fell to the floor, unable to take it anymore.

“Please just stop!” he cried out, nearly tearing up in agony.

After staring for a bit in disbelief, Wei Wuxian just groaned: “What is he doing? Shijie, let’s go.”

After pausing for a moment, a little dazed from what just occurred, Jiang Yanli nodded.

“Great,” Wei Wuxian said, then glanced back at Lan Wangji to add, “Lan Zhan, I’m going.”

Lan Wangji nodded, saying nothing.

‘*That was probably for the best,*’ the real Lan Wangji decided, very carefully ignoring the sighs of disappointment around him.

On the other hand, having failed to stop Jin Zixun, Jin Guangyao finally returned. He approached Lan Xichen, forcing himself to smile all the while.

“Ah, this… really is…”

“Today’s disturbance was not your fault,” Lan Xichen assured him, patting his shoulder a few times.

Jin Guangyao sighed and massaged the center of his brows, confessing, “I’m afraid even two hours won’t be enough time to fix this mess.”

“Why is that?”

“You see, not only did Young Master Wei keep a third of the prey to himself, but Da-ge single-handedly eliminated over half of the remaining prey.”

Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen froze.

The simulated Lan Xichen just laughed: “That’s what Da-ge is like, after all.”

Hearing that, Lan Xichen frowned.

He was trying to alleviate Jin Guangyao’s concerns. The lighthearted tone he was using was probably in part an effort to help Jin Guangyao relax. And yet, when coupled with what had just occurred….

Lan Xichen didn’t find it at all strange that Nie Mingjue had taken another third of the prey for himself.

And yet, when he found people speaking against Wei Wuxian for doing that exact same thing, he had said nothing in response.

(To the side, he noticed Jiang Yanli frown. A look of discontentment crossed her face. She hadn’t really expected anything else, but to think that, even in the end, Jin Zixun had still refused to apologize despite her request. As always, she had the best of intentions in mind.)

(She just never had the power required to actually make a change.)

But Lan Xichen had also been there. He might have emotionally had fewer reasons to try to help, but he had far more ability to interfere than she did.

‘Makes you wonder what they would have said if either of us had been the ones to use demonic cultivation, huh?’ Nie Mingjue asked.

They didn’t even have to be the ones who had used it. If Lan Xichen had just supported what Wei Wuxian had done-

And Nie Mingjue, to his side, frowned deeper than ever before.

He had speculated about what they would do if he had been the one to invent demonic cultivation. If he had, as hard as it was to believe, he had thought it was entirely possible no one would raise a fuss. Perhaps, he had thought, if he had taken a third of the prey, no one would object.

He hadn't thought he would get that theory confirmed so quickly.

(Because this wasn't just speculation anymore. He *had* taken a third of the prey. He was half the reason it was so hard for the contestants to hunt. And not a single person seemed to care.)

While this pair had been caught up in their own thoughts, the simulated versions had set about expanding the hunting range (with Lan Wangji volunteering to help as well). They left on their swords, meaning there were only a few people still in that section of the forest chatting about what had just occurred. A short while later, Jiang Cheng strode out of the woods.

He looked around at the gathered cultivators in confusion.

"Sect Leader Yao, what happened here?" he wondered.

"Ah, Sect Leader Jiang," Sect Leader Yao greeted back. "Your sect's Wei Wuxian is quite a character."

"...What are you trying to say?" Jiang Cheng asked, beginning to frown.

Sect Leader Yao began to laugh: "I wouldn't dare to imply anything. Sect Leader Jiang, you mustn't take what I said to heart!"

But what he'd just let slip was already more than enough to make Jiang Cheng's face darken.

'*I'll find Wei Wuxian later and shake the full story out of him.*'

He turned around and began to leave, but, as he did, couldn't help but hear the words of a few in the distance.

"Yunmeng's Lotus Pier was really the star of the show this time, huh? Almost all the spirits and corpses were summoned to the Yunmeng Jiang Sect's ground. There'll definitely be a number of cultivators interested in joining them."

"Well, what can we do about that?" Sect Leader Yao responded with a sigh. "It's not our fault our sect's don't have a Wei Wuxian."

"It's not necessarily a good thing to have Wei Wuxian. I wouldn't want to have a member of my sect always stirring up trouble."

And of course, Jin Zixun, Jin Zixuan, Lan Wangji, and Jiang Yanli's roles in the situation went unmentioned.

“Wei Wuxian… he really is too bold. Anyways, from now on, I won’t be attending any night hunts he’s going to.”

And having heard what they were discussing, a third voice added on, “Huh? You think those cultivators will be interested in Yunmeng? I don’t think so. To put it simply, they’re interested in Wei Wuxian, aren’t they? Didn’t the Yunmeng Jiang Sect grow in renown during the Sunshot Campaign only because of Wei Wuxian?”

And that was a good thing. It was something to be proud of, for a disciple to bring fame to their sect. No one would be angry at their disciple for helping like that.

And yet, those words made Jiang Cheng’s face darken that much more.

And the real Jiang Cheng could only watch that in silence.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I could have made all the watchers see the kiss between LWJ and WWX, and many of you were actually expecting me to. However, I'm afraid I'm just not physically capable of surviving the second hand embarrassment that would result from writing Lan Qiren actually *see* that, so from day one that was never going to happen, sorry! lol

I've included MDZS Q Episode 12: Comparing Heights and the Audio Drama Extra: Tossing Flowers (in case anyone was curious as to where those scenes came from).

Thanks for reading!
:)

A-Yuan Arrives!!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Hey, brat!" an elderly woman's voice called out, harsh and impatient. "There's someone here to see you."

"See me?" Meng Yao asked, setting his quill down on an inkstone.

"Seems like it," she said, her plump belly jiggling slightly as she began to laugh. "It's a pretty wealthy-looking young cultivator too. Maybe she heard about how much use Sect Leader Jin got out of your mom and wants to try you out too!"

Uproarious laughter took over the shop, and Meng Yao very nearly felt his smile crack.

"No, no, Madam." A voice came from outside the room, and one of the younger workers stepped in shortly after. "You only saw from a distance, but I stayed just behind the boss and got to see up close. He's got a very pretty face, but the cultivator who came is a boy. A handsome one too!"

Sounds of interest spread throughout the shop (along with a few sounds of disappointment from the male workers who had been quite excited until that was revealed). Moving his arms faster, Meng Yao began to put away his work as quickly as possible.

(He really should be able to just put his project down and go see the visitor, but past experience told him that, if he did that, it would undoubtedly be sabotaged by the time he got back. Being a shop's bookkeeper was usually a position that came with a fair bit of authority.)

(It turned out, however, that if everyone knew you as 'the person who was thrown down the stairs of Koi Tower' it didn't matter what your position supposedly was. Everyone felt free to say whatever they wanted about you.)

"Maybe Madam Jin sent someone to finish the job," an elderly crafter speculated, and Meng Yao's movements paused.

"I don't think so," the youngest worker continued, eager for gossip. "Given his robes, I'm pretty sure he's part of the Jiang Sect. I've even heard his name before: he introduced himself as 'Wei Wuxian.'"

"What?" Meng Yao asked, turning away from the door he was about to exit through. "You said his name was Wei Wuxian?!"

"Eh? You know that name?"

"Well of course he does," one of the men whispered to her. "I hear he still looks up everything he can on the cultivation world in his spare time. Thinks he'll be able to join the ranks of immortals if he just asks enough."

“No, no, I’ve heard the name ‘Wei Wuxian’ too,” a twenty year old woman mentioned. “He’s fourth on the list of the cultivation world’s most eligible bachelors. After the Great Sleep began, he all but took over the Jiang Sect. He’s one of the most important figures in the cultivation world right now.”

The Shop’s Madam furrowed her brows at that, glancing at Meng Yao and asking, “What would someone like that want with you?”

“...I suppose I’ll have to ask him,” was all Meng Yao said in response, giving a pleasant smile as he exited the room at last.

~~Meng Yao didn’t have the rank required to backtalk them. If anyone accused him of pilfering funds now, the shop owner would throw him out without a second thought. So Meng Yao would wait and wait and wait and wait, and then, when he was finally ready to leave, he would make them regret everything they’d said.~~

The clicks of his footsteps as he moved down the hall increased in speed.

The Madam wasn’t completely wrong in her judgment. Meng Yao was quite confident in his ability, but he wasn’t so naive as to think that *Wei Wuxian* could gain anything from him as he was now. From what he had heard, Wei Wuxian had both Wen Ruohan and Jiang Fengmian’s protection, making him the center point of an alliance between two of the most powerful sects. Given that everyone knew the Jin and Jiang were already ‘as close as siblings,’ the Jiang Sect was now in a *very* comfortable position.

‘*Maybe… he’s trying to use me as a weapon against my father?*’ Meng Yao wondered. ‘*What happened was quite a scandal. Maybe he thinks bringing me back will bring what happened into everyone’s minds again.*’

The last thing Meng Yao wanted was to cause trouble for his father. If it seemed like that was the case, Meng Yao would just have to politely refuse. He mentally prepared himself then opened the door-

“G-gege!” a voice cried out. It was a young child’s voice — something almost never heard in this part of town. Meng Yao looked down and saw a young, wide-eyed child staring back up at him.

“Um… I…”

On principle, Meng Yao was almost never speechless. This, however, was certainly enough to give him pause.

“Try again, A-Yu,” someone whisper-yelled from behind. It was, if Meng Yao wasn’t mistaken, *Wei Wuxian* cheering the child on. Regardless, his words did seem to be enough to spark some last bits of bravery in the young boy and he made another attempt.

“H-hello, Gege. My… I’m A-Yu. Mo Yu,” he stumbled out, blushing in embarrassment as he went on. “I’m… I’m happy to have seen you-”

“Meet you,” Wei Wuxian whispered. “We agreed on ‘meet you.’”

“Ah, right! I-I’m happy to meet you, Ge-ge. I mean it’s nice to meet you,” the boy continued, shifting his weight from his right foot to his left at a rapid pace. “I-I hope we get along and- and I’m very happy to meet you!”

Those last few words seemed to be too much for the young boy and he turned around and buried himself in maybe-Wei Wuxian’s waiting arms.

Meng Yao was thoroughly lost.

“Great job, A-Yu,” maybe-Wei Wuxian said, standing up with ‘Mo Yu’ still in his arms. “I’m very proud of you.”

The little boy nodded and relaxed at the praise, but didn’t seem willing to peek out from where he was hiding in Wei Wuxian’s chest quite yet.

Well, there were many questions Meng Yao had, but standing there gawking wasn’t going to help. At this point, he had no choice but to rely on his backup plan and just try to get his introduction out of the way as quickly as possible. Maybe then everything would start making at least a little sense again.

He closed the door and entered the room, giving the young man in front of him another look.

(Was this really Wei Wuxian? The quality of his Jiang robes and the steely confidence in his gaze did seem to support that, but the child in his arms made Meng Yao hesitate. On the other hand, why would anyone spend so much money and effort towards impersonating Wei Wuxian, a man Meng Yao had never met, just to meet with him?)

Desperate for answers, Meng Yao forced a smile and said, “Wei Wuxian, I take it? It’s nice to meet you. My name is Meng Yao. I was told you wanted to see me. May I… may I ask who this is?”

The child in Wei Wuxian’s arms jumped slightly, making Wei Wuxian pat him on the back a few times as he said, “It’s nice to meet you too. I am Wei Wuxian, and this is Mo Yu, your… your half brother.”

“Excuse me?” Meng Yao asked, stiffening up immediately. He had heard the boy calling him “gege,” but he had assumed the child meant ‘older boy in my proximity,’ not ‘actual older brother.’

“I hope you’ll excuse the confusing introduction,” Wei Wuxian continued. “I’ve been trying to get A-Yu to open up more around people he doesn’t know, but he’s been having a lot of trouble. However, when I mentioned to him that the person we were going to meet was his brother, he seemed a little more willing.”

“Did… did I do good?” a tiny voice asked.

“You did great!” Wei Wuxian responded immediately, and seemed serious about his praise too. “It was a flawless introduction, A-Yu. Your brother was very impressed.”

Meng Yao wasn't, but he didn't see a need to mention that.

Most especially because now, at least, he was starting to understand why someone as important as Wei Wuxian would visit *him*.

"I apologize for saying so, Wei-gongzi, but I'm afraid I have neither the ability nor the means to take care of a child right now, my half brother or not," Meng Yao said, making sure to interject the right amount of regret and misery into his tone. "I assure you, when such a time comes that I am more suitable I would be happy to-"

He paused, seeing Wei Wuxian hold up a single hand calmly (his other being used to carry Mo Yu).

"You can relax, Meng Yao," he said. "I would have come to see you with or without Mo Yu's presence."

Strike that. Meng Yao once again had no earthly clue what Wei Wuxian was here for.

(To be perfectly honest, Wei Wuxian was still somewhat uncertain about that too.)

A few hours before, Jiang Fengmian and Wen Ning had left to visit Wen Xu. Wei Wuxian would've been annoyed about being left behind, but the knowledge that it was because of Wen Chao's dogs made it hard to complain. Besides, not long after, he got another call from the future. When he slipped into the discussion zone, he found three people waiting for him: Mo Xuanyu, the future's Nie Huaisang, and the future version of the first jade of Lan, Lan Xichen.

And they had a lot to talk about.

Although everyone (both in the future and among the watchers) still seemed pretty determined to keep the specific contents of the simulation a secret, those in the future had come to the decision that there was a lot Wei Wuxian needed to know about Meng Yao. They had already brought up creating an organization to deal with people like Xue Yang in a peaceful manner, and Jiang Fengmian had told him everything he could about Xue Yang after waking up. Now, the second individual they were highly worried about had to be addressed. And they had given Wei Wuxian his full life story.

There was only one slight issue: Wei Wuxian still wasn't sure whether he should believe them.

Sure, he did like Huaisang when they'd run into each other at previous discussion conferences. The time he had spent working on improving the Píngxíng Gateway with Mo Xuanyu had been fun, and the first jade of Lan had an impeccable reputation.

Still, he had to wonder.

(If Meng Yao's initial social position and then subsequent rise to power meant people were willing to lie to get a version of him taken out in the past, even if it wouldn't affect their

world, then Wei Wuxian would have to be very careful about how much faith he put in their words.)

Which was why, at the suggestion of Mo Xuanyu, surprisingly enough, he would start off by getting to know Meng Yao first hand.

“The reason I asked to see you, Meng Yao, is because I have a job offer for you,” Wei Wuxian declared. “Would you have any interest in becoming my secretary?”

“I… I beg your pardon?”

“I won’t be making you a disciple of the Jiang. However, if you want to join another sect after the first stage of the project is complete, I would be happy to write you a letter of recommendation, depending on how well you perform with me. The Jiang Sect is looking to create an organization that will interact more with civilians than cultivators, and it will need employees that are disconnected from the sect.”

“And you’re offering me a position there?”

“Mmhm,” Wei Wuxian nodded. “I’ve heard a lot about you, you see.”

As Wei Wuxian had expected, Meng Yao had to suppress the tension that filled his body at those words.

(Which was fair, as the information Wei Wuxian had gotten about him allegedly made him out to be the single most hated individual worldwide in the future.)

(If it was true, of course.)

‘Alright then, I’ll go meet up with him,’ Wei Wuxian had decided.

‘Really?’ Mo Xuanyu had asked. ‘And what’re you going to tell him? I don’t mind you telling him everything, but I doubt he’d believe you.’

‘Don’t tell him anything!’ Nie Huaisang cried out. ‘Wei-xiong, he’s terrifying! Oh, you-you really do need to be careful. I’ve heard that giving him information will let him see into your soul! I mean I-I didn’t ever see him do anything awful myself, but the things I’ve heard*. Be on guard, Wei-xiong! Don’t let him find out you don’t trust him!’*

Mo Xuanyu had seemed somewhat amused by Nie Huaisang’s frantic outburst, but the first jade of Lan had been disapproving.

‘He’s rather intelligent,’ Lan Xichen pointed out. ‘If you lie to him about why you’re spending time with him and he finds out the truth later… he’ll lose all trust in you.’

It had seemed like a rather odd thing to say with how much information *they* were keeping from him, but Wei Wuxian had decided to not press that point. Especially since Mo Xuanyu hadn’t taken a side.

‘You can decide,’ he had said. ‘I’ll support whatever choice you make.’

‘Eh? But Mo-xiong!’

‘Huh? But Wei… you want Wei Wuxian to decide? He’s only fifteen.’

‘I don’t see why not,’ Mo Xuanyu had shrugged. ‘You’ve both said your pieces, but he’s the one who’ll actually have to live in that world. Wei Wuxian, I’d like you to think about what they’ve said. However, make any decision you want. I think you’ll be able to decide that better than anyone else.’

It was a strange offer. Mo Xuanyu had been one of the main forces keeping information from him. And yet, today, he had delivered a full novel’s worth of facts about Meng Yao and then had given no instructions, instead trusting Wei Wuxian to decide.

‘Are you sure?’ Wei Wuxian had asked, grinning a little. ‘Seems a bit unusual for you.’

‘Well, Nie-xiong has been advising me to trust you a little more,’ Mo Xuanyu had confessed, making the future Nie Huaisang hurriedly snap open his fan and hide his blushing face behind it.

‘Oh, I got an endorsement!’ Wei Wuxian had said, delighted. ‘Alright then, I’ll try to not disappoint!’

So, there became a question of how much to tell Meng Yao.

(Which was complicated by the fact that Wei Wuxian didn’t even know how much of their story to believe.)

As such…

“What have you heard, exactly?” Meng Yao asked, looking as though he regretted it a moment later. The continued surprises had left him a little off his game today. He was used to chasing after opportunities after having a lot of time to consider them; he’d never had one seek him out before.

It was a dangerous state to be in, when he still didn’t know what Wei Wuxian was after.

However, at that moment, Wei Wuxian smiled.

“Like I said: a lot. I’ve heard about your relationship with your father, and about what happened at your infamous birthday.”

This time, having expected it, Meng Yao managed to withhold his flinch.

“I heard some less than flattering things about your character too. Enough to make me worried about you.”

“What-” Meng Yao asked. But-

“And I’ve also heard that you’re one of the most talented people around, and intelligent enough to change the world. I've been told you're quite ambitious, and that you're willing to

put work in to get what you want."

Here, Meng Yao took a half step back, having even less clue than before as to what Wei Wuxian was after.

"...Who have you heard that from?" Meng Yao asked.

"Can't tell you quite yet I'm afraid," Wei Wuxian responded bluntly. "But you can rest assured that I don't completely trust their account on any of it."

Meng Yao felt his smile falter again. He knew what he was capable of, but he couldn't think of anyone who would say the same. With his reputation, being the bookkeeper for this shop was something he had to fight tooth and nail to keep, and the Madam, who had benefited immensely from his work, wasn't so stupid as to go bragging about that and risk someone else stealing him away.

And as for the disparaging remarks on his character… everyone here thought of him as a polite, quiet, talented punching bag. He was a pushover, in their eyes. Even those who didn't see him like that just felt pity for him.

Was this just one of the rumors that cropped up as a result of his mother's occupation?

(Or had he slipped up and let someone discover his revenge plan too soon?)

"...Then the job offer?"

"It's genuine," Wei Wuxian said. "What I was told was concerning enough for me to not be able to overlook you but was also completely hearsay. I don't actually have any reason to believe it."

"Then?"

"Then, if I wanna know whether any of it's true, I guess I better get to know you!" Wei Wuxian bowed once and saluted him — as though he were meeting an *equal* instead of a disgraced bastard — and grinned. "I'll introduce myself again. My name is Wei Wuxian, head disciple of the YunmengJiang Sect. I've heard many things about you, including how skilled of a leader you are. I'm creating an organization that will interact with citizens and deal with the parts of cultivation that *don't* involve killing monsters. I'm looking for someone to work there, and simultaneously want to make sure you're not a threat. I swear by my name to not allow any harm to come to you unless I know for a fact that you've done something to deserve it. You'll be paid twenty times what you're paid now, get all your living necessities taken care of, and get a connection to one of the world's most powerful sects, if you perform well. Now then, how would you feel about working for me?"

In a rare turn of events, Meng Yao was nearly speechless. This was possibly dangerous. Wei Wuxian already admitted he didn't fully trust him, and who knew exactly what he'd been told. And he might be lying about all of it, for all Meng Yao knew.

But…

But.

Wei Wuxian was being frighteningly blunt. Anyone trying to trick Meng Yao into coming would have to be stupid to mention that lack of trust. At the very least, it did seem like Wei Wuxian was trying to set up a long term relationship. That didn't mean he had Meng Yao's best interests at heart, but...

Meng Yao had been kicked out of Koi Tower quite unceremoniously, and had no way of fulfilling his mother's desire and making it back there as of yet. He had no true cultivation experience and was now far too old for any sect to accept him without a dramatic change in circumstances. He wanted to make it back to Koi Tower — *needed* to make it back to Koi Tower — but, for the last few months, it had seemed rather hopeless.

However, in recent weeks, there were many rumors flying around regarding Wei Wuxian. They now said he had gained the approval of at least two, maybe three, of the Great Sects' Sect Leaders. Rumors had spread that Jin Guangshan's orders were preventing Jin Zixun from taking action against Wei Wuxian, despite how much he wanted to. If Jin Guangshan's approval of Wei Wuxian was truly so high….

Now, at long last, Meng Yao was possibly seeing a pathway to his goal.

(But Wei Wuxian would have to be telling the truth for that to be the case.)

Little Mo Yu peaked out of Wei Wuxian's chest, watching Meng Yao tentatively.

"...You have doubts as to my character, and yet let him introduce himself to me?" Meng Yao asked. "Wouldn't I be more scary than a random stranger?"

But, despite his still-present fear, the young boy shook his head rapidly.

"You're my gege," he said.

Bouncing Mo Yu in his arms a few times, Wei Wuxian explained, "His mother has told him a lot about his father. The two of you are related through your father, so everything his mother has told him about Jin Guangshan was applied, in his head, to you."

"Really?" Meng Yao laughed, finding a strange sort of irony in the similarities of their upbringing. "How did he end up with you, then?"

"...His mom loved him, but the rest of the family thought her claims that the sect leader would return were… a bit hard to believe. I offered to let him come with me."

'Much like I'm offering to you,' Meng Yao could all but hear.

He looked down again, making eye contact with Mo Yu. Children were hardly the best judges of character, easily tricked and fooled as any adult pleased. But they were also poor liars.

(And, despite how nervous he was, Mo Yu truly did look at home in Wei Wuxian's arms. He felt safe there; assured. It was hard to tell whether they were really half brothers, as Wei Wuxian claimed, but did have a few reasons to believe it. For one, every time Mo Yu's sleeve

slipped down slightly Meng Yao could see a few marks on his arm. Years-old scars, creeping into view whenever the uniform's sleeves slipped off his too-thin wrists. Mo Yu had every right to be terrified now, and had obviously lived through something difficult, but he viewed Wei Wuxian as home.)

(It might be a manipulation technique. It was entirely possible Mo Yu wasn't here because Wei Wuxian wanted to let him meet his half brother, but instead because it would help him lure in Meng Yao. It was likely, in fact, that they weren't brothers at all, and Wei Wuxian had just made that up. Meng Yao would be far from surprised if Wei Wuxian was just approaching him as part of a convoluted scheme to take the Jin down. But…

When would he ever get a chance like this again?)

"Well, I'm sure this won't be a simple decision for you," Wei Wuxian said. "I'll leave you a way to contact me-"

"No!" Meng Yao shouted at once.

Wei Wuxian just blinked: "No?"

It was risky. It was scary. But Meng Yao couldn't take the chance that Wei Wuxian would retract his offer later.

"Thank you for the offer," he said at once, bowing lowly. "I humbly accept."

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened.

And then, a moment later, he lit up.

"Did you hear that, A-Yu? You're brother's going to come with us!"

"He is?" the little boy asked, a small, hopeful smile forming on his face.

"I… I am," Meng Yao confirmed, and Mo Yu's smile got that much brighter.

"Wonderful. I have your room already prepared. How long do you expect it to take you to settle your affairs here? A month?"

"I can leave right now."

"Eh? Really?"

Well, no, not really. The Madam and boss would surely be furious if he just up and left, and he had still had his revenge to consider. It was all planned out already. He would only need a week to implement it fully, but…

Wei Wuxian already admitted he didn't fully trust Meng Yao. Half of this job was a test of character, to see what kind of a person Meng Yao was. For all Meng Yao knew, the test had already begun.

(And, if Meng Yao had to choose, the opportunity he was being presented now was worth just a little bit more to him than the revenge. He had only been in this shop, piling up grievances, for two months. The people here *didn't matter* to him.)

He looked down one more time at Mo Yu, happy, safe, and content in Wei Wuxian's arms.

"Yes, I'm sure," he confirmed. "Thank you again, Wei-gongzi."

And Wei Wuxian smiled back.

"I look forward to seeing what you do."

Despite the rather climactic conclusion Jin Zixuan's confession made to the last segment, there was very little for the watchers to talk about once it was over. For one, they had actually missed most of the segment due to the activation of the concealment zone, and thus had much less content to consider than usual. For another, very little had happened. It truly did feel like set-up in the same way the Cloud Recesses disciple exchange did.

(Except, this time around, the watchers had a far more broad perspective. Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue were especially quiet, unable to shake the feeling that whatever was coming would seem extremely obvious in hindsight.)

Lan Wangji was most silent of all, the weight of what his other self had done in the last segment looming over him heavily. Every time he made a sound, Jin Guangshan would glance back at him, a knowing smile on his face. Subconsciously, Lan Wangji had become quieter and quieter in an effort to avoid this, erasing his presence almost entirely.

Luckily, given that no one was talking, there were no conversations that had to stop when the simulation began anew. Everything faded to darkness and Lan Sizhui's voice rang out.

"Two months later."

An abandoned city appeared. It was worn down, with untended roads and crumbling buildings. It was also familiar.

Wen Qing's eyes widened.

"Qishan?" she whispered.

Wen Ruohan's gaze turned ice cold.

"After the Qishan Wen Sect collapsed, the city that used to be the most prosperous of all evaporated into thin air in just one night, leaving nothing but ruins. People who had lived there searched for new homes, and Lanling, Yunmeng, Gusu, and Qinghe received the greatest influx of residents out of all of them."

Because Wen Ruohan had lost.

No, rather, because he had decided to start this all in the first place.

"As a result, those four cities began to flourish," Lan Sizhui finished, tone completely blank. It was as though he was reciting the statistics of a hypothetical event rather than a real one.

Meanwhile, the simulation changed to suit the narration, moving away from the wastelands that were once Qishan to an even more prosperous version of Yunmeng than the one in their world.

"Ah, Hanguang-jun," someone realized, bowing at once upon recognizing the white robed cultivator. Lan Wangji bowed back to everyone who greeted him, so practiced in this that he was able to continue moving forward without the slightest change in pace. At least, at first.

"Lan Zhan — ah, no, Hanguang-jun. What a coincidence!" Wei Wuxian said, looking over from where he was seated on the other side of the street. The airy pavilion he was in had gauze curtains on all sides, shading the open air dining area from the hot afternoon sun. The trend from the flashback in the last segment continued: contrary to the bustling street, there was a notable *lack* of people in the area around Wei Wuxian.

Except, of course, the quartet of girls.

Seeing them, the cultivators that had flocked to Hanguang-jun like bees to flowers suddenly gained awkward expressions. They began backing away uncomfortably.

'*Ah, Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian have a terrible relationship, don't they? I… probably shouldn't stay here.*'

'*I heard these two got into arguments every time they met up during the sunshot campaign.*'

Nie Huaisang couldn't help but cackle at that: "What ignorant souls!"

"You're right," Jin Guangshan said, then, glancing back at Lan Wangji, continued, "They don't have even the slightest idea what the true relationship between those two is, do they?"

Lan Wangji didn't flinch or look away at his words. That didn't mean he didn't want to.

While that conversation had occurred, the concerns of the surrounding cultivators had climaxed. The general public seemed sure Hanguang-jun would storm off as soon as possible rather than converse with Wei Wuxian.

However, instead, Lan Wangji simply commented, "It's you."

"It's me!" Wei Wuxian confirmed. "Hey, when did you find the time to come to Yunmeng? If you're not busy, why don't you come over here and have a drink?"

The girls at his sides all circled him, laughing, "Yeah, young master. Come up here and have a drink!"

Both the watchers and the surrounding cultivators turned to stare intently at Hanguang-jun, waiting to see his reaction. There was a slow breath in, then a slow breath out.

The next thing the simulation showed was him entering the open-air pavilion Wei Wuxian was inside.

'*What are you doing?*' Lan Wangji thought, watching his other self with a wary gaze. '*You… don't you remember what you did to him? Do you really think you can just approach him like this after what happened?!*'

Lan Wangji didn't want to stay away from Wei Wuxian forever. The future had more than shown how many times Hanguang-jun had been able to help Wei Wuxian and keep him safe. That was a good thing.

(And, given what Wei Wuxian had done while they were both drunk, his feelings were most certainly not unreciprocated.)

But that didn't change the fact that watching his future self approaching Wei Wuxian made the real Lan Wangji very, *very* uncomfortable.

"Sit, sit," Wei Wuxian offered, gesturing to an empty seat before him. "If you're here, won't you have a few sips?"

"Liquor is prohibited."

"I know liquor is prohibited in your sect, but it's not like this is the Cloud Recesses. It's fine to have a few sips here."

Lan Wangji's expression didn't relax at all, clearly indicating his disapproval.

"Your far-future self seems to disagree," Lan Xichen coyly pointed out. Those words made Lan Qiren grit his teeth together, annoyed at the reminder of how unexpectedly his most precious student had turned out, but he held the complaint in.

Wei Wuxian was important to Lan Wangji, and the two of them drinking together had allowed their relationship to grow closer. He still didn't like it, especially when he was forced to watch, but he couldn't completely oppose it either. Perhaps it would be okay to allow a lack of control every once in a while.

(The currently Lan Wangji *vehemently* disagreed.)

Despite that, the ghost girls filled a cup of alcohol for him and placed it on his side of the table. He didn't reach for the cup, but he didn't move to leave either.

"You finally came to Yunmeng for once, and you won't even try the delicious liquor here?" Wei Wuxian protested playfully. "Well, though this liquor is delicious, I suppose it can't hope to compare to Gusu's Emperor's Smile! That's really the best alcohol of all. If I ever go to Gusu again, I'll definitely grab a half dozen and drink them all at once!"

Jiang Cheng blanched at the description, unable to resist imagining the hangover that would lead to the next day.

"Honestly, what's wrong with you? There's a seat right there and you're still standing! Sit, won't you?"

"Go sit! Go sit!" the girls agreed, motioning for him to sit down.

Lan Wangji's light eyes examined the girls slowly. Then his gaze turned to the flute by Wei Wuxian's side.

After considering his words carefully, he opened his mouth.

"You should not stay in the company of inhuman beings for so long."

There was a beat of silence and a gust of wind moved the gauze curtains forward until they blocked out the sun. In the new dimness, a faint red glow could be seen emanating from the eyes of the girls and Wei Wuxian.

Several watchers couldn't help but swallow nervously at the sight.

Jin Zixuan gave an awkward laugh: "Ah… after watching Wen Ning for so long… it's hard to remember what ghosts are usually like."

"We also saw these girls in the last segment," Madam Jin pointed out. "Wei Wuxian had made them seem awfully human then, too."

Had made them seem *alive*, just like Wen Ning appeared, even while being a walking corpse.

But now the girls stood almost impossibly still, staring, unblinking, at Lan Wangji. The darkness also made their bodies seem paler than before, as if there was no blood moving in them.

(Admittedly, there probably wasn't.)

Wei Wuxian lifted his hand, and his eyes glowed a brighter red for a moment. A command was sent out through the surrounding resentful energy.

The girls stepped back, out of sight.

And, unconsciously, a few of the watchers did as well.

"Lan Zhan…" Wei Wuxian shook his head. "You really do become more boring the older you get."

Once again, Lan Wangji barely withstood the urge to flinch.

"You're still so young. It's not like you're in your seventies; don't go around copying your uncle all the time."

Lan Qiren, on the other hand, could not quite hold back his reaction. He felt his fists clench and looked down, unable to watch Wei Wuxian even a moment longer.

“You should focus on things other than scolding others sometimes.”

Stepping around the table, Lan Wangji walked slightly closer and said, “Wei Ying, it would be for the best if you came to Gusu with me.”

“That again?!” Jiang Cheng snapped.

Jiang Yanli frowned slightly, and Lan Xichen looked down.

“...I haven’t heard you say that in a long time,” Wei Wuxian commented.

There was a far more serious air over this conversation than the last one they’d had. Several watchers felt themselves tense and couldn’t quite tell if that was in response to the current scene or Wei Wuxian’s emotions, as transmitted by the surrounding resentment.

Wei Wuxian rubbed his eyes briefly, commenting, “The Sunshot Campaign is over, now. I thought you gave up on this a while ago.”

“Last time we saw each other, during the hunt on Phoenix Mountain… did you notice the signs?”

“Signs of what?” Wei Wuxian snapped.

“Your loss of control.”

There was a scoff: “You mean me getting into a fight with Jin Zixuan? I think you’re misunderstanding something; I get into a fight with him whenever I see him.”

Jin Zixuan flinched at that description.

(This wasn’t quite the “senior Wei” version of Wei Wuxian, but it was close enough to leave Jin Zixuan with a feeling of intense guilt for disappointing him. Which was strange, considering this Wei Wuxian was describing one of his peers to Lan Wangji rather than a student.)

But Lan Wangji wasn’t convinced.

“There’s also what you said afterward.”

“What did I say? I say so much everyday. I’ve long since forgotten some words I uttered two months ago,” he explained, making a dismissive motion with his hand.

But Lan Wangji just kept standing there, not breaking eye contact. Another cooling breeze, which should have seemed refreshing on such a hot day, brushed by, instead bringing a sense of further discomfort.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said, “The ghostly path harms the body and the heart-”

“Oh gods,” Wei Wuxian groaned, leaning forward to rub between his brows as if he had a headache. He shook his head a few times, as though berating himself for having expected anything else.

Madam Jin sighed lightly, commenting, “I think I understand now why Wei Wuxian was so quick to leave when he ran into you the first time after being brought back to life.”

Nie Mingjue sighed as well, adding, “It’s not like I can’t see where Hanguang-jun is coming from. But this isn’t going to convince him.”

Not disagreeing, Lan Qiren felt his fists clench together even tighter than before.

This wasn’t going to get Wei Wuxian to agree to go with Lan Wangji.

‘*Which might be all for the best,*’ the real Lan Wangji thought, watching the simulation with a terrifyingly blank gaze.

Wei Wuxian breathed out calmingly.

“Lan Zhan, you… I’ve heard more than enough of what you have to say, but you still think you haven’t said enough? You say it harms the body, but I’m fine now. You say it harms the heart, but I haven’t become mad, have I?”

“It’s not too late yet. But, in the future, even if you regret it, it'll be-”

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian shouted, standing up. A large blast of wind flew through, shaking the building and sending the surrounding curtains flying wildly. It was the middle of a bright, sunny day, and yet no one could deny that it felt like there was a dark cloud hanging over the city.

But-

“Do you think… do you think A-Xuan’s death was because of something like this?” Madam Jin couldn’t help but ask. “I don’t deny that Wei Wuxian usually has impeccable control, but if someone kept pressuring him… maybe he’s easier to drive to madness than everyone else expects.”

At those words, Nie Mingjue could feel a number of gazes turn toward him.

(After all, even his ‘acceptable cultivation style’ worked that way. Why couldn’t Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation do the same?)

“Well… I certainly can’t imagine Wei Wuxian ever hurting A-Li if he’s sane,” Madam Yu admitted, stepping closer to her daughter once again.

But, unlike the helplessness that seemed to be sweeping over the watchers, fury appeared to be building up in the ghost girls. Their eyes glowed a brighter red and their crimson-painted lips split open into horrifyingly wide smiles. They moved up, practically looming over Lan Wangji.

The real one took a step back, watching fury flash across Wei Wuxian's face.

But-

"Stop it," Wei Wuxian commanded.

The girls didn't allow their gazes to drift from Lan Wangji's impassive form, but slowly retreated nonetheless.

(Despite everything, his control was still perfect.)

"Well, what can I say?" Wei Wuxian laughed once. "Even though I don't think I'll regret it, I don't like to listen to other people's guesses on how I'll feel in the future either."

"I know, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered. "But… maybe because of that… you won't be alive for much longer."

With how relaxed most of the previous segment was, it was easy to temporarily forget about that.

(Not too long from now, Wei Wuxian would kill Jin Zixuan, Jiang Yanli, and supposedly thousands of other cultivators. Not too long after, *Jiang Cheng* would lead a siege against him and he would die.)

(Coming back to life didn't negate that. Not at all.)

Finally-

"No." Lan Wangji's bright eyes seemed to dim further. "...I was the one out of line."

"You weren't. But, indeed, it seems like I shouldn't have invited you up here. I was presumptuous."

"You weren't."

"Really?" Wei Wuxian asked, voice notably blank. "That's good then."

A few more beats of silence followed.

Lan Qiren couldn't believe he was thinking this, but he missed watching his nephew and Wei Wuxian drunk-flirting with each other in front of the juniors. Hanguang-jun had tied his forehead ribbon around Wei Wuxian and had nearly caused Lan Qiren to have a heart attack when he had seen. That was still vastly preferable to *this*.

Lifting the alcohol jar up, Wei Wuxian downed it immediately.

"Still, I guess I should thank you," Wei Wuxian said. "I'll take that as you being concerned for me."

And that *was* what it was. The watchers all knew that.

But Wei Wuxian clearly didn't.

(Their first night together after Wei Wuxian came back to life, when Hanguang-jun physically dragged him back to the Cloud Recesses, felt different now.)

"Then, I won't take up any more of Hanguang-jun's time," Wei Wuxian offered. "Let's meet again if the chance comes up."

Not even bothering to wait for a response, Wei Wuxian left. His ghost girls followed after, still watching Lan Wangji with their unnerving glares.

The world turned dark for a moment. When light returned, they were in Lotus Pier.

"Ah, that was beyond awkward," Nie Huaisang groaned, burying his face in his hands.

"S… sorry we watched that," Jin Zixuan said, glancing tentatively over at Lan Wangji. He and Jiang Yanli might have been misunderstanding each other, and Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan might have behaved coldly toward each other at various times, but it was most certainly nothing like *this.*

However…

"You have nothing to apologize for," Lan Wangji responded. "This is all… because of…"

'Me,' he couldn't quite bring himself to say.

Wei Wuxian stepped into one of the main buildings, and Jiang Cheng looked up from where he was wiping his sword.

"You're back?" he asked.

"I'm back."

Jiang Cheng frowned: "You look terrible. Don't tell me you ran into Jin Zixuan."

"Worse than Jin Zixuan."

Jiang Yanli winced slightly at that description, and both the real Jin Zixuan and real Lan Wangji desperately wished they could melt into the floor.

"Who did you run into then?"

"Guess."

"Hmm… give me a hint."

Without hesitating for a second, Wei Wuxian added, "Wants to lock me up."

"Lan Wangji?" Jiang Cheng responded at once, having needed no time to ponder.

"...You also think Lan Wangji wants to lock Wei Wuxian up?" Madam Yu asked, glancing back at her son. He floundered for a moment, but found he could only shrug helplessly.

"He was there the day Wei Wuxian returned from the Burial Mounds," Jin Guangshan pointed out. "With how… unexpressive Lan-er-gongzi is, it's not much of a surprise that no one managed to figure out his *true* intentions."

Turned away, Lan Xichen was unable to notice the way Lan Wangji stopped breathing completely at those words.

"Why was he in Yunmeng?"

"No idea," Wei Wuxian shrugged. "He was in the streets, probably searching for someone. He hasn't brought this topic up since the sunshot campaign, but today he was at it again."

"It's your fault for calling him over first."

Wei Wuxian did a double take: "How did you know I called him over?"

"Do you even have to ask? When have you not been the one to initiate contact between the two of you? You're strange too. You always part on bad terms. Why do you keep trying to talk with him?"

"Because I'm ridiculous," Wei Wuxian declared.

"Because you love him!" Nie Huaisang shouted back. Jiang Cheng frowned at those words, but couldn't dispute them.

(Not after he'd seen first hand how happy Wei Wuxian was when he and Lan Wangji were together.)

But this Jiang Cheng had nowhere near the same amount of information the watchers did. He sighed, muttered an "at least you're aware of that," and went back to wiping his sword.

Wei Wuxian collapsed dramatically into a seat across from Jiang Cheng before asking, "Just how many times do you have to wipe your sword every day?"

"Three times. And what about you? When was the last time you even held your sword?"

Wei Wuxian grabbed a pear and took a bite.

"I wipe it once a month," he responded. "I know where it is; I tossed it in my room. I don't need to take care of it more often than that."

Madam Yu sighed: "Well, if he refuses to bring it even to conferences, I suppose this is no surprise."

Those words made Jiang Yanli frown, however, and she pointed out, “But… A-Xian loves practicing his swordsmanship.”

“Maybe he doesn’t think he needs to now that he has demonic cultivation,” Jiang Cheng pointed out. “If he can take on a few thousand spiritual cultivators at once, it probably seems pretty pointless.”

‘Huh? You think those cultivators will be interested in Yunmeng? I don’t think so. To put it simply, they’re interested in Wei Wuxian, aren’t they? Didn’t the Yunmeng Jiang Sect grow in renown during the Sunshot Campaign only because of Wei Wuxian?’

“Still, that’s… a pretty stark change,” Lan Xichen commented. “I’m sure everyone can see how different he is now. I can’t imagine that’s helping his public image much.”

Giving a teasing laugh, Jin Zixuan leaned over to Jiang Cheng and commented, “You, on the other hand, seem to be taking care of your sword a bit excessively.”

Jiang Cheng jumped, recognizing immediately this was revenge for the numerous ‘peacock’ comments he and Wei Wuxian had given.

“You’re right,” Wen Ruohan acknowledged, his lips twitching up into a mocking smirk. “It’s quite lucky, then, that Wei Wuxian managed to return Jiang Wanyin’s core to him, isn’t it?”

Quite a few watchers jumped at that. They hadn’t forgotten per-se, but so much had happened since then that it was hard to keep track of every little thing.

(Nie Huaisang and Wen Qing, who had most certainly *not* forgotten that detail, felt their expressions fall at the comment.)

While that conversation had been going on, the simulated Jiang Cheng had expressed his disapproval: “From now on, carry your sword to important events like hunts and discussion conferences. When you don’t, it’s a blatant showing of your lack of discipline for others to laugh at.”

“You know I hate it when other people try to force me into doing things. The more they try to make me do it, the less I want to do it. So what if I’m not carrying my sword? What are they going to do about it? And I don’t want to be dragged into a sword duel by people I don’t even know. So I just won’t take it. Solves everything. It’s better this way.”

That was the kind of thoughtless refusal Lan Qiren would expect a disgruntled preteen to give their friends. Sure, Wei Wuxian had gone against Lan Qiren’s authority before and disobeyed common courtesy before and gotten into fights and *invented demonic cultivation*, but…

There had always been a reason for it.

(And ‘I don’t want to waste my time fighting nobodies’ didn’t seem to match the kind of motivations Wei Wuxian had shown in the past.)

Jiang Cheng seemed to agree slightly, asking, “Didn’t you love showing off your sword skills in front of others?”

Which wasn’t too far off from what Jiang Yanli had said. People perked up in interest.

“I was a kid then. I can’t act like a kid forever, now can I?”

“...”

“...Is that the entirety of his explanation?” Madam Jin wondered aloud.

There wasn’t much people could do other than shrug. It didn’t seem like a motive that made much sense, but what reason would Wei Wuxian have to lie to Jiang Cheng?

If Lan Wangji wasn’t still trying to avoid Jin Guangshan’s attention as much as possible, he might have noticed the somewhat bitter amusement that crossed Wen Ruohan, Wen Qing, and Nie Huaisang’s faces at that.

Jiang Cheng smirked, shaking his head in an entertained disbelief as he concluded, “Fine, don’t bring your sword then. It doesn’t matter. But don’t provoke Jin Zixuan from now on. He’s Jin Guangshan’s only son, after all. The future Sect Leader of LanlingJin will be him.”

A rather awkward silence spread out.

“If you beat him up, what am I supposed to do? As the sect leader, should I beat him up with you? Or punish you?”

“...It depends on the situation,” Lan Qiren said. “There’s more at play in one of their arguments than just their positions.”

“Ah, yes, sir,” Jiang Cheng said at once.

Lan Xichen frowned however and Nie Mingjue scowled deeply. Yes, that was how it should be, but was that how it would actually happen?

As the simulation went on, their answers were becoming more and more a firm 'no.'

However, the watchers weren’t the only ones to catch the slight error in Jiang Cheng’s words.

“What do you mean Jin Zixuan’s his only son? Isn’t Jin Guangyao here now? Jin Guangyao seems so much better than him.”

Finished with wiping his sword, Jiang Cheng slipped Sandu back in its sheath as he said, “So what if he’s better? No matter how much better he is, no matter how clever, he’ll never be anything more than a servant who greets guests. He can’t compare with Jin Zixuan.”

“I… what?” Jin Zixuan asked.

Jiang Cheng flushed red at that, but paused when Jin Guangshan said, "Young Master Jiang has a point, doesn't he? Jin Guangyao might be clever, but his true nature has been revealed to us time and time again. A-Xuan is definitely the only option there is."

Having gotten his words supported by a sect leader, Jiang Cheng relaxed slightly.

But his simulated self's comment was clearly a reference to Jin Guangyao's mother's occupation, rather than any moral values he may or may not have. It was exactly the kind of mindset that had allowed so many people to gang up against Wei Wuxian just two in-simulation months ago.

Unfortunately, the three most likely to comment on that hypocrisy were Nie Mingjue, Lan Wangji, and Wen Ruohan. One of the trio was in the middle of reassessing everything he knew about himself, and the other two had watched themselves be killed by the person in question.

Put simply, none of them were in the right headspace to try speaking in Jin Guangyao's defense at this time.

And Wei Wuxian didn't seem especially worried about that either, as an apparently far-more important issue had just been raised.

"Jiang Cheng, be honest with me — what do you mean? At Phoenix Mountain you went as far as to bring Shijie with us. You can't actually want Shijie to…"

"...It's not impossible."

"It's not impossible?! Have you forgotten what he did in Langya? You're seriously telling me that it's not impossible?!"

That was… really not how Jin Zixuan wanted one of his fiance's most precious people to react to the possibility of their marriage.

"He's… probably regretting it."

And that was really *really* not what Jin Zixuan wanted the best defense Jiang Cheng could give to be. He was regretting it, and he knew his other self almost certainly was too, but Jiang Yanli was worth more than that.

Wei Wuxian agreed: "Who cares if he regrets it? Do we have to forgive him just because he apologized? Look at what his dad's like! Maybe Jin Zixuan will be the same in the future!"

Jin Guangshan blinked in surprise at the vitriol Wei Wuxian was giving out, and Jin Zixuan froze in place.

"He better not be," Madam Jin hissed.

And the real Madam Jin's frown deepened as Wei Wuxian continued, "What if Jin Zixuan grows up into someone who spends all his time searching for new women? And

you want Shijie to be with him?"

"See if he dares!" Jiang Cheng snarled back.

"I-I wouldn't!" Jin Zixuan shouted, turning toward Jiang Yanli. "I wouldn't! You have to believe me, I would never… I would never…"

'*Be like my father*' he thought, glancing back at the watching Jin Guangshan.

Sure, he wanted to be like his father, but just… not in this way.

"I… you don't think Wei Wuxian kills me because of this, do you?"

At that question, quite a few watchers had to do a double take. This whole time they had been looking for things that might corrupt Wei Wuxian until he was willing to do that. A change in *Jin Zixuan* being the cause had not been discussed much as of yet.

"...Probably not," Lan Wangji said at last. "His future self clearly regrets what he did. In addition, I think learning you did that would make him extremely mad, but he wouldn't kill you over it."

"...I guess so," Jin Zixuan agreed.

But now that it had been spoken out loud, the thought was most certainly there.

At that moment, Jiang Cheng sighed.

"It's not like you have a say in whether he's forgiven or not. A-Jie likes him, so what can we do?"

Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth: "Why does she have to like such a…"

He tossed the pear away, not finishing that sentence. He agreed; it was Jiang Yanli's decision. He was still unhappy about it though.

"Where's Shijie?" he asked at last.

"I don't know. Probably the usual places — the kitchen, the bedroom, or the ancestral hall. Where else would she go?"

Nodding in agreement, Wei Wuxian stood up and began to walk. The simulation flashed forward to show him in the kitchen, then, not finding her there, her bedroom, and finally the ancestral hall.

She kneeled there, cleaning her parent's memorial tablets.

Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli, and Madam Yu jumped at that, feeling as though they had been slapped in the face by the sudden reminder. The simulated Jiang Yanli's steady, practiced wipes nailed the point in even harder.

At the very least, they could take some solace in the fact that there were ashes in those jars.

"Your brother…" Nie Mingjue paused, clearing his throat. "Your brother was very brave, Wen-guniang."

Wen Qing paused at that, then gave a small smile and nodded in agreement. She didn't know where Wen Ning was, but she couldn't regret the actions he had taken to help the Jiangs.

(The Jiangs, meanwhile, had to look over at the memorial hall again, considering briefly what would be in it if Wen Ning hadn't managed to retrieve those for them.)

"Shijie?" Wei Wuxian asked at last. "Are you talking to Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu again?"

Voice soft as snow, Jiang Yanli responded, "Neither of you come, so of course I have to."

'Neither of you come.' Jiang Cheng was Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan's son, so of course he would be expected to come. But Wei Wuxian… had never even been adopted into the family.

~~Because Madam Yu would never let that happen.~~

When Jiang Yanli declared Wei Wuxian as her brother in front of all those Sect Leaders, Madam Yu had thought it was partially an exaggeration intended to get them to back off. However, with what she had said now….

For as long as Madam Yu could remember, the real Jiang Yanli had never referred to Wei Wuxian as anything more than her shidi.

(But now that she looked back on it, Madam Yu could see that the reason for that was probably because of *her*.)

Wei Wuxian knelt by Jiang Yanli's side. He grabbed Jiang Fengmian's tablet, and began cleaning them with her. As he did, however, his eyes kept straying from his work and moving over to her again.

"A-Xian, why are you looking at me like that? Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

Wei Wuxian grinned and shook his head: "No, I'm just here to roll around."

As he said that, he carefully laid Jiang Fengmian's tablet down and then literally rolled around Jiang Yanli for a bit, making her laugh in delight.

"Ah, A-Xian, you were born with a smiling face," she said. "Always smiling, never minding sorrowful things. No matter what situation you're in, you can always be happy."

She put her hands on top of his.

"It's that temperament that allows you to stand A-Cheng's bad temper."

“Hey!” Jiang Cheng protested, blushing in embarrassment as the other juniors laughed.

“Shijie, I don’t have a good temper at all,” he protested. “It’s actually all because of you. If not for you, I would have been beaten to death a hundred times by Jiang Cheng!”

How fitting, then, that once Jiang Yanli was dead, the future’s Jiang Cheng was going around torturing people who resembled Wei Wuxian. Although no one spoke that thought aloud, the cheer in the juniors slowly began to vanish.

“Silly you,” Jiang Yanli scolded. “Don’t you mind how A-Cheng acts. In his heart, he cares about you very much.”

And that was definitely true.

At one point in time.

“Xianxian, how old are you?” Jiang Yanli suddenly asked.

Perking up at once, Wei Wuxian declared, “Xianxian is three!”

“The mighty and terrifying Yiling Patriarch, everyone,” Nie Mingjue muttered, then closed his eyes and let out a sigh.

Jiang Yanli gave a sad, nostalgic smile. She wasn’t quite sure why. This Wei Wuxian hadn’t died yet, and the world hadn’t yet turned against him. Realistically speaking, this was much better than what was going to come. There was no reason for her to feel like this.

And yet the played-up innocence in Wei Wuxian’s tone still made her feel like crying.

“Shijie, I want to ask you something,” Wei Wuxian said at last. Pausing in her laughter, Jiang Yanli set Madam Yu’s memorial tablet down as well, giving Wei Wuxian her full attention.

The real Jiang Yanli tilted her head, waiting for the question.

“Why… why would someone like another person? I mean that kind of like.”

“Why are you asking about this?” Jiang Yanli asked in response. “Do you have someone you like? What kind of a maiden is she?”

‘*If she were a maiden, this would be so much simpler,*’ Jiang Cheng thought, a scowl forming on his face momentarily. ‘*But… Wei Wuxian’s never smiled around anyone… the way he does around Lan Wangji.*’

And that wasn’t really something Wei Wuxian could choose to change about himself, so-

In direct contrast to Jiang Cheng’s thoughts, Wei Wuxian just shook his head at her question: “No. I won’t like anyone, at least not too much. I don’t see why I should. Isn’t that the same thing as putting a collar around my neck?”

“What?” Madam Jin asked. “Why would he think that?”

A snort escaped Nie Huaisang at that question and his attempt to cover it up with a cough failed rather spectacularly. Everyone turned toward him and he looked away. Although some wanted to ask what he thought was so funny, most had a fairly good idea already.

‘*You don’t have to look any further than this crowd to understand Wei-xiong’s reaction. Aren’t the relationships he knows the most about Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian’s, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan’s, and Madam Jin and Jin Guangshan’s? With that as your benchmark, it really will seem like romantic relationships only bring suffering.*’

However, it was hard to tell what the simulated Jiang Yanli thought about that as her only response was, “Hmm… three seems a bit old. How about one?”

She booped his nose, and he gave a big gasp.

“No! I’m three! The three year old Xianxian is hungry! What should he do?” Wei Wuxian responded, working hard to keep himself from smiling as he spoke.

After thinking for a moment, Jiang Yanli responded, “I think there’s soup in the kitchen. You can have some. Will the one year old Xianxian be able to reach the stove though?”

“If I can’t, Shijie can just pick me up. I’ll be able to reach it then!”

“Fooling around again!” Jiang Cheng suddenly shouted, stepping into the ancestral hall at that exact moment. “I, your Sect Leader, have already poured you a bowl and put it outside. Kneel before me to express your gratitude and go drink your soup outside!”

“A-Cheng!” Jiang Yanli laughed openly, making Jiang Cheng blush and try to hide his face.

Wei Wuxian, who had slipped outside to grab his soup, suddenly popped back inside: “What do you mean by this, Jiang Cheng? Where’s the meat?!”

“Finished it. There’s only lotus roots left,” Jiang Cheng responded shamelessly. “You don’t have to eat them if you don’t want to.”

Straightening himself up in mock-anger, Wei Wuxian elbowed Jiang Cheng and said, “Spit it out! Right now!”

“No objections here! What, do you plan on eating it then?”

“Okay, okay,” Jiang Yanli intervened. “How old are you two, fighting over some meat. I’ll just make another jar.”

Jiang Yanli smiled at the interactions the simulated three shared, but felt her smile dim a moment later. Wei Wuxian had asked her a question. In a joking manner, of course, which had led to Jiang Yanli’s equally playful response. Still, having seen his interaction with Lan Wangji (and knowing what their relationship would become in the future), she felt that the question he had asked was a little more serious than her simulated self realized.

Wei Wuxian would turn to her — trusted her — as though she was his mother.

And yet, despite her best intentions, Jiang Yanli couldn't help but feel like she never quite managed to do enough.

(After all, despite what she had said, she had neither changed Jin Zixun's mind nor gotten him to apologize to Wei Wuxian. She had just temporarily kept a fight from occurring, stalling the conflict like always.)

(Which, mind you, was more than anyone else managed to do, but Jiang Yanli's thoughts weren't very focused on that.)

Someone cleared their throat.

"My… my mother cooked Wei Wuxian's favorite dish in the world: lotus and pork rib soup," Jin Ling announced, then cleared his throat again, sounding slightly choked up. "It was… um, not only was it really delicious, but every time he had it Wei Wuxian would recall the first time he had tasted it."

The simulation showed images quickly, reminding them of the scenes they'd already watched regarding Little Love, Princess, and Jasmine meeting Wei Wuxian for the first time.

'Coward,' the five year old Jiang Cheng huffed. 'What's there to be afraid of? Look at how cute they are! They won't bite you.'

Jiang Cheng swallowed and looked away.

(After all, later, the future Jiang Wanyin would use a dog against Wei Wuxian fully intending for that dog to bite. It wouldn't be much of a threat otherwise.)

Then the young, preteen Jiang Yanli appeared, giving a warm smile like always.

'You can come down,' she said. 'Let's go back.'

When Wei Wuxian finally fell, she tried to catch him but didn't quite manage to. He slammed hard against the ground and began to cry.

Because she was never quite strong enough to actually provide any real help, was she?

And then finally, after running into Jiang Cheng, they began walking back.

'Don't worry, I won't tell Uncle Jiang,' the young Wei Wuxian promised with a wink. 'I just hurt myself since I suddenly wanted to climb a tree last night!'

Wen Ruohan frowned at those words, but made no outward comment.

Then, Jiang Yanli gave them some soup.

“Remembering that always made him happy,” Jin Ling revealed. “That’s why… mom’s soup was his favorite.”

Upon hearing that, Jin Zixuan spun towards Jiang Yanli at once.

“A-Li!”

“Y-yes?”

“I… I don’t want to volunteer you for anything or to make you do something you don’t want to, and-and I would appreciate getting to try some myself, in this world, but… do you think we’d be able to have you give instructions to someone in the future’s world? Maybe this A-Ling can still try your soup, even if you can’t be physically present to make it.”

Upon hearing that suggestion, Jiang Yanli’s eyes widened and an enormous smile appeared on her face.

“Yes!” she said at once, turning toward her fiance with some of the most enthusiasm he had ever seen from her. “Yes, let’s do it.”

At that moment, they returned to the Yiling Patriarch version of Wei Wuxian, who held his now-empty soup bowl in his hands as he gazed out at the starry sky.

‘*Seeing Lan Zhan in the streets made me think about those days in the Cloud Recesses,*’ he mused. ‘*I called him over on a whim… I guess I thought maybe I could direct our conversation toward those times. But… I guess things are different now than they were back then.*’

Lan Qiren and Lan Wangji paused at those words, wishing they could refute them. Things weren’t really all that different. Wei Wuxian was still Wei Wuxian, and his anger at the ways other people were treating him didn’t change that. But their future selves — all of their future selves, from Jiang Wanyin to Jin Guangshan — didn’t seem to realize that. Things were different than they were before only because *they* insisted on making it so.

Jiang Yanli’s future self seemed to be the only one who disagreed.

At that moment, Wei Wuxian stood up. He began to walk, passing through the Jiang Sect’s training grounds on the way. The disciples all bowed their heads, their gazes containing respect, acknowledgement, and a little bit of fear.

‘*I… don’t recognize any of them,*’ Wei Wuxian thought absent-mindedly as he passed through. A brief flash of a memory was shown. The past Wei Wuxian, at fifteen, playing casually with his fellow disciples, getting teased and laughed at and splashed and hugged as they went about their lives.

“He doesn’t recognize any of them?” Madam Yu asked, her frown deepening. “Even if… even after what happened, I would have thought he would continue teaching his juniors. Wasn’t he always running around doing that?”

“Our Wei Wuxian still does that,” Jiang Cheng confirmed.

But for some reason, after developing demonic cultivation, it seemed like Wei Wuxian wanted nothing to do with his sword anymore.

Nie Huaisang, Wen Qing, and Wen Ruohan all glanced at each other briefly, accidentally making eye contact (which Nie Huaisang hurriedly looked away from with a terrified ‘eep’).

Wei Wuxian exited the training grounds and even passed through Lotus Pier’s gates. Outside, despite the late hour, vendors sold all sorts of treats and trinkets, and the sizzling oil filled the air with a mouth-watering aroma. Wei Wuxian breathed in.

It was slightly different from what Jiang Cheng recalled of his home. People he didn’t know were there, and this section of the pier had clearly been rebuilt recently. Which made sense, given that five years and a war had passed, but it was still somewhat disconcerting to see.

Nevertheless, Wei Wuxian grinned. He walked over to the stall with the largest pot of sizzling oil.

“Big servings today, huh?” he asked.

The vendor grinned back fearlessly, offering, “Young Master Wei, you want one? I’ll give it to you for free. No charge!”

“I’ll have one. Change me anyways,” he offered, handing over a few coins. However, at that moment, he noticed someone else there. He glanced over at the figure sitting to the stall’s left, who was shivering as they clutched their knees. When Wei Wuxian had spoken, their head had shot up.

And, at this moment, both Wei Wuxian and the watchers realized who it was.

“You?!” he asked.

Wen Qing looked up at him.

The scene faded away.

There was silence among the watchers. The dignified, capable, untouchable doctor of the Wens had looked like a beggar just then. It was about as far as you could get from the person they all knew. Jiang Yanli covered her mouth, which was wide in shock, while Madam Jin and Madam Yu gaped openly. Then, the very air seemed to darken.

Bloodlust filled Wen Ruohan’s mind, and rage seemed to encompass Nie Mingjue. They wanted to stand up and demand that whoever had managed to turn such a capable, honorable person into *that* be held accountable.

Except…

One of them had started the war, and the other had led the side that won it. Who could be considered responsible for this, if not the two of them?

When light returned, Koi Tower appeared before them.

"...I hate it when they do this," Lan Xichen admitted, eyes unusually unkind. By this point, it was hard to be surprised that the simulation would cut away at the worst moment possible. Still, after what they had just seen….

"Qing-guniang, are you alright?" Jiang Yanli asked, walking over to her. That sight had been enough to leave a sour taste in everyone's mouth. Some, like Wen Ruohan, were furious at what had happened to one of their own. Some, like the Lans and Nie, were furious at the state Wen Qing, the woman who had gone against Wen Ruohan to save Wei Wuxian, was in. Some, like Jin Guangshan, were disappointed at how dirty the once-beautiful woman had become.

Regardless, no one was pleased at what they had just seen.

"I… I was alone," Wen Qing whispered. "Why… wasn't A-Ning with me?"

Those who hadn't yet considered her brother sucked in a breath at that question.

"Is he… already dead?" Wen Qing asked, staring, wide eyed, at the glistening golden tower before her.

(So opposite the appearance her other self had displayed just a moment ago.)

But, with as much indifference to their concerns as always, the simulation remained at Koi Tower, where Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji were walking through the endless sea of white peonies. They moved so gracefully they practically appeared to be gliding over them, the dewdrops on the flowers barely stirring in their wake.

The watchers forced themselves to relax, focusing on the scene before them.

Lan Xichen looked over: "Wangji, is there something on your mind? Why do you seem so tense?"

"...Tense?" Nie Huaisang asked, glancing at Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng, who could only shake their heads. They might be better at reading Lan Wangji than they were before, but they were still a long way away from Lan Xichen's skill, it seemed.

(Though even Lan Xichen seemed to have no clue why Lan Wangji had been acting so strange since the concealment zone activated during the last segment.)

Nevertheless, as Lan Wangji's brows furrowed and he shook his head, it became clear to all the watchers that Lan Xichen's read of the situation had been spot on.

Then-

"...Xiongzhang, there is someone I want to take back to the Cloud Recesses."

Lan Xichen nodded, listening carefully.

"Take him back… and hide him somewhere."

The first jade's eyes widened.

"Ah, you're speaking about Wei Wuxian, aren't you?" Madam Jin realized at once. There was a bit of laughter across the watchers, and teasing smiles formed on everyone's faces. The shock of Wen Qing was hard for them to ignore, but they were starting to get used to their helplessness before the simulation. It would be easier on everyone if they could just go with the flow.

Sighing, Lan Qiren commented, "If only Hanguang-jun maintained the level of hesitance you have."

"Come now, Uncle," Lan Xichen said. "You have to acknowledge that it worked out rather nicely."

Lan Qiren shrugged, neglecting to comment.

Their reactions were completely different from the simulated Lan Xichen's. He felt nothing but surprise.

'*Ever since A-Niang passed away, Wangji became more and more withdrawn. Apart from night hunts, Wangji spends all his time in his room, reading, meditating, practicing calligraphy, playing his guqin, and improving his cultivation, only ever really talking to me.*'

"Oh, that's so sad!" Nie Huaisang wailed, feeling this single-mindedness was another way Lan Wangji resembled his older brother. "Though at least that seems to change in the future. You know, with you dragging Wei-xiong back to the Cloud Recesses and all."

"Definitely," Jiang Yanli giggled. "And A-Xian was protesting so loudly too. I'm surprised Hanguang-jun managed to keep his cool."

Nodding in agreement, Lan Qiren admitted, "I suppose that if there's one thing Wangji has learned overtime, it's that the easiest way to deal with Wei Wuxian is to just keep going no matter what he says-"

"Uncle, *enough!*"

Everyone froze. Because Lan Wangji had just raised his voice and *screamed* at his uncle. And it wasn't an embarrassed protest, he sounded genuinely enraged. The closest thing they had ever heard to this was the simulated Lan Wangji yelling at Wei Wuxian after he had switched the book.

But even that was nothing compared to the sheer desperation that had been in Lan Wangji's tone just now.

~~He knew why they were saying that. It was because, when Wei Wuxian was being dragged to the Cloud Recesses, he was protesting under misinformed assumptions. It was because he sometimes liked to complain at length about things that didn't really bother him in order to be babied by the few people who would actually allow him to be that vulnerable, and, as the~~

~~simulated Wei Wuxian began to trust Hanguang-jun more, he had used that card time and time again. It was because, despite all the times Wei Wuxian nearly initiated it, Hanguang-jun had always refused to do anything uncouth with him.~~

~~But they didn't realize that his hesitance was because he had messed up so thoroughly once before.~~

"Wangji?" Lan Xichen asked, stepping closer and lowering his voice.

"No need to worry, Lan-gongzi," Jin Guangshan said. "Your brother's just having a little difficulty accepting the idea that it's okay to like beautiful things."

"I will have to request that you don't speak on my behalf, Sect Leader Jin," Lan Wangji said, tone colder than even the deepest water in the ocean.

The fact that his brother wanted to bring a person home had greatly surprised the simulated Lan Xichen. However, as the silence drew on, he quickly realized how serious Lan Wangji was being. Soon, a bit of happiness and approval appeared in his expression.

However, one thing was still confusing.

"Hide them somewhere?" Lan Xichen asked.

Lan Wangji frowned softly.

"Yes. But…" he paused, "...He is not willing."

Both Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren's smiles faded slightly at that, instantly realizing the connection to the current Sect Leader Lan. Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji might not know exactly what had happened between their parents, but…

It made sense that this would be weighing on him.

(However, Lan Wangji knew full well that this was about more than just his parents. Those words — those concerns — were, more than anything, a product of Phoenix Mountain.)

At that moment, a loud clamor was heard from the back.

"Is this a road someone like you can walk on?! Who let you roam around?!" someone shouted, the words nearly coming out as a growl.

"I'm sorry, I-"

Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen turned around and saw Jin Zixun, nose turned up high, shouting rather menacingly at a man cloaked in pure white robes. When that man noticed their gazes he immediately went pale. Clearly, he recognized them.

And the watchers recognized him.

“Su She,” Wen Qing observed blankly.

(She wished the simulation would focus on her brother. Or go back to the future, and show what happened after Wei Wuxian was stabbed. Or move between those times, and show how he died. Unsurprisingly, the simulation decided to do none of those things.)

Jin Zixun’s shouts and rants had continued without end, but, not long after, a man in golden robes walked over with swift steps. It was Jin Guangyao, donning the vermillion mark his current position allowed him to have.

“The paths of Koi Tower are rather intricate,” he commented. “Young Master Su, it’s not your fault that you got lost. You can come with me. I’ll guide you where you need to go.”

Jin Zixun sneered and stormed off, but Su She appeared rather taken aback: “You know me?”

“Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I?” Jin Guangyao smiled. “We’ve met before, haven’t we? Young Master Su, Su Minshan, your swordsmanship is quite good. Ever since the hunt at Phoenix Mountain, I was thinking that it would be a pity if such a young talent never made its way over to our sect. In the end, though, it appears you made it here without my intervention. I was over the moon with joy. Would you come this way, please?”

“He really does have a great memory,” Jiang Cheng commented.

“Yeah,” Nie Mingjue agreed. “That’s part of why I-”

He stopped, not finishing that sentence.

‘*His skills are why he initially caught my attention. That’s part of why I valued him so much. And then he… and then I-*’

A bitter taste filled his mouth.

Meanwhile, Su She appeared to have been completely swept up in Jin Guangyao’s flattery.

“There were countless cultivators who would come, seeking assistance from the LanlingJin Sect like Su She did,” Lan Sizhui read aloud, very pointedly not commenting on Lan Jingyi’s mocking scoff at Su She’s name. “He didn’t think anyone would recognize him, and he never expected Jin Guangyao to be able to remember him so clearly, even going as far as offering praise, after having only met him once. He was instantly relieved.”

A fact that showed rather clearly on his face. He turned away from the Lan brothers at once, not wanting to see what sorts of expressions they were making.

The scene shifted, and the LanlingJin Sect’s Glamor Hall came into view. It was bustling with people, everyone who had come for the conference seated in their

appropriate spots. The positions were rather carefully chosen, and no one was surprised to see Jin Guangyao running around, managing the whole thing.

Beautiful women walked to every table, pouring glasses of alcohol for the sect leaders seated there. When they arrived at the Lan table, they noticed the lack of alcohol cups — tea cups and a few, dainty dishes being the only items there — and quickly moved on. Lan Xichen had his usual friendly smile on, while Lan Wangji became as unreadable as a brick wall. The conversation they were having earlier was not appropriate for the current time and place, so neither tried to talk.

However, at that moment, a man approached them.

"Sect Leader Lan, Hanguang-jun, a toast to both of you!" Jin Zixun said, holding his cup out.

A frown instantly appeared on Lan Qiren's face.

Jin Zixun had been going around toasting everyone, and seemed to not realize why this would make the situation uncomfortable. Jin Guangyao hurried over.

"Zixun, both Zewu-jun and Hanguang-jun grew up in the Cloud Recesses. There are over three thousand rules on their stone wall, some of which forbid drinking. Instead of asking them to join you in this, why not-"

"The Jin Sect and the Lan Sect have always been like family!" Jin Zixun declared, quite annoyed by Jin Guangyao's interruption. "We're one union! My two Lan brothers, if you don't drink this, you'll be looking down on me!"

"Zixun, you little-" Jin Zixuan cut himself off, remembering last minute that his parents were seated right next to him, and buried his face in his hands. "I can't believe you told Wei Wuxian it was 'rude' for him to win a *fucking competition*, and then just a few months later you…"

Jiang Yanli sent him a pitying look, but there wasn't much she could say to help,

And, worst of all, was the reaction Zixun's thoughtless words elicited.

"What a bold move."

"How confident. That's just how an esteemed cultivator should act!"

"But *Wei Wuxian* was being too arrogant?" Nie Mingjue asked, repeating Jin Zixuan's point.

(But of course, these same people hadn't complained at all when it had been Nie Mingjue taking a third of the prey.)

Jin Guangyao's smile appeared shaky and he rubbed at his temples to alleviate some stress. Lan Xichen stood up.

"Thank you for the offer, Young Master Jin, bu-"

“You don’t have to say anything, Sect Leader Lan! Our sects aren’t strangers. Don’t speak so formally with me! Just tell me one thing — will you drink or not?”

The corners of Jin Guangyao’s eyes began to twitch as he pointed out, “After this they’ll be flying back on their swords. Drinking would probably affect their-”

“It’s not like they’ll get drunk after just a few cups!” Jin Zixun said, clearly having never seen a Lan drink in his life. “Even if I drink eight large bowls, I’ll still be able to fly away just fine!”

Well Jin Zixuan knew for a fact that wasn’t true.

But a wave of cheers and encouragement came from all sides.

(Because while Wei Wuxian or Jin Guangyao saying the same would be a challenge to the hierarchy, Jin Zixun saying it made it an honorable and noteworthy accomplishment. Nie Huaisang not bringing his sword was just what he did. Nie Mingjue taking a third of the prey was just Da-ge being Da-ge. Madam Yu whipping Wei Wuxian over nothing was just to be expected. Jin Zixun forcing the Lans outside of their comfort zones was displaying his confidence. No one wanted to intervene.)

But then-

A hand reached forward, snatching up the cup of liquor being offered to the Lans. Lan Wangji’s eyes opened wider in surprise.

And Wei Wuxian drank the full thing in a single gulp.

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli realized, lighting up at once. She turned toward Wen Qing, who was staring at Wei Wuxian with nearly tangible levels of relief in her eyes.

Finally, they might get some answers.

With a heavy clank, Wei Wuxian set the cup down on the table.

“I drank it for him,” he said. “You satisfied yet?”

Although such thoughts weren’t appropriate given the current situation, the real Lan Wangji couldn’t help looking Wei Wuxian up and down. He had helped Lan Wangji. And the confidence in his stance, the mocking disobedience in his eyes, the playful grin on his face… combined with his striking appearance as the Yiling Patriarch, it was all quite…

Lan Wangji turned away.

(After what he had done, he had no right to look at Wei Wuxian like that ever again.)

“Young Master Wei,” Lan Xichen realized.

“When did he come in?” someone whispered, backing away from the scene. The atmosphere throughout the crowd was completely opposite the enthusiasm they had

while Jin Zixun was in control.

Wei Wuxian glanced over at the speaker for a half second, responding, "Just a moment ago."

The person being addressed jumped slightly, looking very much like they wished they could hide behind their friend. After all-

'*Just a moment ago?*' people thought. '*But we were all here… and not a single person noticed him enter. No one notified the room or greeted him. How did he…*'

The gathered cultivators shivered. For most it was an expression of their disgust and fear over his abilities.

And for some, like Jin Guangshan, in fascination and desire.

Lan Wangji's eyes remained situated on Sect Leader Jin like a rabbit watching a tiger.

The first to recover was Jin Guangyao, who rushed forward at once, all smiles, to say, "I wasn't aware Young Master Wei had arrived at Koi Tower. I apologize, the lack of welcome was my fault. Would you like to be seated? Oh, right — do you have an invitation?"

"No thanks, I don't," Wei Wuxian responded immediately, his eyes not straying from Jin Zixun all the while. "Young Master Jin, could i please have a word with you?"

"What has Zixun done now?!" Jin Zixuan cried out, beyond done with his cousin. Jiang Yanli had grown close to Wen Qing throughout the simulation, and Madam Jin had already had immense respect for her. Jin Zixuan himself had been beyond impressed to see the way she and Wen Ning had protected Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin after the Massacre of Lotus Pier.

So to see her like that now-

'*Zixun,*' he thought, '*You better not have been involved.*'

"You want to talk now?" Jin Zixun asked, scoffing at Wei Wuxian's request. "If you have anything to say, come after the banquet is over."

Some in the crowd muttered their support of him while criticizing Wei Wuxian's forcefulness. Perhaps encouraged by that, Jin Zixun sneered down at Wei Wuxian.

'*He's the last person I want to talk to,*' Jin Zixun thought.

"...How long would I have to wait?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Probably around six to eight hours. Or maybe ten to twelve. Or until tomorrow."

"So that's a 'no' to talking then," Madam Jin said.

"I'm afraid I can't wait that long," Wei Wuxian said.

“You’ll have to wait even if you can’t.”

“Wei Wuxian’s clearly trying to solve this matter quietly,” Nie Mingjue signed. “But with Jin Zixun… that’s not likely to work.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna go with a strong ‘no’ on that front,” Jiang Cheng muttered, glaring at the Jin disciple.

At that moment, Jin Guangyao stepped in and asked, “Young Master, what do you need Zixun for? Is it really such a pressing matter?”

“Pressing indeed. It allows for no delay.”

And thus, in response, Jin Zixun turned to Lan Xichen and said, “Sect Leader Lan, here, here. You haven’t joined my toast yet!”

“Zixun!” Madam Jin snapped.

“Is he… trying to parody what happened in the last segment — how Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji and thanked him for his help while in the middle of a conversation with him?” Madam Yu wondered, and, despite her annoyance at Jin Zixun, long-born habit had her continue with, “See Wei Wuxian? This is exactly what happens when you get into fights with people over nothing!”

“And who among us would have behaved differently when confronted with the same situation?” Nie Mingjue pointed out. “I’m sure he could have bent over backwards to placate them back then and maybe that would be helpful now. But he shouldn’t *have* to.”

(Just like Nie Mingjue felt, once upon a time, that Meng Yao shouldn’t have to.)

And whatever was worrying Wei Wuxian was too important to allow for this stalling any longer.

“Fine. Then I’ll talk about it right here. Young Master Jin, have you heard of someone by the name of Wen Ning?”

Wen Qing nearly did a double take, and she felt her mind momentarily freeze.

“Wen Ning? I haven’t.”

“I’m sure you remember him,” Wei Wuxian countered. “Last month, when you were night hunting in Guangquan, you chased an eight winged bat king to the gathering place, or the detention camp, that the remnants of the Wen Sect lived inside. You brought out a group of Wen disciples. The one in the lead was him.”

Slowly, quietly, narration from Lan Sizhui began to play: “After the Sunshot Campaign, the Qishan Wen Sect was destroyed. The territory was split up among the winning sects. The Guanquan area was appropriated by the LanlingJin Sect. As for the remnants of the Wen Sect… they were herded to a small corner of Qishan, not even a thousandth of the territory they had once owned. They were crammed in, and had to struggle to live.”

Wen Ruohan's eyes went dark at those words.

'*They dare to do that to the Wens? How amusing. Do they truly believe their disrespect will go unpunished?*'

~~But he wasn't there anymore to punish them. He had started the war.~~

'*Because none of them knew what they were doing. You have to look no further than what's happening to Wei Wuxian right now to realize that. They were all foolish and incompetent and if I was the one in charge I would-*'

But he wasn't. He had lost.

And now Wei Wuxian was putting himself in this situation *for* the Wens.

And the resistance from the gentry remained as strong as ever.

"I said don't remember. I'm not so bored as to waste my time remembering a Wen dog's name."

Both Wen Qing and Wen Ruohan looked about five seconds away from murder.

As, notably, did Wei Wuxian.

"Fine. I don't mind explaining further. While you were struggling to catch the bat king, you happened to run into a few Wen disciples who had also been hunting it down. You ordered them to carry spirit attraction flags to serve as bait-"

Meaning they had tried to use one of *Wei Wuxian's inventions* against Wen Ning.

"-Which, of course, they weren't stupid enough to agree to. One person stepped out and tried to reason with you. That person was Wen Ning. After some delay, the bat king got away so you beat up the Wen cultivators and took *them* away. Do I need to give you more details? The group hasn't returned yet. Apart from you, I don't know who in the world I can ask about this."

"...You have my humblest apologies, your Excellency," Jin Guangshan said at once, bowing low. "I am astonished to hear that Zixun did such a despicable and cowardly thing!"

There was no way for Jin Guangshan to talk around what Jin Zixun had done. The best thing to do now was to cut off all ties.

"I assure you, he'll face whatever punishment you desire!"

"Will he?" Wen Ruohan asked, tone frighteningly unimpressed.

And Nie Mingjue wanted to protest — to say that it was the Wen Sect's just desserts, after what they had done to all the other sects — but…

But not Wen Ning.

The young, wide eyed, frighteningly kind boy who had saved Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin appeared in their minds. A second later, the watchers recalled how they had first found him: a fierce corpse with chains around his limbs and barely enough consciousness to hear Wei Wuxian's call.

No matter what he felt, no matter how angry Nie Mingjue had been, that boy had done nothing to deserve that.

Unsurprisingly, Jin Zixun didn't agree:

"Wei Wuxian, what do you mean?" he asked. "You're saying you came for *him?!* You aren't standing up for a Wen dog of all people, are you?"

Whispers began to spread throughout the surrounding crowd.

And Madam Yu cursed the fact that Wei Wuxian was doing this in such a public place.

(But he had *tried* to move the conversation outside, and he had even been willing to wait if it wouldn't take long. If Wen Ning's life was on the line — if the boy who had gotten her and Jiang Fengmian's ashes back could die — then Wei Wuxian waiting any longer would be unjustifiable.)

(And, if nothing else, Wei Wuxian always tried to be righteous.)

But an argument like that would never convince Jin Zixun. As a result, all Wei Wuxian did was shrug at his accusation, an arrogant grin appearing on his face.

"How is it any of your business whether I want to stand up for him or chop his head off? What I want him for doesn't matter; just give him to me!"

Wei Wuxian's patience was running out.

(Fear began to spread through the surrounding audience.)

'*Just tell him the full story, Wei Wuxian!*' Jin Zixuan thought. '*He's… Zixun is rude and such, but he… no one could possibly justify this happening to Wen Ning if they know what he did for you and Jiang Wanyin! He…*'

He, in the last segment, had more than proved that he didn't care at all what Wei Wuxian had to say.

'*But he… but surely…*'

"Wei Wuxian, you're truly too bold! The LanlingJin Sect didn't invite you, and yet you had the audacity to come here and run wild! Do you think that you're invincible? That no one has the courage to confront you? Do you want to outrun the heavens?"

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow mockingly: "You're comparing yourself to the heavens? Excuse me for saying so, but your face seems a little too thick, doesn't it?"

Jin Zixun flushed at his words.

And a deranged smile formed on Wen Ruohan's face.

'*A man with no talent at all… no skill in cultivation or swordsmanship or politics, dares to speak down to the Wens and Wei Wuxian? People in this crowd may have fought back against me eventually, but how many minor sects did they allow me to destroy before then? The only reason you have the 'courage to confront' Wei Wuxian is because that Jiang brat has no idea what he's doing as a sect leader. If I had Wei Wuxian, if I was still there, if I was in control, none of this would be happening!*'

(But he had tried to gain control, and lost. And now there was nothing he could do about this.)

And then, before Jin Zixun could speak up again, Jin Guangshan stepped forward and calmly said, "It's not a matter worth arguing over in any case. You youngsters, there's no need to lose your tempers over such things."

"My *brother* is hardly inconsequential," Wen Qing hissed at him, and Jiang Yanli nodded firmly in agreement.

"I meant to imply no such thing," he hurried to counter. "I only-"

"However, Young Master Wei, to be honest… barging into the LanlingJin Sect's private banquet is indeed inappropriate."

'*And, like always, Wei Wuxian knows that there are plenty of things more important than being proper,*' Lan Qiren thought, some frustration boiling over. The real Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji also frowned deeply.

(Because their other selves were *right there*. If these versions of them just knew Wei Wuxian better, understood him better, then they would see how right he was. Unfortunately, they lacked the knowledge their real selves had gained.)

'*He only spoke up when Jin Zixun was at a disadvantage,*' Wei Wuxian realized. '*What, is he annoyed about what happened at Phoenix Mountain?*'

Nevertheless, Wei Wuxian nodded in acknowledgement of Jin Guangshan's point, turning away from Jin Zixun to face him entirely.

"Sect Leader Jin, it was never my intention to disturb your private banquet. My apologies. However, the whereabouts of the people Young Master Jin took are still unclear. Every second counts; a few moments delay could make me too late. A person in that group has saved me before. I can't sit back when they're in danger. Please excuse my rudeness; I will make up for what I've done at a later date."

And there it was. He had explained everything important and said everything he should need to. The Wens were taken away under false pretenses — or, rather, no pretenses at all — and

one member of that group was someone whom Wei Wuxian owed a life debt. What more needed to be said?

(A lot, apparently.)

"Regardless, I'm sure this matter can wait a little while longer. Come, come. You can sit down first. There's no need to rush; let's talk about this."

Jin Guangyao had already prepared a seat for him. Jin Guangshan stepped forward, reaching out as if to guide Wei Wuxian to where he wanted him to be. Wei Wuxian stepped back.

"Thank you, Sect Leader Jin, but I won't be staying long. This matter can't be delayed. Please let this be sorted out as soon as possible."

"At least he's still being polite," Lan Qiren observed. It wasn't exactly working, but the effort was still clear.

"There's no need to hurry," Jin Guangshan said, stepping closer to Wei Wuxian again. "Though, if we get down to it, there are indeed a few things that the two of us should discuss. Now that you're here, why don't we take the opportunity to sort these things out?"

Wei Wuxian raised a brow: "Sort out what?"

"Young Master Wei, we've talked about this a few times already, haven't we?" he said, shaking his head as though finding Wei Wuxian's childish priorities amusing. "Don't you remember. During the Sunshot Campaign… you used a certain object."

"Oh, you did mention before. You mean the Tiger Seal?"

"Yes," Jin Guangshan said, his smile growing wider.

And a chill came down Lan Wangji's spine.

(Jin Guangshan's gaze at that moment looked identical to how he was when speaking to Lan Wangji in the previous segment.)

"It's said the Stygian Tiger Seal was made from the iron of a sword you found in the cave of the Xuanwu of Slaughter," he said, and the simulation shifted to replay the moment the seal was formed. "You only used it on the battlefield once, but its power was horrifying. A few of our cultivators were even affected by the residual force-"

"Please get to the point," Wei Wuxian interrupted.

"That is the point. In that battle, in addition to the Wen Sect, our side also took great losses. In my opinion, such a weapon is quite difficult to control. To leave it in the hands of just one person would…"

He trailed off as Wei Wuxian began to laugh.

And if Lan Wangji were anyone else, he probably would have joined in.

Was it possible that the losses the Jin took from what Wei Wuxian did were too great to be ignored? Sure. Was it possible — likely, even — that the simulated Hanguang-jun and Jin Guangshan's concerns about Wei Wuxian's control weren't completely unfounded? Of course. But were the words of someone so obviously trying to get something worth taking at face value? Not at all.

(And after everything that had happened so far, if Wei Wuxian did end up pressured into losing control, it was clear that any spiritual cultivator would have surely qi deviated long before.)

As was continuing to be proved by the very scene they were watching.

"Sect Leader Jin, let me ask you something," Wei Wuxian requested. "Do you think that, now that the Qishan Wen Sect is gone, the Lanling Jin Sect has a right to replace it?"

The tension in the room could cut glass.

"That's not-" Jin Zixuan began, then cut off. He remembered the burning of the Cloud Recesses, and the Massacre of Lotus Pier. The horrors that the Wen Sect committed under Wen Ruohan were almost too plentiful to count. But then he recalled the Xuanwu cave, and how the Wen Sect tried hanging them up as bait.

(And how, not even a minute ago, Wei Wuxian accused Jin Zixuan's cousin of trying to do the exact same thing.)

(The only difference was that the Jin Sect's victims couldn't fight back on their own.)

The silence among the watchers was present among the simulated cultivators as well. Wei Wuxian's eyes swept over the room, practically daring anyone to deny it.

"Everything belongs to you? Everyone has to listen to you?" Wei Wuxian grinned. "Looking at how the Lanling Jin Sect is acting now, I almost thought I was looking at the Qishan Wen Sect's empire all over again."

Jin Guangshan paused, unprepared to deal with such accusations.

And Wei Wuxian wasn't wrong. In fact, he seemed to be the only one realizing that the current situation was paralleling the previous one so closely. And yet, no one seemed to listen.

During Nie Mingjue's memories, Wei Wuxian had seen this version of himself. Upon observing the Yiling Patriarch's general demeanor and refusal to bring his sword around, he had flushed bright red.

'Ah, I'm so embarrassed!' he had thought, turning away. 'I look so pretentious! I can't believe I did this! I wish I could go back in time and beat myself up!'

It was somewhat clear what Wei Wuxian meant. He certainly hadn't been trying to get along with people from the other sects. Putting aside refusing to bring his sword, if he hadn't gotten into a fight with Jin Zixun — if he just bowed his head as everyone wanted him to — then perhaps this situation would be going differently. But-

'Almost all the spirits and corpses were summoned to the Yunmeng Jiang Sect's ground. There'll definitely be a number of cultivators interested in joining them.'

'Well, what can we do about that?' Sect Leader Yao sighed. 'It's not our fault our sects don't have a Wei Wuxian.'

Lotus Pier had been hurt by the war, but it had become one of the great sects again *because* of how Wei Wuxian would 'show off.' If he bowed his head, Yunmeng wouldn't be in as good of a position as it was.

And, putting aside how he 'should have' acted before, with Wen Ning's life on the line, this was not the time to be dilly-dallying with pointless pleasantries and other conversations. He needed to act now.

Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen, who could see there other selves standing to the side, not getting involved, frowned deeply.

There had been numerous shouts of protest from the people gathered around, but Wei Wuxian seemed to pay them no mind. He didn't regret what he'd said; it seemed clear to him that the Jins were following in the footsteps of the Wens.

(And, just like when he mentioned how inevitable it was that the Wens would attack the Pier, no one cared to listen.)

"Wei Wuxian!" someone nearby suddenly spoke up. "You should watch your words!"

"Did I say something wrong? Forcing living people to be bait and beating them up when they refuse to obey — how is that any different from what the Qishan Wen Sect did?"

"Of course it's different!" another guest of the Jins spoke up. "The Wen-dogs did all kinds of evil. The end they arrived at is only karmic retribution! We avenged an eye for an eye, letting them taste the fruit they themselves had sown. What's wrong with doing that?!"

"Take revenge on the ones who bit you. Wen Ning's branch doesn't have any blood on their hands! Don't tell me you find them guilty by association?!"

Once upon a time, Nie Mingjue's answer would have been a resounding 'yes.' After all, the wealth the Wens acquired through their conquests was used by Wen Qing and Wen Ning's family. Every time the Wens conquered a sect, they were the ones benefiting from it. They could act as they pleased due to Wen Ruohan's protection.

But Wen Qing and Wen Ning *hadn't* stood on the sides. They had fought back when they could.

(And how many minor sects had Nie Mingjue been powerless to help while the Wens took them down one by one?)

“Young Master Wei, isn’t the only proof that they don’t have blood on their hands your say so? The only evidence is your word. Don’t you have anything more?”

“The only proof that they *have* killed anyone is what you say! Shouldn’t you be the first to show evidence? Why are you instead asking me?”

It was a fair point.

And yet, no one really seemed to care.

He had mentioned that Wen Ning was taken prisoner unjustly and Jin Zixun hadn’t opposed his description of the events. He had told everyone that he owed Wen Ning a life debt, and that Wen Ning’s branch hadn’t contributed during the Sunshot Campaign. He had even promised to pay for interrupting the dinner at a later time, when lives weren’t on the line.

What else, at this point, could he say?

‘*Wei Wuxian,*’ Wen Qing thought, a sad smile forming on her face. ‘*You… thank you. For trying. I’m so sorry I ever thought you would be responsible for what happened to A-Ning. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.*’

“Back then, when the Wen Sect moved to slaughter us, they were a thousand times more cruel than we are now! They didn’t treat us with justice and morality, so why should we treat them like that?”

“Oh, so you *admit* that what’s happening to Wen Ning is immoral?!” Jiang Cheng shouted, mouth somewhat open in disbelief. He glanced over, and saw his sister still hovering by Wen Qing’s side.

The renowned doctor looked almost doll-like; she was far too still.

“Oh, is that how it is?” Wei Wuxian asked, his grin taking on an even more dangerous edge. “The Wen dogs did all kinds of evil, so anyone who had the surname Wen should be killed? That can’t be it, right? After all, many of the clans doing well right now defected from the Wen Sect not too long ago, right? In this very hall, aren’t there quite a few sect leaders who used to be under the Wen Sect’s wing?”

‘*Reasoning with them will never work,*’ Wen Ruohan thought, and he would have laughed about it if this situation were even the slightest bit humorous. ‘*At least when I did something I* knew *what I was doing. They all just…. I most certainly will not forget this insult to the Wen Sect. If I was there, I would-*’

But he wasn’t there. He wasn't there, and therefore the Wen Sect had no protection. His legacy was obsolete; everything he had ever worked for would be subjected to the whims of idiots who weren’t fit to even lick Wei Wuxian’s shoes. And sure, that was partly Meng Yao’s fault.

(But really, he only had himself to blame.)

And yet, despite that, and despite everything Wen Chao took from him, Wei Wuxian was still there staring the Sect Leaders down.

“If anyone with the surname Wen can be used as a whipping post for our anger, regardless of whether they’re innocent or not, does that mean I can take those formerly involved Sect Leaders and deal with them as I please?”

His eyes flashed red and he placed a hand over Chenqing.

“If I were to kill all of them right now, I don't think anyone would be able to complain.”

“A-Xian, calm down!” Jiang Yanli shouted at once. There was an excitement to the energy around them now, Wei Wuxian’s anger fueling it until it perked up in anticipation. But right now, all Wei Wuxian was doing was making enemies out of the surrounding Sect Leaders.

He had to calm down.

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli tried again, despite being fully aware the simulation couldn’t hear. “A-Xian, if you just reason with them-”

By saying what? What was there that he could say about the situation that hadn’t been said already?

(Even Jiang Yanli’s older self had known that Wei Wuxian alone would never be able to convince any sect leaders. It would need to be a true member of the gentry; someone of noble birth. Someone who couldn't be called ‘the son of a servant.’ She had known it would never work if it was just him.)

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli realized at once. “A-Xian, you need to find A-Cheng!”

“There’s no time!” Jiang Cheng pointed out, his body tense like a spring wound up and about to explode. “And besides, it might be me but that future version of me — though he’s better than the far-future version he still-”

Wasn’t someone the current Jiang Cheng trusted.

“Wei Ying!”

All the watchers froze.

That was Lan Wangji’s voice. The fury around Wei Wuxian seemed to ebb momentarily at the words.

Jin Guangyao stepped forward: “Young Master Wei, please don’t react so hastily. There’s still time for discussion.”

Nie Mingjue gritted his teeth and hissed, “That’s exactly the point you silver-tongued snake! There isn’t time! We don’t know how much longer Wen Ning will be alive!”

“Wei Wuxian!” Jin Guangshan stood up.

And a feeling identical to how he had felt when Jin Zixun was talking overcame Jin Zixuan.

‘*A-Die… please just shut up.*

“Wei Ying, just because Sect Leader Jiang isn’t here… that doesn’t mean you can be so impertinent!” He was flushed faced and embarrassed by what Wei Wuxian had done.

But Wei Wuxian’s eyes just narrowed.

“Do you think I wouldn’t be doing this if he was here? If I want to kill someone, who could stop me?”

He slowly turned, gazing over the crowd.

“Who would dare to stop me?!”

A half laugh, half sigh left Nie Huaisang’s lips and he shook his head.

“Looks like negotiations are over,” he mumbled.

(Though it definitely didn’t seem like Wei Wuxian would have gotten very far even if he had the patience to continue.)

Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan both turned away, overcome by both Wei Wuxian’s frustration — transmitted by the energy around them — as well as their own.

(Because surely the people here wouldn’t be able to excuse the situation if they understood it. And yet, Wei Wuxian had already told them everything there was to know. They just weren’t willing to listen so long as the information was from him — so long as it was about the defeated Wens.)

“Wei Ying, put Chenqing down,” Lan Wangji advised.

At this, finally, Wei Wuxian turned to look at him.

‘*I’m worried about him,*’ the real Lan Wangji thought. ‘*I don’t want the world to turn against him.*’

But-

‘*I don’t believe him. I’m not trying to help him, I’m trying to stop him.*’

Because at this point in time they cared about each other, but they didn’t truly understand each other.

(They wouldn’t start to until Wei Wuxian came back to life thirteen years later.)

However, although the current Lan Wangji’s understanding of Wei Wuxian was nothing in comparison to his future self’s, he was still vastly different from everyone else there.

As Wei Wuxian stared at his reflection in Lan Wangji's light eyes he seemed to snap out of the rage that had been building inside of him.

He had a job to do, and no more time to waste.

"Jin Zixun!" he shouted. "Enough stalling. I'm sure everyone here has realized my patience is limited. With how much time we've already wasted… I'll give you to the count of three. One…"

Jin Zixun hesitated, but floundered upon seeing the expression on Jin Guangshan's face.

"Two…"

"F-fine! Fine. It's just a few Wen-dogs. Take them if you want to. I don't have any more time to waste on you. They're at Qiongqi Path; go find them on your own!"

He had gotten permission.

But, after what had just occurred, this small victory was nowhere near enough to lessen the frustration of either the watchers or Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian laughed coldly: "If only you'd spoken up sooner."

However, Wei Wuxian didn't have enough time to deal with Jin Zixun now. He turned on his heel and left as quickly as possible, unwilling to waste the precious seconds he had.

But the simulation remained behind and the watchers got to see his departing back. Slowly, they looked around at each other and frowned.

"...I should have done more," Lan Wangji acknowledged. "I should have investigated, at the very least."

"At least you did something," Lan Xichen pointed out. It was an odd phrase to hear from him. He was always gentle beyond comparison, and more patient than any other. However, as he watched his other self remain silent despite what Wei Wuxian had brought up-

'*Da-ge warned me about Meng Yao, and I dismissed his concerns,*' Lan Xichen thought, eyes growing cloudy. '*And now Wei Wuxian warned us all about the Jins, and I still held back. Da-ge died because of my decision in that first case. I wonder… how many will die because of my hesitation here?*'

And Nie Mingjue, meanwhile, frowned deeply.

'*I wasn't at this meeting, but, if I had been….*'

He didn't even need to finish that thought.

Those who remained in the hall looked equally pensive. However, just by observing the expressions on their faces, it was more than clear that their thoughts were far less charitable toward Wei Wuxian.

At that moment, Jin Guangshan stood up and kicked the table in front of him, sending it toppling over to the floor. The gold dishes and silver platters rolled down the stairs and slammed onto the ground.

'*Yes,*' Jin Guangshan thought. '*You see, now, how big of a mistake it was to allow him to go uncontrolled. A beast like that belongs collared and caged. It doesn't matter how beautiful it seems; it's nothing but arrogance to believe you can control it while it's free.*'

The simulated Jin Guangshan stormed out of the hall.

"Fath-" Jin Guangyao cut off, seeing that Sect Leader Jin had already left. He hesitated then nearly seemed to deflate. Then, he noticed an infuriated Jin Zixun trying to leave.

"Zixun!" Jin Guangyao shouted, raising his voice. But Jin Zixun just threw his cup of alcohol Jin Guangyao's way, sending it crashing against his cousin's chest and leaving a large stain.

However, no one in the audience seemed to notice. A cold sweat was running down everyone's back and their eyes seemed wide in fear. Their attention hadn't strayed from the door Wei Wuxian had exited not long ago.

Madam Yu scoffed.

"Don't you see what you just did, Wei Wuxian?" she asked, giving a nearly deranged laugh. "How exactly do you think making everyone terrified of you will help? They end up killing you in the end! You can't take on everyone by yourself!"

"So he should just let my brother die?!" Wen Qing shouted back, standing up. "I won't allow you to speak to him that way. Not when he did all this just to save my brother's life."

"If he had acted differently before-"

"You whipped Wei Wuxian for sunbathing!" Nie Mingjue shouted back. "*I* took out just as much prey as him during that competition. Our Chief Cultivator over here has destroyed whole sects without anyone making so much as a peep of protest. It's not his actions alone that are turning people against him."

(Because if Wei Wuxian had actually been Jiang Fengmian's bastard son, it's was entirely possible that none of this would be happening.)

"A-Yao," Lan Xichen said, rushing over to Jin Guangyao to check on the stain Jin Zixun had given him. There was obviously concern in his expression, but none of it appeared focused on Wei Wuxian.

'*Did you… not hear what he just said?*' Lan Xichen thought, staring at his other self. '*Do you really not think you should be checking up on the claims he made? You're not even going to*

try to investigate?'

Earlier, when they heard about how Nie Mingjue and Nie Mingjue alone had stood up against the Jin Sect regarding Xue Yang, Lan Xichen had thought his other self had probably been busy with something else. Then Nie Mingjue's memories were played, and he watched his other self happily discuss with Meng Yao about the watchtowers during that time instead. Neither he nor Nie Mingjue had confronted Jin Guangshan, but Nie Mingjue had at least tried.

Jin Guangyao reassured Lan Xichen and asked him to remain seated, but Lan Xichen pulled out a snow-white handkerchief and gave it to Jin Guangyao.

"Go change your clothes," he suggested.

"I can't just leave, can I?" Jin Guangyao asked back.

'*What are you doing? You should be following Wei Wuxian to see if he's right about the Jin. How can you be so unconcerned about all this?!*'

But, despite the real Lan Xichen's shock, his other self continued to fret over Jin Guangyao instead.

At that moment, Jin Guangyao's exhaustion seemed to boil over into a bit of bitterness and he said, "Young Master Wei really is too impulsive sometimes. How could he speak like that in front of so many sects?"

"Impulsive?!" Wen Qing repeated.

"Was he wrong?"

Lan Wangji was the one who had spoken, and his words were colder than ever before.

But he, also, did not follow after.

His future self had. The Hanguang-jun of thirteen years later had actively fought off every other sect for Wei Wuxian. But the one featured in the simulation right now didn't seem to realize how dire the consequences of this could be.

(And, after the kiss, couldn't bring himself to chase after Wei Wuxian regardless.)

At that moment, having considered Lan Wangji's words, Jin Guangyao decided to respond:

"No, he's not wrong," Jin Guangyao admitted with a laugh. "But it's because he's right that he can't say such a thing in front of them, right?"

'*Back then, when the Wen-dogs moved to slaughter us, they were a thousand times more cruel than we are now! They didn't treat us with justice and morality, so why should we treat them like that?!*'

Nie Mingjue gave a bitter laugh: “So everyone involved knows that what they’re doing is wrong, they just don’t care.”

Frowning slightly, Jin Guangshan pointed out, “Sect Leader Nie, just because you weren’t there-”

“No worries, I’m including myself,” he said. “I’m sure that as soon as I hear that he’s worried about ‘Wen-dogs’ I lose all interest in investigating the situation. I… he-”

He turned, facing the corner of the room where the two Wens stood. Wen Ruohan had been unquestionably cruel, and had taken far too much from everyone, from Nie Mingjue, personally. Wen Ruohan could experience a thousand evils and Nie Mingjue wouldn’t try to intervene even once.

But Wen Qing — Wen Qing was different.

“I’m sorry,” Nie Mingjue said. “I…”

Wen Qing couldn’t give even a bitter smile.

(Because no matter how the real versions felt, they had no power to change what was about to happen.)

And as if in proof of this, the simulated Lan Xichen’s frown deepened: “Young Master Wei’s heart has changed.”

Those words made Lan Wangji wince as if in pain, and he turned to look where Wei Wuxian had just exited from.

And the real Lan Xichen was frozen.

“I…” he paused. “What did I just say?”

“You said his heart has changed,” Jiang Cheng reminded him.

“But A-Y… Jin Guangyao just admitted he was doing the right thing. Why would my response be… why would I…” he gave a strange, half laugh. “Am I blind?”

‘*No,*’ Wen Ruohan thought, ‘*Just enjoying your blissful ignorance. All of you thinking you can call yourselves righteous…. If I was in charge — if I was in control-*’

Except trying to gain control was exactly what had led to this outcome, wasn’t it? If he had just been satisfied with the amount of power he had, his sect would still be okay.

The simulation moved them outside just in time for them to see Wei Wuxian turn the corner.

“I know where he is. Let’s go,” Wei Wuxian said, making Wen Qing look up at once. She was covered in dust and dirt and was still far more thin than she should be, but none of that stopped her from rushing up to Wei Wuxian as soon as she heard those

words. However, with how weak her body was, in her rush to make it to him she stepped wrong and twisted her ankle, her spinning head making her unable to walk straight. Wei Wuxian caught her before she made contact with the ground, holding her trembling body delicately.

Wen Qing herself seemed indifferent to the state her other self was in, far more concerned with her brother than that. Her uncle, on the other hand, turned even colder.

Wen Qing was one of the smartest people he knew. She was far more capable than the fools who had been dining extravagantly inside Koi Tower's Glamor Hall. She, of all people, should not look like this.

But Wei Wuxian was helping her, even if he might be the only one who would.

"Do you want me to take you somewhere to rest?" Wei Wuxian offered. "I can go alone. I'll definitely bring back Wen Ning."

"No! No," she shook her head desperately, clinging to Wei Wuxian's robes. "No, I'll go! I have to go!"

Madam Jin gritted her teeth together, looking over at her husband momentarily. As far as she knew, Jin Guangshan hadn't touched Wen Qing (personally, at least). He hadn't damaged her and he hadn't tried to seduce her.

But he was still partly responsible for this once proud-woman begging on her knees, and Madam Jin would be sure to remember it.

Ouyang Zizhen cleared his throat then said, "After Wen Qionglin went missing, Wen-guniang ran from Qishan to Yunmeng with almost no rest. She hadn't closed her eyes in days. Once she saw Senior Wei, she urged him and begged him as if she had gone crazy."

A flashback appeared, showing just that. Unable to clearly understand her in the state she was in, Wei Wuxian bought her some pork buns. Wen Qing accepted them with trembling hands, staring at them for a moment before hurriedly forcing them down her throat.

"She knew she wouldn't last long without sustenance, so she ate as quickly as possible," Zizhen finished.

As Wei Wuxian stared at her worn-down figure a memory flashed into his mind. It was him and Jiang Cheng while they were on the run from the Wens. Jiang Cheng was unconscious, but Wei Wuxian, as he stood before Wen Qing all those years ago, looked just as broken and desperate as she did now.

"Your positions have reversed," Wen Ruohan observed. "But you both chose to save each other."

"...So it seems," Wen Qing agreed.

Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing had never met in their world. At this point in the simulation, they had only seen each other a handful of times. Despite that, they had been able to trust and rely on each other when they had no one else. Wei Wuxian had gotten help from her and Wen Ning to save Jiang Wanyin's life, get back the ashes of the Jiangs, and, possibly, transfer his core to Jiang Cheng. Now, Wen Qing was relying on him to repay the favor. It would be hard to describe the relationship they shared in words, but both their lives had been reshaped by this bond.

Which was why, now, when Wen Qing finished her food and began explaining again through fear-filled cries, Wei Wuxian assured her immediately.

"It's fine," he said. "I'll definitely bring back Wen Ning."

"I knew I shouldn't have left! But I-I had no choice! They forced me to go to another city. When I came back, Wen Ning and the others were all gone! I knew I shouldn't have left him alone!"

Panic was beginning to consume her.

"He'll be alright-"

"He won't! A-Ning's been skittish ever since he was young. He's cautious and timid. He can't hire anyone with even the slightest temper to be his subordinate — they're all a bunch of mice like him! He has no idea what to do during an emergency if I'm not with him!"

"Qing-guniang, breathe," Jiang Yanli whispered to her. Although not as distraught as the simulated version was, Wen Qing knew she should listen to that advice. She took in a large breath, then nearly felt her legs collapse from under her.

Nie Mingjue was by her side at once, arms extended as though he had been about to catch her.

"...We can't touch each other right now," she reminded him, phasing her hand through his as proof. He faltered at that then looked away, knowing there was nothing he could do.

"Qing-guniang," Jiang Yanli began again. "I… have faith in your brother. He chose to save A-Xian and A-Cheng all on his own, didn't he? And in the far future he took on Song Zizhen without missing a beat. He might be stronger than you think."

But the attempted assurances felt empty and hollow when faced with the terror the simulated Wen Qing was experiencing.

A flashback formed. It was a younger Wei Wuxian carrying an unconscious Jiang Cheng on his back, leaving Wen Qing behind. Her face was regal and proud, and her posture upright and strong.

"No matter what the result of this campaign turns out to be, we, from now on, owe each other nothing. All debts are settled."

But then, just an hour before, Wen Qing had run into Wei Wuxian again. She grabbed onto his hand and kneeled in front of him, practically clawing at him in desperation.

"Wei Wuxian, Wei Wuxian, Young Master Wei! Please help me. I really can't find anyone else to help me. Please, you have to help me find Wen Ning. I have no option other than you!"

None of her pride remained, because she did indeed have no one else.

A thought which made Jiang Cheng look away.

'*The… the person she actually saved was me. I got caught trying to distract the Wens to protect Wei Wuxian, but they don't know that. Everyone seems to be thinking that Wei Wuxian's father's status is the reason why no one's listening to him, but that… that wouldn't be a problem with me. So… why didn't she come to the Yunmeng Jiang Sect for help?*'

And why, now, was he far too terrified of the answer to that question to ask it aloud?

"Qiongqi path was an ancient path that ran through a valley," Lan Jingyi added. "According to legend, the path was where the founder of the Qishan Wen Sect, Wen Mao, rose to fame in just one battle. Hundreds of years ago, he fought a divine beast for a full eighty one days straight, taking its life in the end. The divine beast was a Qiongqi, a creature of chaos known to punish the good and encourage the evil."

That was the legacy of the Wen Sect which Wen Ruohan's choices had destroyed. Their great history was now a road in which Wen Mao's descendents were unjustly kept imprisoned.

If Wei Wuxian had come to his side, it was entirely possible he would have won the war. He had brainstormed time and time again for things he could have offered Wei Wuxian to ensure the boy's loyalty, but had to throw away those ideas each time. And yet, the closest Wei Wuxian came to being allied with the Wen was now, after they had lost — when they had *nothing*.

It was a strange situation.

"How accurate the story is and whether the following Sect Leaders of the Wen Sect embellished it is impossible to determine. Unlike, I might add, the great victory Hanguang-jun and Senior Wei had against the Xuanwu of slaughter-"

There was a clearing of a throat in the background. At this point, Lan Sizhui had guided him back to the script so many times that he didn't even need to say anything out loud for Lan Jingyi to get the message.

"Ah, right. Anyways, hundreds of years later, this dangerous rift had turned into a tourist attraction and a focus of praise. After the Sunshot Campaign, when the sects divided up the area the Qishan Wen Sect used to hold, Qiongqi path was taken by the Lanling Jin Sect. Originally, the tall walls of the valley were carved to depict the story of Wen Mao, but, now that it belonged to the Lanling Jin Sect, they were hurrying to take that down."

Wen Ruohan twitched, and Jin Guangshan felt his life flash before his eyes. He silently moved further from the Chief Cultivator. Wen Ruohan might not be able to hurt him while they were both in the simulation, but that didn't apply once they left.

"Right now it was in the middle of reconstruction. All the relics on both sides were being chiseled down and new pictures were being carved. Naturally, once it was complete, it would be given a new name to emphasize the Lanling Jin Sect's honor."

Jin Zixuan blushed at the description, finding it strangely reminiscent of the horse riding explanation. A thinly veiled mockery of the Jin Sect's focus on appearances that Jin Zixuan couldn't truly dispute. It was embarrassing-

"Such a large-scale undertaking would need many laborers. There were no better candidates for this than prisoners of war from the Wen Sect, who had become homeless dogs after the Sunshot Campaign."

Jin Zixuan's flush disappeared, his embarrassment giving way to a heavy feeling of guilt at that description.

"Prisoners of war?" Wen Qing repeated, her usual self control crumbling. "A-Ning wasn't a prisoner of war! He didn't fight! He was taken captive afterwards while night hunting! That's not…"

She couldn't finish.

(The remnants of the Wen Sect were herded into a single area. It wouldn't be right to call them prisoners of war, but they probably were in all but name. Once that was settled, moving a few to a labor camp on the slimmest of justifications probably seemed like common sense to Jin Zixun.)

The simulation shifted and the world became dark for night. Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing walked swiftly, the latter hurrying as fast as she could given her malnourished and exhausted body. Every so often Wei Wuxian would have to help her steady herself if she stumbled along the way.

"Why… why aren't they flying?" Jin Zixuan asked. "Wouldn't Wei Wuxian be able to carry both of them on his sword if he wanted to?"

"It looks like Suibian is still in his room," Lan Xichen pointed out. "As for why he didn't use it to get to Koi Tower… maybe he just forgot? He and Wen Qing did meet in Yiling, but perhaps he thought Wen Ning would be closer than he was."

Growling in frustration, Jiang Cheng ran a hand through his hair and said, "Damn it, Wei Wuxian. If you'd just come back to the Pier you could have picked up your sword *and* gotten my help. Demonic cultivation isn't useful for quick transportation, you arrogant idiot. Just ask for help if you need it."

Thrown off his game by the current situation of the Wen Sect, Wen Ruohan very nearly found himself growling openly at Jiang Wanyin's words. The boy might not know the (now very

likely) truth about the core transfer, but the thoughtless scolding — coming from ignorance — grated at his mind.

'*You're right, going to his sect leader for backup would be the logical thing to do,*' Wen Ruohan thought. '*Now then, why don't we consider how your far-future self acts every time Wen Ning or Wei Wuxian is mentioned, and maybe we can see why he didn't.*'

(That wasn't really fair to say. Wen Ruohan was making assumptions about Jiang Wanyin's current character on something he would do later, and who knew what would happen between those times. Unfortunately, like always, he didn't care much about being fair.)

The two of them entered the mouth of the valley and found rows of temporary shacks. The place seemed nearly desolate with the exception of a bent-over figure in the distance. She walked slowly, each step giving her immense pain, and carried a large flag through the heavy rain. As she moved closer, more and more of her features could be made out. She was an elderly woman carrying a toddler on her back.

Wen Qing sucked in a breath. By her other self's description of events, she had known to expect something like this. It was still flooring to actually see a member of her family stuck here. While she didn't recognize the toddler, she knew he was family just the same.

Darkness flashed in Wen Ruohan's eyes once more.

The toddler was strapped onto the woman's back with cloth, leaving him unable to move. He seemed to be completely absorbed in nibbling at his own fingers, staring at his hand in fascination every once in a while. It would have been quite an adorable sight.

(If the boy wasn't so obviously too thin for his age.)

Exhausted, the older woman had to set down the flag for a moment, stumbling as she did. That appeared to be enough to snap the simulated Wen Qing into action.

"Granny, it's me!" she called out, running over.

Unable to clearly distinguish or hear who it was in the rain, the elderly woman hurriedly picked up the flag and raised it high again, trembling in fear. When Wen Qing ran over, 'Granny Wen' subconsciously raised her arms, trying to defend the child and her own head.

Jin Zixuan felt sick.

"But… but Zixun ran into cultivators," he pointed out slowly. "And-and he took them back unjustly, but… there shouldn't be any reason for these two to be here."

Those words seemed to cut into Nie Mingjue bit by bit.

(He had only just recently been convinced about Wen Qing and Wen Ning, but his other self shouldn't have *had* to be convinced in regards to a grandmother too weak to cause any harm — in regards to a *toddler*. And sure, he might have not specifically known about or approved

the presence of these two here, but he was the sect leader of the strongest sect next to the Jins. It was his *job* to know these things.)

(And that Nie Mingjue either hadn't noticed or hadn't cared.)

"What is this?" Wen Qing asked, taking the flag from the woman. "What are you doing?"

She looked over at the flag.

The crest of the Qishan Wen Sect was painted on top. However, above that, there was a large red 'X,' making the sect's symbol almost impossible to read. The cloth had been torn up as well, heavily damaged by an intentional force.

'*I see,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*She's probably too old for labor, so the Jin Sect found some other task to give her under the guise of 'initiating self reflection,' huh?*'

"And I suppose this is the sort of thing your sect finds amusing, Guangshan?" Wen Ruohan asked, deceptively softly.

"No!" he responded at once. "No, no. I can assure you, my other self would have had nothing to do with-"

Wen Ruohan merely raised a hand, cutting Jin Guangshan off in an instant. All the while, the Chief Cultivator's eyes hadn't strayed from the scene before him.

At that moment, the woman finally managed to realize who was before her. Her jaw dropped.

And Wen Qing stepped forward, clutching her hand to ask, "Granny, where's A-Ning? Where's Uncle Four and the rest? Please, tell me where A-Ning is!"

Granny Wen glanced up to where Wei Wuxian stood then faltered, unable to say anything. Her eyes were laser focused on the distinctive black and red robes he wore, as well as the flute by his side. Eventually, however, she looked toward the valley.

Without even pausing to think about it, Wen Qing straightened up and spirited that way.

"M-maybe you'll make it in time," Jiang Yanli suggested, trying to calm Wen Qing's (and her own) nerves. She recalled the steely confidence her other self had wielded while confronting Jin Zixun in the last segment, and how easily that Jiang Yanli had been able to reassure Wei Wuxian.

(But she was not that woman yet, but she very much wanted to be.)

They followed Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian through the long pathroads of the valley, the torches that lined the slides flickering wildly as they went. Wen Qing's desperation spurred her on and Wei Wuxian was there to catch her every time she stumbled.

Despite the rain, the covered torches provided just enough light for them to see what laid at the deepest part of the valley: dozens of prisoners, ghastly pale, laboring under the command of the Jins. All their spiritual power was sealed, and the fifteen or so inspectors, riding on horses, criticized them harshly while they worked.

Those inspectors weren't necessarily weak, but they weren't notable either. They were nobodies. People who only had positions of power now due to the friends they'd luckily made before.

~~They reminded Wen Ruohan of Wen Chao. What should have been a positive reminder through the connection to his son instead filled him with an even greater rage.~~

'*Incompetent weaklings. They wouldn't be able to raise their heads in my presence before, but they think, now that I'm gone, they can mock the Wen Sect?*'

"Where did you come from? Who let you come in here?!" one inspector called out, seeing Wen Qing hurriedly approach through the rain. She paid no mind to his question, looking around at all the laborers with a frantic intensity. Every tired, grime-covered face was dismissed one after the other.

None of them were Wen Ning.

Wen Qing felt her heart rate increasing again.

"What are you doing?!"

"I'm here to find someone!" her simulated self shouted. "I'm here to find someone!"

Uninterested in her answer, the inspector pulled something from his waist and said, "I don't care if you're looking for someone or not. Leave! If you don't…"

He trailed off, his eyes leaving her figure and focusing on the man who had brought her here. Just like with Granny Wen, the black robes and flute attracted his eyes immediately and left him completely unable to speak. The weapon that he had taken out remained still, the inspector unable to even consider using it while Wei Wuxian stood there.

The watchers hated the way Wei Wuxian's new reputation followed him around after his return from the Burial Mounds. They didn't like how people kept provoking him, and they hated what it had caused Jin Ling to do.

But right now, it filled most of them with a near-sadistic sense of glee.

The inspector, who had seemed so threatening a moment ago, was barely able to breathe when Wei Wuxian's glare landed on him.

'*No, he's not looking at me,*' the inspector realized a moment later. '*It's… my iron band he's looking at.*'

He looked back at the object in his hand. A branding rod, just like what had scarred Wei Wuxian's chest a few short years ago. The only difference was that there was now a peony instead of a sun.

"Guangshan!" Lan Qiren raised his voice. "Are you insane?! There's a toddler among them! How can you not have realized this would be going too far?!"

"How are you any better than the Wens?" Nie Mingjue asked as well (because he hated Wen Ruohan and everything the man had done, but these people *were not him*). "I — even the Wens just used it against full grown cultivators! You think we didn't see who was here?! Not a single one of them can fight!"

"Ah-well," Jin Guangshan stuttered, glazing briefly at the dark void that was surrounding Wen Ruohan. "You-you see, we only saw the Wens use it against cultivators, but that doesn't mean they didn't use it against civilians. The Wens lost the war, so we're enacting justice — repaying an eye for an eye."

"But we're not doing this to the soldiers!" Jin Zixuan shouted, standing up.

"Zixuan?" Madam Jin asked.

"I…" he paused, glancing at his mother, then looked back at his father. "F-father, these people aren't soldiers! Wei Wuxian told us the full story! They were the remnants of the Wen Sect and Zixun imprisoned them unjustly. We — we're *worse* than the Wens if this is true!"

"Zixuan!" Madam Jin shouted.

But Jiang Yanli, his fiance, hadn't backed down in the future no matter how much physically weaker she was than Madam Jin and Jin Zixun. The least Jin Zixuan could do was not back down in front of his own parents.

"A-Niang… we kept wondering how Wei Wuxian would ever even consider killing me. We all agreed he probably wouldn't kill me over, well, upsetting A-Li. But if… if this is true… and if my other-self knew about it…."

Then I more than deserved it.

For a moment, no one could speak.

The inspectors all recognized Wei Wuxian immediately. Now, none of them even tried to stop Wen Qing's search. She ran through the laborers, eyes wide, and shouted as she did.

"A-Ning! A-Ning! It's me!" She looked around. "Where are you? Please, answer me! A-Ning!"

Wen Qing fists clenched together even tighter, and she wouldn't be surprised if she learned her real body had started tensing up as well.

Wen Ruohan, watching with ice-cold eyes, breathed out slowly.

(Morally, he had no room to talk. The hypocrisy was not lost on him.)

(Nevertheless, his desire for vengeance grew.)

"A-Ning!" Wen Qing's shouts continued. "A-Ning! It's A-Jie. It's your A-Jie. I'm here now! A-Ning!"

Slowly, the inspectors dismounted their horses, still staring at Wei Wuxian.

'*Are we… supposed to greet him?*' one thought. He stepped forward then stepped back.

Their fear couldn't be overcome so easily.

Going to Wei Wuxian was definitely the best option Wen Qing had. When Wen Ning was first taken, she could have run over to Lanling herself. Instead, she took a risk and went to Yunmeng instead. Wei Wuxian could have turned her away or might have been unable to help, but she took that risk. Now, it was more than clear how worthwhile that was.

Even without her former status and wealth, the thing that had drawn Wen Ruohan to her — her brain — was still as sharp as ever.

'*Still,*' Lan Wangji thought, '*Still, I shouldn't have let them go alone.*'

Hanguang-jun was a respected figure in the world of cultivators but he wasn't a sect leader. It was debatable how much he would have actually been able to help if he wasn't able to convince his uncle and brother to join in as well. Despite that, it was crystal clear that the Hanguang-jun of thirteen years later *would* have gone with Wei Wuxian.

(And despite the gross lack of self control his other self had shown during the kiss, the real Lan Wangji really wished his simulated-self had followed along.)

By now, it had become clear that Wen Ning, if he was around, couldn't hear Wen Qing's calls. She ran over to the inspectors who were still hovering awkwardly around Wei Wuxian.

"Where are the Wen cultivators who were sent here just a few days ago?"

The inspectors all looked over at each other. Eventually, one spoke.

"All the prisoners here are the Wen Sect's cultivators. New ones are sent every day."

"Every day?" Madam Jin repeated.

"I-I'm looking for my brother! He was sent here by Jin Zixun! He-he's about this tall." She raised her hand. "He doesn't talk much. Stammers whenever he has to-"

"Look, Maiden. There are so many people here. How are we supposed to remember if one of them stammers or not?"

"I know he has to be here!"

Another inspector came forward, round and chubby with an appeasing grin: "Maiden, don't worry. It's not at all uncommon for sects to come to us to ask for cultivators. Maybe one of them took him in the past couple of days."

"Ah!" Jin Guangshan straightened up at once. "See, it appears you are all well aware of what is going on here. I'm sure I only set this up with the endorsement of the other great sects."

"What?" Lan Qiren turned towards him.

"I doubt I'd have the manpower to run all this if you all didn't help," Jin Guangshan said. "It would be far too hard to keep this a secret. Besides, what reason would this inspector have to lie to Wei Wuxian?"

Frowns and glares spread throughout most of the watchers. Lan Xichen wanted to protest.

But-

'Young Master Wei's heart has changed.'

Wei Wuxian told them that Wen Ning had saved his life and then been captured unjustly. When he went to help Wen Ning, *that* had been Lan Xichen's reaction. At what point did 'my future self doesn't understand how bad it is' become 'my future self is, at best, willfully ignorant?'

(Nie Mingjue had shouted at Meng Yao right in front of Lan Xichen's face that Xue Yang needed to be dealt with. Instead Lan Xichen focused on Meng Yao, and, later, on the loss of Nie Mingjue. He ignored Xue Yang, who would go on to hurt civilians, Song Zizhen, Xiao Xingchen, and A-Qing in the cruelest of ways.)

The simulated Lan Xichen hadn't taken any actions that were wrong, but the real Lan Xichen was certain he didn't deserve to be sect leader if that was the best he could do.

'*Do you know what's going on?*' he wondered, remembering how the concern on his simulated self's face was only regarding Wei Wuxian's anger, and not the words he was saying. '*Do you know and intentionally allow this to continue? Or are you so content to just trust when the Jin Sect says 'all is well' that you won't bother to look into it yourself no matter what you hear?'*

(Honestly, Lan Xichen couldn't say which option was worse.)

"You think… someone took him?" Wen Qing asked quietly.

"Ah, that's not all," another inspector jumped in. "When we do roll calls, we also sometimes find out that someone's run away."

"He wouldn't have run away! Granny and the others are all here! My brother wouldn't have run away on his own!"

And a toddler — a *toddler* — had been there as well.

Lan Qiren suddenly felt a memory form.

'How dare you?!' his future self had once asked, appalled by Wei Wuxian's suggestion of demonic cultivation. 'Our goal is to liberate and purify those evil spirits. You're trying to make evil fight evil? You would be reversing the natural order — completely ignoring ethics and morality!'

And yet, when true crimes against righteousness were performed, he was the one standing there, trying to intervene.

"Then… would you like to take some time and search for him?" one inspector finally suggested, his eyes going back and forth between Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian despite only speaking to her. "You can go through everyone here. If you don't find him, then there's nothing we can do about it."

"Everyone's here?" Wei Wuxian asked.

The inspectors all froze as one, some even flinching slightly at Wei Wuxian's voice.

Lan Wangji hated the fact that fear of Wei Wuxian was so widespread. However, looking again at the branding irons and whips on the inspectors' belts, he found himself grateful for it once more.

"T-that's right," one inspector said at last.

"Then, for the time being, I'll take that to mean that all the *living* ones are in this courtyard. So, where are the rest?"

Wen Qing felt her whole world turn to ice.

And the simulated version seemed to instantly lose all the blood in her body, becoming as white as a corpse.

"That's not it," an inspector said at once. "Although there are Wen Cultivators here, we would never allow them to experience fatal damage."

But, not listening anymore, Wei Wuxian grabbed his flute and raised it to his lips. Upon seeing that, it wasn't just the inspectors who tensed up. The prisoners who had been working nearby screamed, dropping whatever they were carrying and fleeing at once. They were trapped in the valley, but they nonetheless tried to get as far away as possible.

"In-in truth, the Wen Sect cultivators hadn't recognized Senior Wei's face," Ouyang Zizhen reported, and there was a soft sound that made it sound like he was shifting awkwardly as he said it. "Because, um, any cultivator who met Wei Wuxian on the battlefield was only met with… utter annihilation. Every Wen who could have recognized Wei Wuxian's face had become a member of his corpse army. It, um, was known among the prisoners that the flute Senior Wei carried was made of dark wood

and was decorated with a crimson tassel. By unsheathing it, he had become their worst nightmare."

"It's Chenqing!"

"The ghost flute!"

"That's Chenqing?!"

The watchers remained silent as the explanation went on. They had seen what Wei Wuxian could do. Right now he was helping the Wens, but the infamy he had gained went far beyond that.

In the future, Wei Wuxian was the story parents used to scare their children into compliance. However, right now, he already was that for the Wens.

And, after a moment, Wen Ruohan looked away.

'*He did so much for their side. He practically won the war for them,*' he paused, glancing at Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, Jiang Cheng, and Jin Guangshan, the sect leaders at that time. '*He did everything for them, and yet the Wens aren't the only ones afraid. It couldn't be clearer that his influence turned the tide of battle time and time again and yet they ignore him, belittle him, and disregard his concerns. He's smarter than all of them combined, but no one cares what he has to say. And his own sect leader does nothing to stop this.*'

He glanced around again, observing the fleeing, terrified Wen remnants and the Peony flower branding rod in the inspector's hands.

'*If Wei Wuxian hadn't been loyal to the Jiangs… if he had been on my side from the beginning and we had won… if he had wanted the Jin, Lan, Jiang, or Nie prisoners I gained, I would have given them to him without hesitation. He's more than earned that.*'

Instead, Wei Wuxian had been on the Jiang's side because Jiang Fengmian had been lucky enough to unknowingly pick up the world's greatest genius in his youth.

'*On the other hand… perhaps, if Wei Wuxian had been on my side from the beginning, I wouldn't have started the war at all.*'

Because not only would Wei Wuxian being a Wen have prevented the embarrassments that were the archery competition and the abyss, but the Yiling Patriarch was genuinely *good* in a way Wen Ruohan had never understood. Thus, at the news that something might have happened to Wen Ning, he didn't hesitate to take his flute out.

🎵♪

Resentful energy spiked.

Some watchers swallowed, feeling the command shoot through them like an electric current.

The sound ripped through the curtain of rain like an arrow piercing the night sky. It spread throughout the valley and the surrounding resentment jumped to attention.

Wei Wuxian then lowered his flute. Those few notes were more than enough.

“W-what’s that sound?” someone asked.

The cold grin on Wei Wuxian’s face widened.

Yelps of surprise came from one section of the crowd. The Wens in that area scattered, trying to get as far away as possible. They ran, kicking the surrounding puddles of water into the air with every step.

Thump.

Thump.

Something was approaching.

Jiang Yanli tensed slightly but forced herself to look on. The watchers all turned toward the source of the noise. Madam Yu felt herself reaching for where Zidian would normally be, but, upon remembering that it was gone, lowered her hand shortly after.

(After all, it couldn’t doubt Wei Wuxian's judgment. Not after everything.)

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

A dozen tattered figures stumbled in, their once-white clothes stained black from mud and hanging by threads. But, upon closer look, that fabric wasn’t the only thing worn down. The figures’ limbs and faces were far too thin — almost torn to shreds. Or, rather, rotten.

They were corpses.

And in the front stood Wen Ning.

Abruptly, suddenly, there was a slam on the ground.

“Qing-guniang!” Jiang Yanli called out, rushing over.

Wen Qing had fallen to her knees, unable to deny but equally unable to accept what she saw before her.

There were male and female corpses, both tall and short and varying across all ages. Wen Ning’s face was so pale it looked as though it was made of wax and his pupils were

dilated. His eyes were still open — frozen that way, unblinking — and no breaths left his body. Around his chest, his robes sunk in strangely. His ribs were caved in — crushed.

A flagpole with a disfigured mockery of the Wen Sect's symbol on the end went straight through his heart.

Wen Qing made a gasping sound, as though trying to speak but incapable of making any words. She reached forward with trembling hands toward her brother.

(And, of course, phased right through.)

Jiang Yanli fell to the ground, gagging, and Nie Mingjue's face became white. Jin Zixuan looked away. Nausea was rising up within him. They had seen Wen Ning alive and happy, and had laughed a little when the boy ran away from Wei Wuxian after being caught practicing his archery. Wen Ning had been lively and sweet; Jin Zixuan had wanted to be friends with him. And now….

He glanced back at the simulation, then turned away once more.

(Wen Ning was good. He didn't deserve this. But they had already known Wen Ning was going to die, so, for Jin Zixuan, the equally important concern was the age of the youngest corpse he saw there.)

(He didn't want to know.)

The simulated Wen Qing stumbled forward. She reached out, feeling for a pulse with shaking hands. As anyone in their right mind would know, there was no chance of finding one on him. She pressed again and again and again, moving her hand around as if the lack of a pulse was due to her messing up the measurement, rather than there not being one to find at all.

Eventually, the coldness of the skin she was pressing up against confirmed her fears. Collapsing to her knees, she broke into tears.

'*This should not be the state the Wen Sect is in,*' Wen Ruohan thought, watching with steadily growing fury. '*This should not be the state* my *sect is in. I… I-*'

(Was powerless to change it.)

But those regrets would mean nothing to Wen Qing, who stood there uselessly — too late, far too late — and, in her hysteria, tried piecing back together Wen Ning's ribs. She was a doctor who had performed a core transfer; she could do miracles.

She could not, however, fix this.

Jin Guangshan gave a soft sigh.

'*Her beautiful face is turning so ugly with those tears,*' he thought. '*Dirty though she might have been earlier, she was still well-bred and attractive. Now, though, I can't see any of her former grace. Disgusting.*'

If Madam Jin could hear her husband's thoughts, she would have left the simulation immediately and strangled him alive. Unfortunately, Jin Guangshan had kept quiet about them.

Though, in all honesty, Wen Qing herself probably wouldn't have cared. In front of the stiff corpse of Wen Ning, not even a fragment of the pride she had held onto was left.

"I… I'm sorry," Jin Zixuan whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

But 'sorry' wouldn't bring her brother back.

Wen Qing shook her head, trying to speak, but again found herself unable to.

'No need,' she wanted to say. 'I, more than anyone, understand what it's like to feel responsible for the horrible acts your family does. You're probably as at fault for this as I was for the death of the Jiangs.'

But her brother was *dead.* She couldn't forgive *anyone* quite yet. Slowly, she glanced back at the simulation.

Wen Ning still stood there. Seeing him like this now, it became increasingly clear how different the Ghost General was from a normal corpse. The Ghost General, as unnaturally pale as he might be, was still Wen Ning.

This was just an empty carcass.

Wen Qing had failed. Her brother was gone.

Quietly, one by one, tears began to fall down her cheeks.

Nie Huaisang had reacted in a similar way upon seeing the death of his brother, and the Jiang siblings had upon watching the deaths of their parents. Slowly, they gathered around her.

(And Jin Zixuan moved back, feeling like he had no right to offer her comfort after what *his sect* had done.)

At that moment, overwhelmed by shock, Wen Qing passed out. Wei Wuxian caught her before she hit the ground. Standing behind her, he allowed her to lean on his chest.

Supporting each other, regardless of which of them had more power. Wen Qing and Wen Ning had helped Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian would help the two of them.

The watchers looked amongst each other, unsure of what to say. Then-

"I apologize as well."

Wen Qing looked over. Lan Wangji was the one who had spoken.

"After what Wei Ying said… I should have come to help as well."

Hanguang-jun would have.

"...Thank you for saying so," Wen Qing said, unusually softly.

Wei Wuxian held the collapsed Wen Qing in his arms, closed his eyes, then opened them again.

"Who killed him?" he asked.

It was a rather toneless question. Not enough heat to be anger, but definitely lacking in warmth.

"Y-young Master Wei, you mustn't describe it that way," the head inspector said, watching Wei Wuxian nervously. "We wouldn't dare kill a single person here. He wasn't careful while working and fell deeper into the valley and died."

"Really?!" Jin Zixuan growled, unable to remain silent with what *his sect* was saying. "Really. Two dozen people are all dead because of 'accidents?' They only got here a *few days ago!*"

"Zixuan-"

"A-Die, please shut up!" he shouted.

And Wei Wuxian was similarly skeptical.

"None of you would dare kill even a single person. Really? Is that true?"

"Absolutely!"

"Not a single one!"

"Never!" the inspectors agreed in unison.

Wei Wuxian paused in thought for a moment, then smiled: "Oh, I see. It's because they're Wen-dogs, and Wen-dogs aren't people. Even if you've killed them, it doesn't count as having killed humans, huh?"

Nie Mingjue flinched at those words, feeling them stabbing at him with pinpoint accuracy.

He hadn't been at the conference in the previous scene, but his other self most certainly wouldn't have aided Wei Wuxian either.

Which, in some ways, meant he wasn't much better than the head inspector, who paled upon having his thoughts read so accurately.

Wei Wuxian shook his head, laughing lightly.

"What? Did you really think I wouldn't know how someone died?"

His eyes flashed red once more.

Realizing that the situation was turning bad for them, the inspectors began shrinking away. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, maintained his smile.

The rain continued to pour.

“It’s best if you admit everything honestly. Who killed him? Step forward on your own. I’d be willing to risk killing the wrong person if it means the perpetrator doesn’t get out of here alive.”

The inspectors paled considerably.

“If I killed you all, I could be sure that no one gets away.”

A vicious, bloodthirsty grin formed on Wen Ruohan’s face, but even Nie Mingjue didn’t try to rebuke him for it.

The head inspector stammered, “Th-the Yunmeng Jiang Sect and the Lanling Jin Sect are allies. You can’t just-”

“You’re quite brave,” Wei Wuxian observed, sounding amused. “Are you threatening me?”

Thunder rumbled in the background.

“Of course not. Of course not. Of course not.”

Jiang Wanyin stared.

Wen Ning had saved him after he lost his core protecting Wei Wuxian. Wen Qing had hidden them from Wen Chao while they were weak. Wen Ning had ventured through dangerous territory, getting his parents’ ashes and mementos back for him.

Would Jiang Yanli go to the ancestral hall so often if the ashes weren’t there?

He owed so much to them. And that was leaving aside how he’d gotten to know Wen Qing while inside the simulation. And now she knelt, mourning the loss of her sibling with tear stained eyes. Clenching his teeth, he glared at the inspector.

“Wei Wuxian, you better not let the perpetrator leave alive,” he hissed.

At that moment, Wei Wuxian laughed.

“Congratulations, you’ve successfully drained all my patience,” he declared, making the inspectors shrink back even further. “Come on. Since you won’t speak up, let’s have him answer on his own.”

The frozen corpse of Wen Ning suddenly moved, blasting forward faster than the inspectors could track and crushing the throats of the two nearest ones. Expressionless, Wen Ning raised their bodies high.

“Young Master Wei!” the inspectors tried again. “Young Master Wei, please forgive us! Doing this in the heat of the moment could lead to irreversible consequences!”

Lightning flashed in the background again.

But, at that moment, Jiang Yanli could’t help but recall the first words spoken by the simulation

“A-Xian,” she whispered. “A-Xian, stop!”

Everyone turned to stare at her in shock.

“A-Xian, just worry about the Wens! If you kill the inspectors, you’ll turn the sects against you. You die, A-Xian! You’re going to die if you do this!”

“We wouldn’t — not over this,” Lan Xichen protested. “These Wens are innocent. Wei Wuxian’s enacting justice right now-”

“You’re an even greater fool than I thought if you don’t think the young lady of the Jiangs is completely right,” Wen Ruohan said sharply. “He’s making it worse for himself by killing them since your sects will be able to reframe it as murder if they want to. But he’s choosing to do it anyway because enacting justice is more important to him than that. If that weren’t the case, I doubt he’d be here at all.”

‘*Just like none of you are.*’

Lightning flashed once more, and thunder followed shortly after. The raindrops fell heavier and heavier, trickling down Wei Wuxian’s cheeks. Then, after gritting his teeth together, Wei Wuxian spoke up:

“Wen Qionglin!”

The corpse paused.

“Whoever made you like this, let them meet the same end! I give you the right to do so! Settle everything!”

Wen Ning slammed the two inspectors he was holding together, sending their heads flying into the air.

Jin Guangshan gulped, stepping back.

Blood sprayed everywhere, and even the heavy rain couldn't wash it away completely.

Laughter escaped Wen Ruohan’s throat and his gaze fell on Wei Wuxian once more.

“Show them where they stand, Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian picked up Wen Qing, holding her carefully, and mounted a nearby horse.

“Young Master Wei,” a soft voice called out. Wei Wuxian glanced down and saw an elderly prisoner standing before him.

“What?”

The prisoner paused momentarily at the address, terrified by Wei Wuxian’s voice, but nonetheless forced themselves to point toward the end of the valley and said, “There’s… there’s a house over there. They… lock people inside and beat them up-”

Jin Zixuan flinched once more and Madam Jin had to look away.

“Anyone who dies is dragged outside and buried. The people you’re looking for might be over there.”

“Thank you,” Wei Wuxian said, then rode off.

He arrived at the specified house and dismounted. Holding Wen Qing in one arm, he walked over and kicked the door open. The people inside all jumped at the entrance.

And, staring at the gashes that lined their exposed skin and the unnaturally bent limbs strewn about, Jin Zixuan felt his stomach fall to the ground.

A moment later, the house’s inhabitants realized who was in Wei Wuxian’s arms.

“Maiden Qing!” some of them called out, standing up and rushing over.

“Uncle,” Wen Qing breathed out softly.

The person she’d recognized as her elderly uncle seethed: “Who… who are you?! What did you do to our Office Leader?!”

“Nothing. Who are the cultivators under Wen Ning? Step out now!”

Because he didn’t know all the Wens, and couldn’t trust them all. However, he did know that the ones under Wen Ning were taken unjustly, never having killed during the war.

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli whispered. “Be careful.”

She knew she wouldn’t be able to stop him — knew it wouldn’t be right to. So she would simply ask for his safety and support him any way she could.

Wei Wuxian left, and the cultivators who had served Wen Ning had no choice but to awkwardly follow. Before they could even see what was going on, Wei Wuxian remounted his horse and gestured for them to do the same.

“Hurry up!” he ordered. “Get on!”

“No, but… our Young Master Wen Ning-”

He cut off as a head flew in front of him, several more following shortly after. Everyone looked over to see Wen Ning stomp down on a still-twitching figure on the ground. The inspector stopped moving. Wen Ning then reached down, tearing through the man's organs with his bare hands.

Jin Guangshan clutched at his own stomach again, swallowing momentarily.

"Enough!" Wei Wuxian ordered and Wen Ning froze.

A moment later, a low growl left his throat as though he was still unsatisfied.

So completely opposite the Wen Ning she knew. Wen Qing closed her eyes.

(But what Wei Wuxian had said was that he gave Wen Ning 'permission' to attack; it wasn't an order. And now he was stopping her brother. The one who changed Wen Ning into this wasn't truly Wei Wuxian, it was the inspectors Wen Ning was attacking now.)

Wei Wuxian whistled again then ordered, "Get up!"

Wen Ning stood.

At that moment, Wei Wuxian turned his attention to the living cultivators of Wen Ning's branch, shouting, "What are you waiting for?! Mount the horses! Don't tell me you want me to find you swords?!"

"You don't even have your own sword," Nie Huaisang softly pointed out. The comment went unnoticed by most of the watchers, but Wen Qing and Wen Ruohan both twitched slightly at it.

(If the core transfer was true, that was yet another factor in play in the overall situation here. Neither of them seemed very happy about it.)

Lan Wangji, who had seen their reactions, paused in thought for a moment.

The simulated figures, on the other hand, had no time for such questions. They piled onto the horses, one of them remembering last second to go back and grab the elderly woman and toddler Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing had passed earlier. Every living member of Wen Ning's branch was now there. They crammed onto the limited number of horses, seating two or three people onto one. Seeing that the elderly woman was unable to continue riding while carrying the toddler, Wei Wuxian moved closer.

"Give him to me," he commanded.

The rain still poured down harshly, soaking the young, shivering boy on her back.

To the Wens, Wei Wuxian's very name would be enough to send a shiver down their spines. He was terror incarnate for them, and the physical manifestation of their destruction. The granny tried shaking her head a few times, unwilling to hand the child over. The young boy grabbed tighter to her back, nearly slipping off in the rain.

There was an unhidden fear in their eyes.

But Wei Wuxian remained firm.

Reaching forward, Wei Wuxian picked the child up and pulled him close, away from his grandmother.

“A-Yuan!” she shouted, reaching desperately to take him back. “A-Yuan! A-Yuan!”

The child tensed, but, well-accustomed to feeling fear, did not cry. He nibbled at his fingers a little more, looking up at Wei Wuxian.

“We’re going!” Wei Wuxian shouted, his horse dashing forward first. The others forced their horses to follow after, having nothing else they could do.

The simulation drew to a close.

Although they hadn’t been able to feel the rain coming down on all sides in the simulation, they had been able to see it. With the abrupt ending to the simulation, the dark clouds and wet air were instantly replaced by the pure white walls of the in-between area — nearly blinding in their sudden appearance.

Many watchers leaned back in their chairs, going boneless from mental exhaustion. Wen Qing was surrounded by the Jiang siblings and Nie Huaisang on the floor. She appeared lost to the world, barely noticing anything around her. Nie Huaisang was quiet and pensive, thinking a few things through. Jiang Yanli was concerned, her full attention on Wen Qing, and Jiang Cheng, who had come over upon seeing his sister rush to Wen Qing, was locked in silence.

“...What was it those kids said at the beginning?” Jin Zixuan asked at last. “About… about why we were watching this?”

“You mean the future’s juniors?” Lan Qiren confirmed.

Jin Zixuan nodded but didn’t make eye contact, eyes still trained where they had seen Wei Wuxian and the Wens ride off mere moments ago.

“I understand if you’re skeptical, but please listen,” Lan Wangji recited, his memory allowing him to recall word for word what Lan Sizhui had told them two weeks ago. “In the future, numerous events will happen that will shake the cultivation world to its core. We’re trying to prevent this in your timeline by educating you all on what mistakes were made in our world, and I can assure you that each and every one of your lives was made worse by not having this information. We used a modified version of empathy on numerous spirits to create a 3D model of everything we want to show you. You won’t be able to physically interact with each other or the scenes you see, but you’ll be able to talk to each other whenever you want. We’ll be showing you things in the hope that you’ll react differently than your counterparts in our world did, mainly in terms of how they treated one person.”

Many of the watchers tensed; they all remembered the words that would come next.

“To us, this person is known by his official title as the Yiling Patriarch. To you, his name is Wei Wuxian.”

Someone laughed.

“The way they phrased it made it seem like we’d just made a few mistakes,” Lan Qiren muttered. “Not… Jin Guangshan, Sect Leader Jin, do you think you-”

“It must have been Meng Yao!” Jin Guangshan declared at once. “We’ve all seen just how good that snake is at sinking his fangs into anyone he supposedly serves. First he got rid of the Chief Cultivator, then Sect Leader Nie… now he serves me; his influence must be causing this.”

Frowning minutely, Lan Xichen pointed out, “We don’t have any evidence of that. You can’t just assume it.”

“Young Master Lan, be reasonable,” Jin Guangshan advised. “How many times have you been swayed to his side due to faulty reasoning and too much trust? I know you pity the boy, but that hardly justifies what he’s done. We’ve seen him turn on his sect leader so many times; surely we don’t need further proof than that. After all, your trust in him got Sect Leader Nie killed, didn’t it?”

Lan Xichen flinched at that. Lan Wangji frowned, about to speak up, but froze upon making eye contact with Jin Guangshan. He opened his mouth, trying to speak, but a knowing smirk from the man held his mind in a vice-like grip.

No words left his mouth.

“...There was a toddler there,” Nie Mingjue whispered, stunned into near silence. “He was barely a toddler. It’s been some time since the war ended… he might have not even been born when we won. Why is he in that camp?”

“Because he’s a Wen,” Wen Ruohan pointed out easily. “What? You don’t think your other self is aware?”

“Of course not! Nothing would justify-”

“You might think that now, after watching the simulation,” the Chief Cultivator said. “Are you sure you would be feeling that way without it? No one here is the same as they were when we first entered.”

Nie Mingjue paused. He didn’t think his other self knew. He was pretty sure his other self would never support this. He was almost positive the future Nie Mingjue would have been just as enraged as Wei Wuxian if he had seen what was going on.

Almost.

And that one word carried a far heavier weight than should be possible.

“He killed the Jin disciples,” Madam Jin commented.

“They deserved it after what they did!” Wen Qing snapped, standing up again. “They deserved that and more!”

Her other self had collapsed in grief. However, despite having watched some of it, the real Wen Qing hadn’t gone through the war or the after-effects of losing. For her, anger was burning just as strongly as her grief.

“I agree,” Madam Jin admitted, softly. “I agree. But what A-Li said about how that might turn the sects against Wei Wuxian is true too. If he could have gotten the Wens out without killing them…”

“If someone is after his Stygian Tiger Seal then they’ll pin it against him regardless,” Lan Wangji disagreed. “There’s no reason for Wei Ying to not enact vengeance if he’s going to take the Wens and run. Besides, this is much like the cave of the Xuanwu of Slaughter. Stopping the Wens then had a chance of bringing the Jiangs trouble. He did it anyway.”

(And saved your son in the process.)

The first scene in the simulation itself flashed into their minds again:

‘Yiling Patriarch Wei Wuxian is dead!’

‘Really? Who killed him?’

‘Who else? His old friend Jiang Cheng, leader of the Jiang Clan!’

Jiang Cheng clenched his fists together.

‘If so, serves him right,’ the civilian said, clearly knowing nothing about Wei Wuxian at all.

“What’s going to happen now? Where are they going to go?” Jiang Yanli asked. “I-I mean… A-Cheng, you’ll help, won’t you?”

“Of course-”

Jiang Cheng's words were cut off by a twitch of resentful energy.

“Greetings honorable Sect Leaders,” Wei Wuxian said teasingly. The few conversations he’d had with them had involved the Sect Leaders being surprisingly casual around him. Subconsciously, he was starting to match the atmosphere.

He was relaxed. Around them.

After what they’d just seen, such cheer felt like a slap in the face.

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli whispered softly. “How… how are you?”

“I’m alright,” Wei Wuxian responded easily. “Are you okay Shijie?”

He had instantly picked up on her muted tone.

“Did *someone* do something?”

And, with the way he said ‘someone,’ it was instantly clear that he was referring to Jin Zixuan.

“No!” Jiang Yanli said at once. “No. No, A-Xian. It wasn’t him.”

“It might as well have been,” Jin Zixuan grumbled. “It was my sect that-”

“That isn’t your fault,” Nie Huaisang disagreed. “Now, on the other hand, if you *knowingly* took part in this, then the situation changes.”

But as of yet, they had no reason to believe he knew what was going on.

“A toddler,” Nie Mingjue repeated again, giving a near-deranged laugh as he shook his head.

“...Is that… something I should know about?” Wei Wuxian asked, thoroughly lost.

Madam Yu sighed, practically collapsing in her chair with an unusual display of impropriety: “We’ll explain later, Wei Wuxian. There’s… too much to go into now.”

“...If you say so,” he accepted. “Ah, I wanted to mention, I tracked down Meng Yao.”

There was a pause.

“*What?!”*

“Yeah. He’ll be working for me for a bit. Mo Xuanyu — the future one, I mean — said I should get to know him a bit and draw my own conclusions. So long as I know ahead of time that I should be on guard, I’ll probably be able to control the situation,” Wei Wuxian explained. “Though apparently this is mostly the doing of Nie-xiong’s future self.”

“Me?!” Nie Huaisang asked, jumping at the sudden address.

“Yeah. Supposedly, you convinced Mo Xuanyu to trust me a little more. I’m so touched!”

“Hm,” Nie Huaisang said, fiddling with his hands nervously. “W-well, at least we know where he is now.”

(It was always easier to set a trap if you knew where the snake you were hunting lived.)

“Be careful!” Nie Mingjue advised. “He’s got a silver tongue. How are you going to keep track of him?”

“He’s working as my secretary now. He’s trying to help me track down that ‘Xue Yang’ you mentioned.”

“Is he?” Wen Ruohan wondered, glancing up at the ceiling where Wei Wuxian’s voice was coming from. A strange expression appeared on his face. After what they had just watched, what could Wen Ruohan do?

Wen Ruohan wasn’t used to owing people. After what had just happened, however, he couldn’t help but feel like he did.

(Meng Yao was a similar kind of person to him. Talented, driven, and admittedly quite selfish all the while. He had apparently taken to Wen Ruohan’s lessons on torture like a fish to water. Wei Wuxian, despite having many similar qualities, would never do that.)

(But it was those differing qualities which had led Meng Yao to betray him, and had led Wei Wuxian to save the Wens.)

Wei Wuxian was *good* in a way neither Meng Yao nor Wen Ruohan were. And, because of that, Wen Ruohan owed him more than words could describe.

“Wei Ying, be careful of him,” the Chief Cultivator said at last, not even noticing that he was just repeating Nie Mingjue.

“...I suppose you’ve seen quite a bit of him in the simulation,” Wei Wuxian guessed. “I’ll take your words under advisement, Your Excellency.”

(The sudden switch from his courtesy name to his given name was a little weird, but given how much older Wen Ruohan was than him it wasn’t too disrespectful. Wei Wuxian decided to ignore it).

“I’ll update you all if he does anything I’m uncertain about. You might be able to give me more context.)

Wen Ruohan nodded once, but remained otherwise silent.

Jin Guangshan, meanwhile, licked his lips.

‘*Every time we see the Yiling Patriarch in action I’m somehow still surprised by how powerful he is,*’ Sect Leader Jin thought, glancing up like Wen Ruohan had. ‘*And this version in our world… he knows none of this. He’s so ignorant of what’s to come.*’

A smile formed on Jin Guangshan’s face.

(And Lan Wangji, who was still watching, shivered at the sight.)

A cold wind blew, and Sect Leader Jiang’s annoyance caused Zidian to spark strongly.

“He’s not here?!” Jiang Cheng repeated, glaring at the Lan disciple before him in disbelief. “After I came all this way?”

“Sorry, Sect Leader Jiang,” Lan Jingyi said, not sounding sorry at all. “If you’d sent a message beforehand to say you were coming, maybe Senior Wei would have made himself

available. I suppose you'll just have to wait for him to return."

"Hm." Jiang Cheng took a deep breath and Zidian sparked once more. "And… how long did you say Wei Wuxian's little… excursion would take?"

"Oh, Senior Wei and Hanguang-jun are night hunting together, so it could take anywhere from a few hours to a few weeks. They often spend some of the time just relaxing together in the inns. You know how it is."

Jiang Wanyin shivered in disgust at the image that provoked, his glare turning even more harsh. Unfortunately, Lan Jingyi seemed far too pleased by his annoyance.

"You could wait in here until they return," he offered, as was proper. "Lan Qiren-xiansheng will keep you company. Or, of course, you could always just leave and come back later!"

With the way he phrased it, it was clear which option he preferred. It was a long distance between Yunmeng and the Cloud Recesses, but with his core ~~from Wei Wuxian~~ Jiang Cheng would be able to make the trip again without too much trouble.

However, now that Lan Jingyi had phrased it that way, leaving was the last thing Jiang Cheng wanted to do.

"I'll stay then," he declared through gritted teeth. "It would be an honor to catch up with Lan-xiansheng."

Not even trying to hide his disappointment at Jiang Wanyin's response, Lan Jingyi begrudgingly began bringing him to a tea room where Lan Qiren was waiting. They went up the steps together and entered a large building. The halls they walked through were sparsely decorated (as with every room in the Lan Sect) and emphasized humility and grace over extravagance. A few carvings on the birch wood pillars was as close as it got to liveliness.

It was the opposite of everything Wei Wuxian was and the last place he should want to be.

(And yet, time and time again, Wei Wuxian had chosen to stay here.)

Internally, Jiang Cheng cursed his nephew again.

'*I should never have come,*' he thought. '*What was A-Ling thinking telling me to head over here? I don't need to apologize to Wei Wuxian. My reaction to his stupid time travel invention was perfectly logical! This is just how he always is, thinking he knows what's best for everyone. Always too much thought in and ruining it all.*'

He felt at his lower stomach subconsciously. Wei Wuxian's core seemed to glow brighter in response.

Finally, they made it to the room Lan Qiren was in. Lan Jingyi opened the door then left without so much as a bow of respect. Jiang Cheng would really need to have words with Lan Qiren about him.

With a bow of greeting of his own, Jiang Wanyin entered the room. He sat down across from Lan Qiren, accepting the other man's offered tea. Steam rose off the cup he was handed, obscuring his and Lan Qiren's views of each other momentarily.

"I hope you had a safe journey, Sect Leader Jiang," the man said.

"It was fine," Jiang Cheng responded. "I see the Cloud Recesses are doing as well as ever."

There was a pause as they both took a sip of tea.

Jiang Cheng placed the cup on the table, waving his hand to clear away the steam.

"I hope I'm not taking up too much of your time," he commented.

They were empty words, but expected nonetheless.

"Not at all," Lan Qiren responded. "In fact, my previous arrangement with Sect Leader Nie was canceled shortly before you arrived."

"Was it?"

"Yes," Lan Qiren admitted. "About two minutes before it was meant to begin, a messenger from the Nie Sect came to inform me that his sect leader had seen a bird he wanted to catch on the way to the Cloud Recesses, chased after it, and promptly fell into a ditch and sprained his ankle. It appears our meeting will need to be postponed."

Jiang Cheng really wished he could say he was surprised.

Both men brought their teas up again.

"I hear you want to see Wei Wuxian," Lan Qiren commented. "Has something gone wrong that requires that boy's assistance?"

(Or had *he* done something wrong that Jiang Cheng would need to confront him about?)

"It's not sect business," was Jiang Cheng's only response. "...I hear Sect Leader Nie has taken charge of the wedding?"

A look of displeasure flashed across Lan Qiren's face, but he only said, "Indeed. How did you know?"

"He asked me to send some purple dye to help prepare," Jiang Cheng scoffed. "For free!"

'*Technically, since he's offering to give you and Wei Wuxian a chance to make up in exchange for the dye. It's not for free*' Jin Ling's voice pointed out. Jiang Cheng ignored him as steadily as always.

"Feel no pressure," Lan Qiren said instead. "I'm sure we'll manage just fine without the dye."

“Appreciated.”

They both drank from their cups once more.

“...How did he end up in charge?” Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but ask. It was a wedding between the Yiling Patriarch — who was essentially a rogue cultivator — and the second young master of the Lan Sect. Why would the Sect Leader of the Nie be getting involved?

“It was Wei Wuxian’s decision. Wangji went along with it,” Lan Qiren responded, not bothering to hide the bitterness in his expression. He refilled his cup of tea and took another drink.

‘*Ah. I bet this has something to do with how Wei Wuxian asked for Sect Leader Nie’s help with the time travel mess he made,*’ Jiang Cheng thought. ‘*I have no idea why he’d ask the Headshaker for help, but there’s always some deeper plan involved, isn’t there? Wei Wuxian’s just too smart to tell anyone what’s going on, huh? He’s the only one who can handle it, so why bother informing others? Even his husband’s uncle doesn’t know! And I’m sure whatever he’s using Nie Huaisang for is already all planned out and will keep my stupid past self from doing things wrong. Why would he ever trust others? I bet he thinks no one could possibly know what to do better than as he does!*’

His hands clenched his cup even tighter.

“Yeah,” Sect Leader Jiang laughed. “That sounds like Wei Wuxian, all right.”

Lan Qiren nodded: “It’s how he always acts.”

“Why are we still surprised? Of course he hasn’t explained anything.”

“Indeed. That’s just like him.”

And at that moment, so swept up in their annoyance at Wei Wuxian, the two of them spoke simultaneously:

“He always has to control everything!”

“He never thinks anything through!”

They paused, doing a double take toward each other.

“...Ah, right,” Jiang Wanyin agreed, trying to get back on the same track. “He never thinks about… talking to us.”

“Right,” Lan Qiren agreed, looking equally thrown. “And he always plans his… pranks out.”

A beat of awkwardness passed, and both reached down to take another sip of tea.

(To Lan Qiren, the most recent incident on his mind was when Wei Wuxian and the juniors took a look at what the people in the simulation were watching. After whatever they had

seen, Wei Wuxian fell into a panic attack. That incident certainly hadn't appeared to be the result of careful planning.)

Jiang Cheng cleared his throat: "...Your nephew agreed to having Sect Leader Nie run the wedding too?"

"Ah, yes," Lan Qiren nodded. "Wangji and Wei Wuxian informed me about the matter together. They often only come to me once they've already reached an agreement on things. Or been pushed into it by the other."

Jiang Cheng frowned, looking around again at the Cloud Recesses. The bland white walls were the antithesis of everything Wei Wuxian was but the embodiment of Lan Wangji. He still couldn't believe Wei Wuxian was happy living here. On the other hand, Lan Wangji was his protector now ~~instead of Jiang Cheng.~~ Maybe Wei Wuxian hated it, but would go along with anything Lan Wangji said.

Jin Guangyao laughed: 'Sect Leader Jiang, if only your attitude toward your shixiong was just a bit better, showing everyone that your bond was too strong to be broken, or if you'd exhibited just a bit more tolerance after what happened, things wouldn't have become what they were.'

Wei Wuxian would still have an option outside of Lan Wangji.

"And people think it's a 'perfect relationship,'" Jiang Cheng muttered before he could stop himself. "It's more unbalanced than the relationship between the four great sects and the Wens was."

Jiang Cheng tensed a moment later. He hadn't meant to say that to Lan Wangji's own uncle. However, to his surprise, the man just nodded.

"I wasn't expecting to find someone who agreed with me," Lan Qiren admitted. "I haven't found anyone else who does."

"Well, the truth is plain to see."

"It is," Lan Qiren pursed his lips. "How can anyone be okay with one side having that much power over the other?"

"It's like he can't even speak out against him."

"Absolutely."

"Is there anything I can do?" Jiang Cheng asked. "I wasn't expecting you to agree with me either, but if you also see that your nephew has too much power in the relationship-"

"My nephew has too much power?" Lan Qiren repeated. "Weren't we discussing how Wei Wuxian is controlling his every move?"

"We were?"

They stared at each other again, then quickly grabbed their teas and took a long drink to fill the silence. They set the cups down and Lan Qiren refilled them with the last of the tea.

"...Your nephew, Sect Leader Jin, has been coming over frequently," Lan Qiren said, shifting the conversation to a place he hoped would be free from contradiction.

"Ah, yes. He has become close with some of your sect's juniors."

"I see. I'm glad we can continue our sects' good relations. Perhaps, if the opportunity arises, I can take that group night hunting in Yunmeng. With the Ouyang kid, too."

Lan Qiren nodded: "I'm sure that would be a valuable experience. Certainly much preferable to their usual guides."

Although neither said it out loud, Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning's faces appeared in their minds.

"You would think A-Ling would avoid him after everything he's done."

Because, regardless of the circumstances, it was Wen Ning's blow that killed Jin Zixuan.

(And it was Wen Ning who revealed to him what had happened to Wei Wuxian's core.)

Lan Qiren frowned: "I told them not to travel with him, but it appears no one in this sect cares much for my opinions anymore. Perhaps you could try to guide at least your nephew away from him."

"I did try," Jiang Cheng said, glaring at his tea. "It took him less than a day to disobey me."

Lan Qiren clicked his tongue, disappointed but unsurprised.

"I can't believe this. He's a *fierce corpse,*" Jiang Cheng pointed out with a laugh. Wen Qionglin was a fierce corpse, meaning he was at the Yiling Patriarch's beck and call. And the truth behind his core meant that, even before becoming a fierce corpse, Wen Ning was on Wei Wuxian's side. He was one of the ways Wei Wuxian got the world to work the way he wanted it to and was a tool Wei Wuxian used against Jiang Cheng — against Jin Zixuan — time and time again.

In Jiang Cheng's mind, he was little more than an extension of Wei Wuxian's will to-

"Yes, Wei Wuxian's a fool if he thinks he can control the Ghost General."

Jiang Wanyin paused, blinking at Lan Qiren.

The Lan elder stared back.

"...Wen Qionglin has sentience, so it's up to him whether he listens to Wei Wuxian or not," Lan Qiren pointed out, speaking slowly as if not understanding Jiang Cheng's confusion. "And, from what I heard, what happened to Jin Zixuan was a result of Wei Wuxian losing control. Him being around the juniors is dangerous because Wei Wuxian may not be able to stop him. Yes?"

Jiang Cheng kept staring and Lan Qiren stared back. They both then, simultaneously, lifted their teas and finished the cups.

"...Maybe I'll return another day," Jiang Cheng offered.

"Yes, that would… probably be for the best."

Some time later, a few hundred miles away, a certain Sect Leader Nie gave a content sigh.

"Ahh," breathed out, sinking deeper into his bath and practically melting into the water. He almost appeared to have turned into a jellyfish with how boneless he became, the warm water shutting off his mind.

"Sect Leader Nie!" a voice called out from the other side of the screen.

"Hm?" Nie Huaisang wondered, not present enough to give a verbose answer.

"Sect Leader Jiang and Lan-xiansheng's conversation went exactly as you hoped it would. They are both reconsidering their viewpoints and giving Wei Wuxian's actions more thought."

"Fantastic," he mumbled sleepily. "My wedding gift is about halfway finished then."

There was a pause as the servant of the Nie considered his next words.

"Sir, are you… are you sure it's a good idea to try to manipulate two of the most influential people in the world for the sake of a wedding gift?"

"Sure. Mooching off the emotional turmoil of others is 90% of the work I do these days. And to think Da-ge once told me I wouldn't be able to be sect leader without putting some actual sword practice in. Ha! Shows him!"

The Nie Clan's servant sighed.

'*I wonder if it's too late to suggest to the Yiling Patriarch that he should try to make someone else into Chief Cultivator.*'

(Unfortunately, it probably was.)

Chapter End Notes

Things are getting worse and worse, but A-Yuan is here now so maybe it all balances out lol.
:)

Ignored, Not Unheard

Chapter Notes

> I am warning you now that I will be a tiny bit extra mean to Jiang Cheng in the following chapter. Jin Guangshan is also a creep, but that's not anything new. If that's something that will bother you please proceed with caution! Also, as per usual, beta read by Tintin!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moon rose high in the night sky, sending slivers of light down onto a quiet village. The small collection of homes, far away from any other civilization, stood surrounded on all sides by rice paddies and lakes. Within the territory of the Yunmeng Jiang Clan, this was far from an unusual sight.

What was unusual, however, was the guest they had.

"We greet the Sect Leader of the Jiang Clan!" the villagers shouted from all around, raising a toast in his honor. Jiang Cheng nodded once before taking a drink, scowling the whole time. Really, there was no reason for him to be there at all.

(Except that this village had some of the best dyers in the district, and Nie Huaisang had requested a few dozen elaborate table cloths for Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's wedding.)

Jiang Cheng sighed.

"Chang Fang, go speak to the village elder about our trade offer," Jiang Cheng ordered, causing one of the disciples to his right to bow and scurry off. If all went well, this deal could be finalized without any further actions on Jiang Cheng's part.

Once again, he found himself wondering why he hadn't just sent a representative to handle this.

(However, after the strange conversation he had with Lan Qiren, some part of Jiang Cheng felt like doing this himself. Getting out of the sect for a while seemed good.)

"Sect Leader, would you like another cup?" a middle aged woman to Jiang Chong's right asked, holding up a jar that could refill it. Jiang Cheng began to shoo her off, only to hesitate at the last second and nod instead.

Liquor was poured in.

"I hope you enjoy," the woman said. "My family has been brewing for generations."

Jiang Cheng said nothing as he drank, but the woman's gray eyes seemed to glow with pride regardless. A crackle of purple lightning flashed — unnoticed, thanks to the loud party — around Jiang Cheng's lowered hand.

~~What were the chances that both Wei Wuxian and Mo Xuanyu would be born with irises the exact same shade of silver? Jiang Cheng had never even seen that on anyone else! What a disgusting, unnatural color.~~

All around, there was an almost physical cheer in the air. A small village like this had never received anyone so important as a guest before. Their enthusiasm was palpable.

And, as more and more alcohol was consumed, their tongues became loose.

"The Sect Leader of the Jiang Sect has come to get things dyed by us! Ha! I told A-Ping we were better at it than those Southern Mountain folks!" a round, elderly man bragged.

"Father, what are you getting so proud about? You've never touched dye in your life!" the gray-eyed woman scolded as she walked over to her family.

But her father was undeterred, wrapping an arm around the shoulders of the man next to him as he responded, "My son in law is in the business. I have every right to be proud!"

The strength with which Jiang Cheng held his cup made small cracks begin to form.

"You better drink up!" the father told his son in law, refilling his cup. "Tonight is partly about you! And you'll have your work cut out for you in the coming weeks!"

"They haven't even decided on a date for the wedding yet!" the son in law pointed out.

At the mention of 'the wedding,' Jiang Cheng felt Zidian crackle once more.

This time, it was just loud enough to be heard. Although most of the party didn't seem to notice, both husband and wife looked over at him with wary eyes. Quickly picking up on his mood, they changed the subject:

"Father, did I tell you about the decorated clasp A-Fan managed to make? His metalworking abilities have gotten much better in recent years!"

"You didn't tell me! I haven't managed to see hide or hair of my grandson in weeks! Has he been locking himself up in that workshop of his?"

"He has," the gray eyed woman confirmed. "Apparently he's working hard on a big project…"

Their conversation continued but Jiang Cheng tuned them out. That turned out to be a mistake, however, as most everyone else was talking about the world's most anticipated wedding.

"A-Niang, A-Niang, how much longer until then?"

“They haven’t decided yet, I don’t think.”

“They have to find an auspicious date,” someone pointed out. “This is going to be the wedding of the century. I’m sure the sects are planning it carefully. It’s the Chief Cultivator and the Yiling Patriarch, after all.”

Actually, “the sects” weren’t doing much planning at all. Lan Xichen was barely peeking his head out of his self-imposed seclusion, Lan Qiren didn’t want the wedding at all, Lan Wangji was busy being Chief Cultivator, Wei Wuxian was dealing with the other dimension, Jin Ling was learning how to be Sect Leader, and Jiang Cheng was only doing this under duress. A vast majority of the planning was being left to Nie Huaisang, who (in Jiang Cheng’s humble opinion) was the last person who should be in charge of *anything*.

Though Wei Wuxian wouldn’t care what Jiang Cheng thought.

(Once, he and Wei Wuxian had been certain they would be in charge of planning Jiang Yanli’s wedding. When that time actually came, Wei Wuxian hadn’t even been *invited*. Depending on how things went, that pattern might repeat itself in reverse for the coming one.)

(Nie Huaisang had claimed he would handle things so long as Jiang Cheng took care of the dye, but, considering who had made that promise, Jiang Cheng felt justified in being a little skeptical.)

Of course, unaware of all that, the villagers’ conversations continued on:

“I bet the decorations will be gorgeous!”

“And can you even imagine the food?”

“Yeah! There’ll probably be enough there to feed an army! And it’ll be of a quality fit for the emperor!”

“Eh? I thought the Yiling Patriarch and Chief Cultivator wanted a quiet wedding. With just a few guests?”

An elderly woman scoffed, explaining, “A ‘few guests’ for us and ‘a few guests’ for them are *not* the same thing. Any Sect Leader that’s not invited will view it as a personal affront! And, considering what they’ve done under Jin Guangyao’s rule…”

Sounds of understanding came from all around. The Yiling Patriarch had been found to be good, and all the sects were now supporting that story. However, the fact remained that the Yiling Patriarch had been public enemy number 1 for decades, and the sects had acted accordingly. Thus, the only logical conclusion was that the evil Jin Guangyao had tricked them into hating him.

(And if a sect leader were to not be invited to the wedding, it would seem to indicate that the Yiling Patriarch was *not* in agreement about it being all Jin Guangyao’s fault. Wei Wuxian might be binding himself to Hanguang-jun, their honorable Chief Cultivator, but there was

only so much risk the sects could take. Any Sect Leader powerful enough to have done something against him during the last 13 years would have to receive an invitation to come.)

Jiang Cheng wondered how Jiang Yanli would have felt if she could have known what Wei Wuxian's wedding would turn into.

Before he even registered what he was doing, Jiang Cheng had slammed his cup down on the table before him. Everyone in the party swerved toward Jiang Cheng at once, their earlier conversations vanishing. The gray eyed woman and her husband looked especially nervous about this move. In the sudden silence, Jiang Cheng stood up.

"I'm going for a walk," he announced.

"Ah, I'll guide you," the gray-eyed woman offered, standing up as well. "Our lakes may be nothing in comparison to your Pier's, but we have a few Koi Ponds that I hope you'll enjoy."

As she guided Jiang Cheng out, the more sober guests seemed to breathe out sighs of relief. It was inevitable that being in Jiang Cheng's presence would be nerve wracking, but the complete faith they had in his guide's ability was obvious. The only one who looked nervous was her husband, who stood up to follow only to be pulled back down by his (very drunk) father-in-law a moment later.

Paying that no mind, the gray-eyed woman guided him out.

"If you look to your right, you can see some of the maple trees we have," she explained, gesturing toward them. "They don't have many leaves right now, but in a few weeks this entire grove will be bright red."

The Sect Leader said nothing in response but she made no indication she took any offense.

They walked over a bridge, hearing rushing water flow through underneath.

"The Koi Ponds are quite beautiful. My husband and I got married here, in fact. My younger son loves the area, and I think my older one wanted to get married here too," she explained, smiling nostalgically. "He loved showing his fiancée all around."

"...Loved?" Jiang Cheng asked. The woman paused, surprised at his question, and Jiang Cheng found himself surprised too. He didn't really want to know but, swept up in the conversational aura she exuded, he had found himself asking nonetheless.

"He passed away a few years ago," she admitted at last. "An accident. We... loved him very much."

Jiang Cheng had never heard his own mother say such a thing. An open expression of affection like that felt wrong and foreign. Nothing even *resembling* those words had ever come out of Madam Yu's mouth.

Jiang Yanli would probably have said something like that if she had been allowed to see Jin Ling grow up.

(Might still be able to, in the parallel world Wei Wuxian had created — and wasn't that a strange thought.)

"Ah, here we are."

Jiang Cheng looked up.

In the grounds before him, a crystal clear pond rested calmly. Encircling the pool was a forest of maple trees burning bright red. In the shadows of the trees, fireflies flitted about, giving the lake a white glow.

Then, from the bushes, there was a rustle.

"A-Fan?" the gray eyed woman asked, rushing over. "What are you doing here? You should be in bed."

"Sorry," was the mumbled response.

"Who's this?" Jiang Cheng asked, vaguely recognizing the name.

"Ah, Sect Leader, let me introduce you. This is my second son, A-Fan."

The fourteen or fifteen year old boy bowed once. With his face lowered, his eyes were hidden behind the shadows of his long bangs. Jiang Cheng was glad; he didn't want to take the risk of seeing another set of gray eyes.

"…It's fine," Jiang Cheng said at last, unusually subdued. "My nephew is about his age, too."

The woman smiled, relaxing at his answer.

Then, softly, the boy spoke.

"You're the sect leader of the Jiang Sect?"

His mother frowned at the question, commanding, "A-Fan, go back. Let me talk to-"

"Are you the Sect Leader of the Jiang Clan?!" the boy asked again.

"I am," Jiang Cheng admitted.

"*A-Fan!*" his mother hissed sharply. "Go back."

Then, frowning petulantly, A-Fan protested, "I wanted to meet Sect Leader Jiang. It's not fair that I don't get to when everyone else in the village gets to see him."

With the exception of Jin Ling, kids weren't really Jiang Cheng's thing. He looked away, trying his hardest to ignore the snot-nosed brat in front of him. Luckily, at that moment, someone else arrived.

"Ah, there you are!" a man shouted from behind him. The gray-eyed woman's husband rushed over, having finally managed to escape his father in law. Jiang Cheng relaxed in relief,

sure that, now that the father was here, one of the parents would be able to take the kid away and he'd no longer be Jiang Cheng's problem. He turned back to the gray-eyed woman, ready to ask her to take him to their next stop.

Which was why Jiang Cheng was able to see the flash of silver before it made contact with him.

"*Ah-!*"

"A-Fan?"

Both parents looked over at once, only to see their son being held aloft by a crushing grip on his wrist, his legs flailing underneath.

"Sect Leader, what are you doing?!"

"Sect Leader Jiang, please put him down!" the woman rushed over. "I… what are you-"

Jiang Cheng clenched down, snapping the child's wrist.

The scream that followed kicked the father into gear.

"Let him go!" the man shouted, running over. He reached up, ready to pull his son from Jiang Cheng's hold, only to pause at the last second when he saw a flash of light fall to the ground. Upon closer inspection, its source became obvious. A knife had fallen out of A-Fan's hand.

(A newly-forged one, made by an amateur in metalworking.)

"What's this?" Jiang Cheng asked, unamused. "If you were all working together to kill me then you better admit it fast. I'm not in a very forgiving mood."

Zidian sparked by his side. If that hand had been the one he was using to hold A-Fan up, electricity would have surged through the child's body. The unnatural purple glow lit the water of the Koi Pond, drowning out the reflection of the moon.

"Wait! Wait, Sect Leader. *Wait!*" The gray-eyed woman dropped to her knees. "I-I swear to you, that isn't the case!"

She bowed lowly, and her husband did the same.

"Please, spare him! You-you must have made a mistake. My son would never-"

"You think I *can't tell* when someone wants me dead?!" Jiang Cheng snarled back. "A brat like this-"

"It was nothing you don't deserve!" A-Fan shouted.

"What are you-"

"Be quiet, A-Fan!" his father shouted.

But the child just growled once more.

“You have no right to come here! We don’t need you! Just get out! Go away! You’ve done enough damage!”

“I apologize, Sect Leader. We’ve educated him wrong. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about!”

“Clearly,” Jiang Cheng scoffed.

But, through his tears, the boy managed to hiss out, “I know enough to know that you *killed my brother!*”

Jiang Cheng paused, looking at the child blankly. His anger was still there but, now, confusion was overtaking him. That confusion was doubled by the fact that, for the first time, the boy’s parents seemed unable to contradict him.

“...I’ve never been to this village before,” Jiang Cheng pointed out.

“Not here! He… he… Gege was headed to the Southern Mountain. His fiancee was there! He was going to his fiancee. The-there was a wagon he was riding over on. He covered it in bright red paint. He’d painted all over it himself! In characters! It was a note for his fiancee! Don’t you remember?!”

The words were nearly incomprehensible through the boy’s tears, but Jiang Cheng got the basic point. He scoffed.

“How am I supposed to know what your brother’s carriage had on it? You think I care what a random brat was heading off to do? Whatever happened to him is none of my business. You, on the other-”

“But it *was* you! You have to remember! Because-because they said you saw his carriage! You saw him — you saw the red characters he had written down and decided it was for demonic cultivation!”

Jiang Cheng froze.

Subconsciously, he noticed the gray eyed woman trembling at the words.

“It wasn’t demonic cultivation! It wasn’t! He hadn’t done anything wrong! But you *didn’t care!* You said that only Wei Wuxian would do demonic cultivation so openly! So you took Gege back to Lotus Pier and whipped him to death!!!”

The loud scream cut through the open field, scaring birds in the surrounding trees into flying away. Jiang Cheng wanted to snap back — wanted to write this off as baseless accusations — wanted to show the brat the consequences of his actions — but…

~~But, suddenly, he was unsure.~~

~~*Had* he done this?~~

“Everyone says the same thing,” A-Fan began anew. “Everyone agrees. Sect Leader Jiang sees ghosts everywhere! He’ll accuse anyone of being a demonic cultivator!”

Jiang Cheng gritted his teeth together, snapping, “If I did accuse him then I was probably right!”

“You weren’t! You weren’t! My brother just wanted to see Ming-jie! That was it! He never did anything wrong! You attacked him over nothing! Why?! Why?! Why do you always go after demonic cultivators?! Why do you always get normal people caught up in your vengeance?!”

“I-”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” A-Fan shrieked. “Shut up! Everyone knows that half the people you bring back to torture in your sect haven’t done anything! More than half! None of them have done anything! And you — and you — you killed my brother because he reminded you of Wei Wuxian, but now you want to help with Wei Wuxian's wedding?! What gives you the right?!”

“I don’t make guesses!” Jiang Cheng shouted back, Zidian sparking by his side again. “If I captured him for that then he was a demonic cultivator! You clearly didn’t know a single thing about your brother-”

“He wasn’t he wasn’t he wasn’t!” the child shouted back. “He never was! You deserve to die!”

The hate in his words, for a moment, reminded Jiang Cheng of how Jin Ling had sounded whenever he talked about Wei Wuxian, prior to actually meeting him. There was a level of desperation and hate that was hard to find in people his age. Jiang Cheng only saw it in Jin Ling when his nephew stabbed Wei Wuxian that fateful day at Koi Tower. A child filled with too much bitterness and hate for the few years they had lived. It was even more than that, actually. Jin Ling’s expression had turned regretful immediately after he did that; A-Fan’s hatred seemed to have no end.

But Wei Wuxian had *actually* killed Jin Ling’s family-

And Jiang Cheng might have killed this kid’s.

(What was almost worse was that the situation A-Fan had described matched so many incidents in Jiang Cheng’s memory that he genuinely couldn't say for sure.)

Suddenly, someone clutched at the side of his robes.

“Please… please show mercy, Sect Leader,” the gray-eyed woman whispered. “Please. A-Fan doesn’t know any better. I swear, he doesn’t mean it.”

“We beg your forgiveness,” the father agreed, prostrating himself on the floor.

Jiang Cheng paused.

"...Is what he's saying a lie?" he asked. "How did your eldest son actually die?"

"A building caught fire!"

"A carriage accident!"

Both husband and wife had spoken at the exact same time, not realizing the other would speak too. Therefore, neither response could be true.

Zidian crackled once more.

"Don't touch my parents!" the child screamed.

"A-Fan, be quiet!" his father shouted, scrambling desperately for excuses. "Sir — Sect Leader — it's true that my eldest son died away from us. It was while he was visiting his fiancee, so we weren't there. We don't know what happened! Everyone in the village was told he died in an accident! Someone must have filled my son's mind with lies against you out of jealousy for your constant patronage of your village-"

"And you think that would excuse your son trying to kill me?" Jiang Cheng wondered.

"Forgive us!" the gray eyed woman pleaded. "Forgive us. Please."

The father clutched at his robes as well, begging, "Sect Leader-"

"Quiet," Jiang Cheng hissed. "Next time one of you talks, I'll stop holding back."

He turned his attention to the child once more.

"Who told you I was involved? If you can give me a name, I'll let you and your family go free."

But, despite Jiang Cheng's shockingly generous offer, the kid couldn't speak a word, crying too loudly for anything to be heard. The rage he was feeling was being overwhelmed by the sheer terror Jiang Cheng sparked within him. Even the pleading gazes of his parents did nothing to calm the kid's cries. Then, through A-Fan's sobs, a strange laughter began to appear.

"I hate you," he whispered. "I hate you. I hate you. Yeah, everyone in the village would say he died in an accident! That's because my parents never told them the truth! Everyone knows you target innocent people, but no one's willing to risk angering you here! But I know! I do! A member of *your sect* told us! They brought us back the jade necklace Ming-jie gave him! Don't you dare tell me I'm wrong! You killed my brother!"

"You little-!" Jiang Cheng clenched his fist, sending lightning sparking up his arm. The sight made the tears on A-Fan's face double in intensity but his words continued on.

"You… Just leave! Go back to the Yiling Patriarch's wedding! Go and celebrate like you never did anything! Gege's already dead! He's never coming back! And you get to keep on

living like nothing happened! Leave us and go! You've already taken everything from my family! Are you happy now?!"

'Well?! Have you seen the result of you playing hero? Are you happy now?!' Jiang Cheng had screamed, once upon a time. Wei Wuxian had gagged, suffocating under Jiang Cheng's hands — under the chokehold Jiang Cheng had on him. And, looking back on what happened after, Wei Wuxian had deserved it. He would go on to kill Jiang Cheng's entire family. He had killed Jin Zixuan; he had killed Jiang Yanli; he had gotten Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian killed, too.

At that thought, he could feel his sister frowning at him.

'You know that isn't true,' she whispered.

But it was true. That was why Wei Wuxian never did anything to punish Jin Ling for stabbing him. He knew full well that he deserved it. He knew he had killed Jin Ling's parents and grandparents. He knew that giving Jiang Cheng his core was nowhere near enough to make up for everything he had taken from them-

"Go to hell!" A-Fan whispered, sobbing some more. "You should just…"

'They all should just go to hell!' Jiang Cheng screamed.

Suddenly, Jiang Cheng's other hand snapped forward as well, grabbing onto A-Fan's neck. He squeezed, hoping to permanently silence the brat — to just make those memories stop. A-Fan choked under his grip, kicking his legs and clawing at Jiang Cheng's hands with little effect.

"Stop!" his mother screamed, pushing past Jiang Cheng's warning to pull at his arm. The father soon did the same, but neither managed to make any dent on the cultivator before them.

(Of course they couldn't. Anyone who had ~~Wei Wuxian's~~ core would be unstoppable in a situation like this.)

"Sect Leader Jiang!"

The sobbing, choking brat opened his eyes. He stared at Jiang Cheng, terror clear in his expression.

He, like Wei Wuxian, had inherited his mother's eyes.

That damn shade of gray stared into Jiang Cheng's soul.

Silver eyes looked back, not doing anything to stop Jiang Cheng from choking him so long as he was the only one being hurt.

And, at that moment, Jiang Cheng let go.

“Ah!” the kid yelled, falling to the ground. Jiang Cheng’s arm was instantly released, the boy’s parents rushing to his side.

“Sect Leader,” the father said, positioning himself so he was between his family and Jiang Cheng. “Sect Leader, please, have mercy. I swear, we will discipline him accordingly! I promise! He’ll never even dream of doing something like this again!”

Jiang Cheng glanced down at them, unseeing.

(He could kill them if he wanted to. No one would be able to stop him. If he got all three, no one would even be able to say for sure what happened. Like the brat had said, it was far from uncommon for people to go missing around him.)

‘It doesn’t mean anything,’ Jiang Cheng thought, upon meeting ‘Mo Xuanyu’ for the first time. ‘I should first find an excuse to take him back and use every possible method to get information out of him. It’s impossible for him to not confess anything or give himself away — especially now that he’s reacted this way. I’ve done things like this plenty of times already.’

“Please, Sect Leader,” the mother added in. However, she wasn’t looking at him. Terrified and clutching her son, she kept her gaze down at the floor, displaying absolute subservience in a way Wei Wuxian never did.

(But that stupid, stupid child continued looking up at him, too scared to speak a word.)

(Perfectly silent, just like Wei Wuxian had been under his hands.)

Thus, at that moment, Jiang Cheng ran. He turned on his heel and stormed back toward the village, away from the disgustingly loving family. He really did feel sick just looking at them.

‘You coward,’ he could almost hear his mom hiss. ‘You’re fleeing them! They can’t even do anything to you! How long will it take you to realize that this is exactly the reason no one respects you?’

Jiang Cheng knew that perfectly well. He more than understood. And he was definitely angry enough to act — he wasn’t *scared* of them. There was nothing those civilians would be able to do to him anyways.

And yet, still, he fled.

“Eh? Sect Leader!” Chang Fang greeted him upon his return. “Where’s the woman who was guiding you? She’s apparently the best expert they have on wines. I wanted to ask her about-”

“We’re leaving!”

“Huh?”

Before the members of his sect could fully understand what was happening, Jiang Cheng had already grabbed his belongings, hopped on his sword, and flown off into the distance. They scrambled after him.

“Sect Leader!” Chang Fang shouted, tearing through the air as fast as she could. “Sect Leader, wait!”

Jiang Cheng didn’t pause or look back, continuing on.

“Sect Leader, we didn’t finalize our deal with the village. We don’t have the textiles for the-”

“I’m not attending the wedding!” Jiang Cheng growled.

“What?! But-”

“We’re. *Going.*”

That brat from the village might have been insane, but he was right about one thing: it didn’t make any sense for Jiang Cheng to try to go to Wei Wuxian’s wedding. Nie Huaisang was a fool for thinking it’d be a good idea to get Jiang Cheng some time to talk with Wei Wuxian; nothing good would come of that.

He was an idiot for even considering it.

“...and that concludes my report,” the servant of the Nie Clan said, watching his sect leader carefully. Nie Huaisang’s eyes were wide and interested, as though the disciple had just explained the gripping climax of an all-original play. The Sect Leader paused for a bit, thinking carefully.

“I was not expecting that,” he admitted.

The servant eyed him skeptically.

“I wasn’t!” Nie Huaisang insisted. “How was I supposed to know something like this would happen?! The kid didn’t plan it through at all — it was completely impulsive! There weren’t any signs beforehand that would *let me* predict it!”

The suspicious look he was receiving didn’t go away.

“Do you think I’m fully informed about all things at all times?! This is a completely unfair standard to hold me to! There was no way for me to have known about this!”

True. The servant couldn’t think of any way Nie Huaisang could have known about A-Fan’s plans ahead of time. On the other hand…

“It *is* you,” he muttered.

“So the standard for what’s possible is different than it would be for normal people?! That’s completely unfair! This is discrimination! The only one for whom the impossible should be expected is Wei-xiong!”

The Nie clan’s employee sent over a rather unimpressed look but also couldn’t really refute that point.

“...Then what do we do now?” he asked. “Should we try to convince Sect Leader Jiang that the child truly was mistaken?”

Nie Huaisang hummed thoughtfully.

“...That might be for the best. A-Fan didn’t really say anything wrong, but the solution he came to both didn’t work and, even if he had been able to kill Sect Leader Jiang, wouldn’t have led to the best outcome. The Sect, by lineage, should end up in Jin Ling’s hands. However, given that he’s already busy with the Jin Sect, the one who would actually end up in charge right now would probably be Jiang Cheng’s highest ranking disciple.”

(Someone who had no problem whatsoever with using the power of the Jiang Clan to track down ‘demonic cultivators.’ This pattern had stopped after the incident at Guanyin Temple because *Jiang Wanyin* had stopped it. It was difficult to say whether a new sect leader would bring the tradition back.)

“Sect Leader Jiang left the kid alive though?” Nie Huaisang asked.

“He did,” the servant confirmed. Nie Huaisang thought for a bit longer, contemplative and serious, then grinned.

“You know what; let’s not do anything. I wanna see how this plays out.”

The servant frowned: “Sect Leader, I don’t recommend trying to use Sect Leader Jiang for entertainment.”

“I’m not! Why is your opinion of me so low?!”

“Years of experience.”

But Nie Huaisang just tutted a few times, expressing his disapproval.

“We shouldn’t be too hasty. For all we know, this could turn out to be a good thing,” Nie Huaisang explained. “It’s a shock to his system! A wall in the road Sect Leader Jiang was traveling on! In the end, this might all be for the best. After all, the fact that he’s stopped hunting down demonic cultivators doesn’t mean it never happened. And besides, a few near-death experiences go a long way in changing people’s minds about things!”

The servant levied a long look at Nie Huaisang.

“I’m serious! I didn’t plan this!”

“Of course, Sect Leader,” he said agreeably.

This was far from the first time a dead silence had filled the simulation after the segment’s conclusion. However, previous times, there had been horror, dread, and impatience keeping them silent.

Now, it was mostly guilt.

‘*It was probably Jin Guangyao’s doing,*’ they thought. ‘*There’s no way I would have allowed that to happen if I’d known.*’

Those who were dead at this point in the simulation assured themselves that there was nothing they could have done. Their families, similarly, must not have known.

However, every time their gazes landed on one of the Wens, that sinking feeling would come over them nonetheless.

(It made no sense. Wen Ruohan was a monster. There was no reason at all for *them* to feel guilty while they looked at him.)

Needless to say, no one was very happy.

(The most unhappy of all was Jin Guangshan, who really, really hoped nothing incriminating would be shown.)

Thus, when the next segment began, the most prevailing emotion among the watchers was dread.

When the world darkened, the first thing they could hear was a smattering of frantic voices. There was a general commotion from all around, rising in volume and franticness as time went on. Then, when the voices died down, an explanation appeared:

“On that night, an extreme crisis flooded the cultivation world,” Lan Sizhui’s voice explained. “At midnight, over fifty sect leaders gathered at Koi Tower’s Golden Pavillion.”

And, indeed, there were sect leaders from large and small sects all gathered around in the grand hall. The number of people that showed up was even greater than the number who arrived to the start of the Sunshot Campaign. Jin Guangshan sat front and center at the head of the table, Jin Guangyao standing beside him.

“Jin Zixuan was away, while Jin Zixun didn’t have enough experience,” Lan Sizhui explained. “Thus, Jin Guangyao was the only one who stood by Jin Guangshan’s side.”

‘*None of this bodes well,*’ Wen Qing thought.

Jin Zixuan didn’t know whether to be grateful or frustrated that his other-self was gone.

It was hard to decide. At the very least, the simulated Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, Jiang Cheng, and Lan Wangji all wore solemn expressions. Even more concerningly, they said nothing in response to the words flying around.

“I knew it,” someone muttered.

“It would have happened sooner or later,” another agreed.

Casting a glance Jiang Cheng’s way, yet another whispered, “Let’s see how they intend on dealing with this.”

Madam Yu bristled: “Wei Wuxian acted without A-Cheng’s permission! It’s not his fault-”

“Fault?!” Wen Ruohan raised a brow. “I wasn’t aware that the Jiang Sect considered rescuing toddlers to be a sin.”

“It’s not! I know it’s not!” Madam Yu admitted. “But, after what *you did*, the fact that it was Wens he rescued will be the first thing anyone talks about!”

Normally, Wen Ruohan’s opinion of Madam Yu was low enough for him to discount essentially everything she had to say. Right now, however, he merely fell silent.

(She wasn’t wrong. Out of everyone here, *he* was the most responsible for what had happened to the Wen.)

And her concerns weren’t completely unjustified either. More and more of those gathered around turned their gazes toward Jiang Cheng, watching his reactions with bated breath. By comparison, Jin Guangyao’s summary of the situation went almost ignored.

“...Four inspectors were harmed. Around fifty of the remaining members of the Wen Sect managed to escape. Once they left, Wei Wuxian led them to the Burial Mounds and summoned hundreds of fierce corpses to patrol the mountain. Our people can’t get any further.”

Many of the watchers tensed, recalling, at once, what had happened the last time Wei Wuxian had ended up there. It was still because of the Wen Sect, but the context surrounding this situation was very different than it had been just a few years before. Now it was the only place he thought he could keep them safe.

‘*...Why didn’t he come back to the Jiang Sect?*’ Jiang Yanli thought. ‘*A-Cheng and I would have protected him. Why, before that, would A-Xian go back to…*’

To that dark, wretched, horrible place. Images of countless hands reaching up toward Wei Wuxian’s body — ready to tear him apart and devour the pieces in full — formed in Jiang Yanli’s mind. It was a place without life or light — with rotting flesh and little else. It was a place where Wei Wuxian had nearly died countless times.

Why had he gone back there?

No answer came. Instead, Jiang Cheng spoke next:

“What he did was indeed a bit too much. Sect Leader Jin, I apologize to you in his place.”

Because Wei Wuxian wouldn’t apologize for this; he didn’t regret it. It had been the right thing to do.

“If there’s any way for me to help in this situation, please let me know. I’ll definitely compensate the Jin Sect however I can,” he said.

Compensate the Jin Sect.

As if the *Jin Sect* had been the victim there.

Jin Zixuan clenched his hands into fists.

However, Jiang Cheng's overly generous words were far from enough for Jin Guangshan.

"Sect Leader Jiang, at first, for your sake, the LanlingJin Sect didn't intend on saying anything. However, some of the involved inspectors weren't from the Jin Sect, but other sects. That makes it…"

He trailed off uncomfortably.

Making Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, Lan Qiren, and Lan Wangji clench their hands into fists, tension taking over. They hadn't specifically recognized any of the inspectors, but all their sects had reportedly gained many new disciples during the war. And, even if it wasn't disciples of their sects that had been there, it was surely disciples of people they knew. How many of their fellow Sect Leaders had condoned this atrocity?

How were they going to trust anyone once the simulation was over?

The simulated Jiang Cheng, however, had a very different concern. He paused, then, withholding a sigh, rubbed at the space between his brows tiredly.

"...I apologize to all the Sect Leaders. Everyone, I must inform you that the Wen cultivator whom Wei Wuxian wanted to save is named Wen Ning. We owe him and his sister Wen Qing gratitude for what happened during the Sunshot Campaign."

"You owe them *gratitude?!*" Nie Mingjue repeated skeptically. "Didn't the Qishan Wen Sect nearly cause Yunmeng Jiang's annihilation during the Sunshot Campaign?"

'*What the Wen Sect does has nothing to do with us,' Wen Qing declared. 'We don't need to pay for their sins!'*

And yet here they were, doing exactly that.

Wen Qing had said that when Wei Wuxian had nothing. She had all the power in that situation; there was no need for her to make excuses if she didn't want to. She had genuinely never supported what Wen Ruohan had set out to do.

And then, even though she had no reason to think Wei Wuxian would ever be able to help her in return, she had done everything she could to get him and Jiang Cheng out safely.

Which was why it was quite strange that, after Nie Mingjue spoke, Jiang Cheng said nothing in return.

'*A-Cheng?*' Jiang Yanli wondered.

Jiang Cheng tensed, casting a glance over at the stone-faced Wen Qing before forcing himself to look away.

Perhaps having predicted their confusion, the simulation provided an explanation a moment later:

"Over the last few years, Uncle had been working late into the night every day," Jin Ling explained. "That day, just as he had decided to take an early rest, he was informed that he'd have to rush to Koi Tower because of the explosive news. He'd been suppressing his anger and fatigue for some time now. With his, um… with his natural… er…"

Jin Ling cleared his throat a few times as if to psych himself up, but stumbled over his words again. There was an exaggerated groan then a shuffling of papers.

This time, Lan Jingyi cleared his throat.

"With his natural competitiveness, he was already *quite agitated* that he had to apologize to *anyone*."

Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang both had to stifle laughs at Lan Jingyi's rather tactless way of speaking. Jiang Cheng flushed bright red.

"When he heard the former Sect Leader Nie mention what had happened to his sect again, hatred sprouted within him," Lan Jingyi declared. "This hatred was directed not only at everyone seated in that room, but also at Wei Wuxian."

And, suddenly, the whole situation felt much less funny than it had just moments before.

Finally, seeing that Jiang Cheng wasn't going to answer, Lan Xichen mentioned, "I've heard Wen Qing's name a few times before. I do not remember her having participated in the Sunshot Campaign's crimes."

"But she never stopped them either."

Except she *had*. Jiang Cheng knew she had. The watchers all turned to look at the simulated one.

He remained silent all the while.

"Wen Qing was one of Wen Ruohan's people. How could she have stood against him?" Lan Xichen continued.

However, uncompromising as always, Nie Mingjue responded, "If she responded with only silence rather than opposition, that's the same as indifference. She couldn't have been so naive as to hope she could be treated with respect while the Wen Sect committed evil without suffering the consequences once the Wen Sect was wiped out."

Yes, that was exactly what Nie Mingjue had always thought. But…

‘*The war only started after the Cloud Recesses* and *Lotus Pier were attacked,*’ Nie Mingjue thought. ‘*...Those sects weren’t the first ones the Wen destroyed.*’

(Just the first ones big enough to fight back. The first ones big enough to motivate the other great sects to fight back.)

Nie Mingjue had been willing to fight Wen Ruohan for years. However, he hadn’t actually done anything until he knew he had support from the other great sects. That was a logical decision; he’d get hundreds of people killed for no reason if he rushed in blindly. However, Wen Qing had acted without any help at all. How could his other self think he had *any right* to judge what Wen Qing had done?

And more than that-

They had seen the people Wei Wuxian took back. The fifty he rescued were not the entirety of the surviving Wens; they were only Wen Qing’s branch. The group was made up of two people who helped the Sunshot Campaign tremendously during the war, elders too frail to do much more than sit around, and a toddler who hadn’t even been born when the war began. What exactly was his other self expecting them to have done? Why would anyone in their right minds think that those people deserved what the Jin Sect had been doing to them?!

There was a lot his other self hadn’t been told.

And, because it was *Wens* and no one else, Nie Mingjue hadn’t bothered to look any deeper.

“Qing-guniang, I-” he began, only to cut off when she shook her head.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I didn’t expect anything else.”

And that was almost worse.

Thus far, the only person who had even tried to argue in favor of the other side of the matter was Lan Xichen. He was the only one who had both the thoughtfulness and reputation to speak on the matter. However, now, he fell silent.

‘*After what happened to Da-ge’s father, it makes sense that he would abhor Wen-dogs more than anything.* Lan Xichen thought. ‘*Especially when you add in his intolerance toward evil.*’

And, after thinking that, his protests stopped.

This time, both Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen winced. Watching themselves interact with Jin Guangyao had allowed them to make several observations from an outside perspective. Nie Mingjue had truly understood, for the first time, that him viewing others as his equals did not mean their situations were the same. People who had not gotten the advantages in life he had would have different considerations to make in different situations. When he took a third of the prey, it was celebrated; when Wei Wuxian did, it was scorned. When he waited before going against the Wens, it was strategic; when the weak, sickly, elderly Wens did, it was

cowardice. When he fought to protect his little brother, he was a hero; when Wen Qing did the same, she was overstepping her bounds.

As for Lan Xichen, his concerns were of a slightly different variety.

'*Is placating all I can do?*' he wondered, frowning as he watched. '*When Da-ge brought up concerns about Jin Guangyao I just told him not to worry. When Jin Guangyao brought up Da-ge's hate of him, I excused it as a misunderstanding. Now, even when I can clearly see that something is going wrong, I stay silent if I think I'll upset Da-ge. If I'd just pushed a little more-*'

He looked away, unwilling to ponder that thought any longer. Regret burrowed deep inside him, filling him with a near-physical pain.

(Of course, saying anything was much, much better than saying nothing at all.)

Jiang Cheng stared at his silent other self — who knew for a *fact* that Wen Qing had betrayed Wen Ruohan — and scowled deeply. To his side, he saw Jiang Yanli wringing her hands together nervously, Jin Zixuan torn between watching her and observing his father somewhat fearfully.

Lan Wangji's eyes became ice-cold.

At that moment, another sect leader spoke up:

"What Sect Leader Nie said is quite right! Besides, Wen Qing was one of Wen Ruohan's most trusted subordinates. You're telling me she never participated? I don't buy it!"

"Right?!"

"I'm in agreement too!"

"Is there any Wen-dog without a single drop of blood on their hands? I don't think so!"

As soon as the Wen Sect's crimes were brought up, the crowd boiled over. Soon, everyone was piping in with shouts and jeers, not allowing any one individual to be heard.

Wen Ruohan's frown deepened.

With the exception of some members of the Great Sects, every person there had bowed to the Wen Sect, once upon a time. They had thrown praises upon them and swore to do anything they could to lend a hand. Wen Ruohan hadn't been so foolish as to think that that loyalty was genuine — especially not after *he* started a war — but this sight still left a bitter taste in his mouth. He knew for a fact that Wen Qing had never helped him with things like that. Many of these sect leaders, on the other hand, had whispered information and accusations in Wen Ruohan's ears, using him to get rid of people they didn't like. He didn't mind — he was intending to get control of everyone, so the order didn't particularly matter — but to see those *same people* accuse Wen Qing of things they themselves had participated in…

It would be one thing if they were lying intentionally, but most people here didn't even seem to realize the hypocrisy. If he was in charge, none of them would be able to speak a word.

~~But he wasn't in charge. He had lost. And now Wei Wuxian would have to suffer the consequences.~~

Despite wanting to speak, Jin Guangshan found himself unable to be heard over the noise. Luckily for him, Jin Guangyao stood, managing to attract everyone's attention at once:

"Everyone, please calm down. That isn't the focus of what we're discussing today," he pointed out.

Jin Guangyao was truly the most useful secretary imaginable.

Recalling how the real Wei Wuxian had mentioned finding 'Meng Yao' in their world, Jin Zixuan quietly wondered how his half-brother was fairing.

Meanwhile, under Jin Guangyao's direction, numerous servants came forward carrying platters of fruit. Thanks to that distraction, the gathered cultivators quickly calmed down. Individually, they were all at least semi-capable individuals, but, when grouped up like this, they became easy for Jin Guangyao to shepherd around.

Taking advantage of the sudden silence, Jin Guangshan cleared his throat and said: "Sect Leader Jiang, this is most plainly a matter involving your sect. Normally I wouldn't have barged in-"

"Then don't!" Madam Yu snapped.

"-But, now that things have turned out this way, I feel a need to caution you regarding Wei Wuxian."

And, after seeing first-hand what was going on in that camp — seeing a *branding iron* wielded against the frail, the sick, the elderly, and against a *toddler* too young to speak — no one felt very willing to hear him out.

Unfortunately, the same did not hold true for their simulated selves.

"Go on," Jiang Cheng nodded.

"Sect Leader Jiang, Wei Wuxian is your right hand man. We all know you value him a lot," Jin Guangshan began. "However, it's hard to say whether or not he respects *you*."

'*Yes, very difficult to say. He just* gave up his core *for the brat, after all,*' Wen Ruohan scoffed. '*Jiang Wanyin wouldn't even be able to* be *a sect leader if it weren't for Wei Ying. What respect has he earned? This is exactly the problem with blood-based lineage; all these incompetent, untalented brats-*'

Except it was *his* ancestor who had started that tradition, wasn't it? And, as a lineage-given sect leader himself, he really didn't have any room to talk. Wasn't his own son one of the

most incompetent of all?

Unfortunately, Jin Guangshan's argument didn't get better from there.

"We can leave aside what Wei Wuxian did today for a moment," he continued. "In any case, I've been a sect leader for many years and yet I've never seen a servant be so arrogant — so proud. Have you heard what people are saying? Rumors have spread that everything the Yunmeng Jiang Sect accomplished during the Sunshot Campaign was thanks to Wei Wuxian and Wei Wuxian alone! What nonsense!"

Upon hearing that, the tension in Jiang Cheng's body seemed reborn anew.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Madam Yu snapped. "Jin Guangshan, what are you trying to say?!"

"Nothing, Madam," he assured at once, holding up his hands in surrender. "I'm merely repeating what I've heard from outsiders, I'm sure. Isn't it a genuine concern to have a disciple keep so much hidden from his sect leader — to have a disciple do so much on their own? A bit of concern, from one sect leader to another, seems justified to me."

"So he's a 'disciple' to you but a 'servant' to your counterpart?" Madam Jin scoffed. "You're not even mentioning what happened to the guards anymore. This is just about the ranks they have! Nothing you're saying is important!"

Jin Guangshan said nothing in response.

There was almost no need to. After all, within the simulation, various sect leaders were loudly proclaimed their support of Jin Guangshan's words. No one, not even Jiang Cheng, seemed to view Wei Wuxian's rank as irrelevant to the current discussion.

Nie Mingjue glared at his other self, wishing the man would speak up. Unfortunately, after the Wens were brought up, the simulated Sect Leader Nie had descended into a cold, uncompromising glare, barely appearing to hear the words being spoken around him.

"You see? Everyone's thinking it," Jin Guangshan pointed out. "And it only makes sense. Madams, whatever I'm saying now aside, the two of you have brought up social ranks *much* more frequently."

"What?!" Madam Yu snapped, Madam Jin raising herself up as well. They scoured through their memories, trying to find some evidence to the contrary, only to come up short.

'A-Li, stop peeling that!' Madam Yu snapped. 'You're the master here, not somebody's servant!'

Jiang Fengmian had frowned at her description, muttering a warning, 'San-niang.'

'Did I say something wrong?' she demanded, glaring at her husband. 'Servant.'

(Everyone knew exactly what she had been implying with that word. Especially since, right at the end, she had turned her gaze toward Wei Wuxian, gauging his reaction.)

'What?' she had asked. 'Not willing to hear that word?'

But she had been rightfully angry then! Her son was being forced into the Wens' camp while Wei Wuxian got a choice about whether he would go!

(Because the Wens hadn't *given* Jiang Cheng a choice.)

This was different, though. Now, Jin Guangshan was using those same word to hurt *her* son. She wasn't sure why yet, but he was clearly trying to manipulate Jiang Cheng toward his own ends.

(As though she hadn't used those words for that exact same purpose.)

And as for Madam Jin…

She had never once raised the social rank of the people she disliked as a point. Her own husband was one of the most powerful people in the realm, but there were few she hated more than him. However, she *had* used the circumstances of one's birth against people before. One had to look no further than how she treated her husband's illegitimate children to see that.

(The sin was her husband's, but there was nothing she could do to him. The only people she *could* take her anger out on were the women and children he had taken advantage of — the only people in this situation who had even less power than her. What right did she have to criticize Jin Guangshan's use of the same tactic?)

The others in the crowd frowned as well but, after a moment, looked away.

(Even Nie Mingjue had brought Jin Guangyao's status up once he was mad enough. Though to a lesser extent, Lan Qiren had also treated Wei Wuxian differently than the other students due to his parentage. Wen Ruohan had no room to talk when it came to morality and Lan Xichen's simulated self, though not contributing, remained silent as all this occurred. Jiang Cheng didn't want to speak against a sect leader, Jiang Yanli knew she wouldn't be listened to, and Wen Qing didn't feel like she could speak to anyone given that Wei Wuxian was doing this to help *her*.)

Meanwhile, with every murmur that came out of the gathered cultivators' mouths, Jiang Cheng's face darkened just a bit more.

However-

"A-Die, what… what A-Niang and Madam Yu have said in the past isn't important," Jin Zixuan said. "And whether Wei Wuxian's a servant or not doesn't make him wrong! What you were doing — what *our sect* did to those Wens — isn't something we can just excuse! You-"

"A-Xuan," Jin Guangshan said once, warningly. "That's enough-"

"It's not," Lan Wangji disagreed calmly. Jin Guangshan glanced over at him, making Lan Wangji tense up, but he didn't take back what he had just said. He remained seated, looking

Jin Guangshan directly in the eyes.

(His other self had messed up. He had done something horrible to Wei Wuxian. That didn't justify standing aside now.)

Jin Guangshan frowned at the opposition but hesitated, knowing Lan Qiren's presence would make it difficult to confront Lan Wangji directly.

Nie Huaisang sat back, merely watching the surrounding interactions without voicing any of his own thoughts aloud.

While they discussed, the simulated sect leaders continued to speak.

"I heard Wei Wuxian thinks of himself as worth an entire sect on his own."

"I heard that too," another sect leader agreed. "It's preposterous. That servant was only able to accomplish what he did because he was up against a large number of amateurs freshly drafted by the Wen Sect! The ones we had to fight were actual trained fighters."

"A servant went against servants. The only actual fighter who Wei Wuxian defeated was Wen Zhuliu, a servant of the Wen Clan! Being better than other servants doesn't mean anything at all!"

"Agreed!"

With every mention of the word "servant," the simulated Jiang Cheng seemed to grow angrier and angrier.

And, perhaps noticing, Jin Guangshan leaned closer to Jiang Cheng and said, "Sect Leader Jiang, we've all heard rumors about Lotus Pier. Despite his position and the authority you grant him, he doesn't even bother trying to teach your disciples, does he?"

"I heard he did that a lot before the war," someone muttered.

A nod: "I guess he doesn't feel like the Yunmeng Jiang Sect is worth his time anymore."

The two who had spoken were almost too quiet to be heard, mostly just speaking amongst themselves, but Jiang Cheng's fists clenched tightly nonetheless. Jin Guangshan gave a shallow sigh:

"In an event as important as the flower banquet, he dared to throw a fit right in front of you, leaving however he pleased. He even dared to say something like 'I don't care what Sect Leader Jiang Wanyin thinks of me at all!' Everyone who was there heard it with their own ears-"

"No."

Everyone froze. Slowly, they glanced over. It was Hanguang-jun that had spoken. Jin Guangshan furrowed his brows slightly in confusion.

Thus, Lan Wangji elaborated, "I did not hear Wei Ying say that. I didn't hear him express even the slightest bit of disrespect towards Sect Leader Jiang."

The watchers had seen it all. They could draw their own conclusions easily enough.

"Ah, it seems the rumors have gotten quite out of hand," Jin Guangshan sighed. "I apologize; it seems I should have investigated more deeply."

Wen Ruohan just rolled his eyes.

At that moment, someone cleared their throat.

"Hanguang-jun rarely spoke at times like this," Lan Sizhui announced. "Even when people debated cultivation techniques during conferences, he only spoke when others questioned or challenged him. At such times, he, with the utmost concision, overcame their lengthy arguments without fault. Apart from this, he almost never spoke up."

And thus, Jin Guangshan was a little taken aback, not quite sure how to continue.

Unfortunately, Jin Guangyao was now on his side.

"Really? I see. That day, Young Master Wei stormed into Koi Tower with such a tremendous force. He said so many things, each more shocking than the last. I had thought he said something along those lines, but I suppose I can't quite remember either."

Nie Mingjue frowned at those words but didn't outwardly comment. Everyone else, however, appeared swept along.

Ah, Jin Guangyao was proving himself to be astoundingly useful time and time again. Perhaps, when this was over, Jin Guangshan would see if there was any way to keep that mind of his useful while eliminating any chance of betrayal.

(Perhaps, if he hired a bandit to cut off Jin Guangyao's limbs, the boy could serve him with just that mouth of his.)

(Come to think of it, that might be a good solution for Wei Wuxian, too, so long as he could be separated from resentful energy.)

However, unaware of the true value Wei Wuxian offered, the simulated Jin Guangshan just cleared his throat, continuing, "Anyhow, that boy's always been arrogant."

There were nods from all around.

One Sect Leader cleared their throat as well, announcing, "To be honest, I've wanted to say this since quite some time ago, but, while Wei Wuxian did make a few accomplishments during the Sunshot Campaign, there were quite a few guest cultivators who did even more than him!"

Wen Ruohan scoffed.

“-I’ve never seen anyone as full of themselves as him! Excuse my bluntness, but he’s the son of a servant. How could the son of a servant be so arrogant?”

And there it was again. He was ‘the son of a servant’ whose main flaw was being ‘arrogant.’ Not a single person there was even bothering to ask about the *actual situation* they were gathered to discuss.

Wen Qing sighed: “It’s like a crowd of gossiping housewives.”

Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen both flinched at that description.

And Jiang Cheng frowned.

After encountering the Xuanwu of Slaughter — right before everything fell apart — Wei Wuxian had turned toward him.

‘I need to ask you something. I had a perfume sachet somewhere around my waist. It was empty. Did you see it?’

‘The one MianMian gave to you? I didn’t.’

Wei Wuxian sighed regretfully: ‘I’ll have to find another one later.’

‘You’re at it again,’ Jiang Cheng frowned. ‘You really like her, don’t you? The girl does look fine, but it’s obvious she doesn’t have much background. She might not even be a disciple. She seems like the daughter of a servant.’

Wei Wuxian had then pointed out that he shared the same status. Jiang Cheng’s response had been that Wei Wuxian was different, not that being the child of a servant wasn’t bad. There was no reason for him to say something like that; no one would want *to be the child of a servant. It would be stupid to attach yourself to one for something as important as marriage.*

(Though, now that Jiang Cheng thought about it, Lan Wangji probably wouldn’t mind.)

Sometime later, after the war, Wei Wuxian had groaned, asking, ‘What do you mean Jin Zixuan’s his only son? Isn’t Jin Guangyao here now? Jin Guangyao seems so much better than him.’

‘So what if he’s better?’ Jiang Cheng responded. ‘No matter how much better he is, no matter how clever, he’ll never be anything more than a servant who greets guests. He can’t compare with Jin Zixuan.’

But now Wei Wuxian was so *much* better than Jiang Cheng that people *were* making comparisons.

‘Yunmeng’s Lotus Pier was really the star of the show this time, huh? Almost all the spirits and corpses were summoned to the Yunmeng Jiang Sect’s grounds. There’ll definitely be a number of cultivators interested in joining them.’

'Well, what can we do about that? It's not our fault our sects don't have a Wei Wuxian!' Sect Leader Yao sighed.

"Indeed! He's always had inflated sense of his own accomplishments! I could name a dozen people who did even more!" that same Sect Leader Yao declared now, not showing a hint of doubt in his own words. The simulated Jiang Cheng's aura turned darker and darker with each passing second.

And Jiang Cheng laughed.

'*Some 'Two Prides of Yunmeng' we are,'* he thought.

The crowd's complaints continued on, public perception of Wei Wuxian decreasing by the second:

"In the beginning, Sect Leader Jin asked for his Stygian Tiger Seal with nothing but good intentions! He was just worried Wei Wuxian wouldn't be able to control it, which would lead to disaster."

"Right?! But Wei Wuxian just jumped to assumptions, immediately assuming everyone was after that weapon of his! What a joke. In terms of treasures, what sect doesn't have a few?"

'Sure, but are those 'few' treasures weapons that can kill thousands of skilled cultivators in a single night?' Lan Qiren thought. '*Even assuming that number is exaggerated, I can't think of anything that would serve as a comparison.*'

Wei Wuxian himself thought it was a weapon that shouldn't have been created. Considering what he had managed without it, that said more than anything how dangerous it was.

~~As for what Jin Guangshan's intentions regarding it were, no one wanted to think about that quite yet.~~

The criticism continued on:

"Those with wicked intentions are bound to see wicked intentions in others."

"Indeed. Perhaps that should have been our first sign that there was something wrong with him."

"I knew something would eventually happen if he continued on the ghostly path! Look! His killing intent has been revealed already! Killing us indiscriminately because of a few Wen-dogs-"

"It's not killing indiscriminately, is it?"

And just like that, the chain of criticism was broken. Even Lan Wangji glanced over at that voice, finding its source to be a beautiful woman standing beside one of the farther sect leaders. Her robes were a bold pink and her hair, which had previously been done

in two youthful side buns, was now pulled back into a single bun that allowed her bangs to frame her face. Despite the change, she was instantly recognizable.

"Luo Qingyang," Jiang Yanli realized.

"MianMian!" Nie Huaisang shouted almost simultaneously, smile wide.

"What do you mean?" one cultivator asked, unable to ignore the singular voice of disagreement.

"No, just…" she hesitated, realizing at once how many powerful people were looking her way. "I don't mean anything beyond what I said. There's no need to be so agitated, everyone. I just feel describing it as 'killing indiscriminately' isn't an appropriate description."

A man to her right scoffed: "How is it unsuitable? Wei Wuxian has been killing indiscriminately since the start of the Sunshot Campaign-"

"What?"

"No one can disprove that!"

"The Sunshot Campaign was a battlefield," Luo Qingyang carefully pointed out. "Under that logic, everyone who participated in battle would be 'killing indiscriminately.'"

One of the funniest things about this was that Wen Ruohan actually *had* been 'killing indiscriminately' for years. He hadn't heard this man voice any disapproval back then. Rather, he had been rather happy when one of Wen Ruohan's whims had led to one of his rivals suffering greatly. Then again, Wen Ruohan wasn't 'the son of a servant,' so perhaps those same rules didn't apply.

(Wei Wuxian had done this to save *his people*. If Wen Ruohan was alive — if Wen Ruohan was there — none of this would be happening at all.)

But he wasn't there. As such, the strongest people in the land stared down the one, singular voice of protest. She trembled slightly where she stood, unable to completely hide her fear, but continued speaking nonetheless.

"If we consider it as it stands, I really don't think it's right to say he's 'killing indiscriminately.' After all, there is a reason. If the inspectors really abused the prisoners and killed Wen Ning, it wouldn't be killing indiscriminately, but getting revenge."

"Jin-gongzi."

"Hm?" he asked, looking over at Wen Qing.

"You... said Luo Qingyang worked at your sect, right? At one of the sub-branches?"

“Uh, yeah,” he confirmed. “Though it looks like she's become a disciple of another sect in the years since. I… don’t know her very well.”

Catching onto Wen Qing’s intentions, Jiang Yanli asked, “Would you be able to find her if you wanted to?”

“Probably?”

She and Wen Qing made eye contact, nodding simultaneously.

This woman was putting herself in danger to protect their brothers when it seemed like no one else would. They would very much like to meet her, after this.

Unfortunately, they seemed to be the only ones who thought so.

“You’re almost laughable!” one man shouted, standing up in his rage. “Don’t tell me you think he was right to have killed our people?! Don’t tell me you’re going to praise it as an act of justice!”

“We still don’t know whether or not the inspectors really did those things, either.”

“So you decided to have a conference without investigating at all?! What are we even there for then?!” Nie Mingjue growled, barely able to speak through his rage. If he had been the one to save the Wens instead of Wei Wuxian….

Forget doing a proper investigation; everyone would simply assume that the righteous Sect Leader Nie had enacted justice and the guards therefore must have deserved it, truth be damned.

“It seems no one’s there to fairly judge what occurred,” Lan Qiren observed. “They’ve already decided on what outcome they want.”

This was just a formality to get there.

(But that was only so long as the great sects supported it. If Nie Mingjue had put aside his anger, if Lan Xichen had investigated further, if Lan Wangji had gone with Wei Wuxian, if Jiang Cheng had told the full story, if Wen Ruohan hadn’t started this at all…)

(But, right now, there was nothing they could do.)

And thus, the protests continued:

“How are we supposed to know who did what?! It’s not like any of us were there to see it!”

“That’s right, all the inspectors who lived said that they definitely didn’t abuse the prisoners-”

“Except that they *definitely did,*” Madam Yu scoffed. “You’re trying to pressure the Jiang Sect over *this*?! Only a fool wouldn’t be able to see the truth! Fell off a cliff? Wen Ning had a

flagpole sticking through his chest!"

Wen Qing flinched.

And Madam Yu groaned.

"Why didn't Wei Wuxian just kill all of the inspectors if this was what the result was going to be?" she wondered.

"...He had no proof that they'd done anything wrong," Lan Wangji pointed out. "Because he *wasn't* killing indiscriminately."

He only killed the ones Wen Ning knew were responsible for his own death. As per usual, however, this choice to be righteous caused him nothing but trouble later on.

'*Do more,*' Lan Wangji thought, staring at this older self. '*Do more — say more — do something!*'

He could be as logical and honest as he wanted. Would that do anything to sway this crowd?

'*Tell them about the child! There was a child there! There was a child who's seen his family members murdered one by one — who might have watched Wen Ning get stabbed through the heart for all we know!*'

But, of course, Hanguang-jun didn't yet know about him. He wasn't even really listening to MianMian's conversation, busy with his own. But-

'*Tell them to believe Wei Ying. Tell them to trust him! Tell them he's not what they think he is! Stand by him!*'

Which his other self would do fifteen years later.

Long after Wei Wuxian died.

Everything they had seen and felt in the far-future segments hadn't been experienced yet by those within the simulation. They didn't know the first thing about Wei Wuxian and so felt free to speculate as they pleased.

"I'll bet Wen Ning died after falling off a cliff by accident! Wei Wuxian just wanted an excuse to kill them!"

"Right?! The inspectors even went so far as to properly bury his corpse, and yet this is what they received in turn!"

"How disappointing."

But Luo Qingyang persevered, adding, "The inspectors are scared that they'll be considered responsible for abusing and killing those people. Of course they'd insist he fell off on his own-"

“You can stop bothering. I don’t want to hear anything else from someone who so obviously has ulterior motives.”

“Ulterior motives?!” Madam Jin repeated, realizing what he was alluding to at once. “You little-”

“What? Explain!” Luo Qingyang requested, her face flushed. “What do you mean in saying I have ulterior motives?!”

“What need is there for me to explain? I’m sure we all know. Let me guess: you fell for him back in the cave of the Xuanwu of Slaughter just because he flirted with you? You’re still arguing in his favor, calling black, white no matter how irrational that seems. Ha. Women will always be women.”

A cold chill ran down the watcher’s spines at the combined fury of Madam Jin, Wen Qing, and Madam Yu.

(Once he got used to the angry glares beside him, Jin Guangshan just shrugged to himself. Those men had a point but, in her defense, Wei Wuxian *was* very pretty.)

And moreso-

“If they remember the Xuanwu cave, then they should remember A-Xian risking his own life to save them all, shouldn’t they?” Jiang Yanli asked. “I remember some of the people there. They’re here now. Why won’t they say anything?!”

Lan Wangji frowned deeper and Jiang Cheng had to look away.

If someone else would just speak-

“Ah, so that’s why,” someone muttered. “That definitely explains why she’s so desperate to speak up for Wei Wuxian.”

Nie Mingjue growled.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” another sighed. “And just look at how innocent you pretend to be. Even your heart has grown sideways. How could you be expected to be rational?”

Lan Xichen clenched his fists.

“Stop wasting your time on her. I don’t even know how she wound up a member of my sect. And she even found her way into the Golden Pavillion. I’m embarrassed just standing beside her.”

MianMian flushed red.

“Fine! Fine!” she shouted. “Your voices are louder! Fine! You’re the rational ones!”

Many of those who had spoken were from her sect. She clenched her teeth together, tearing her sect’s crest off her outer robe with great force and slamming it onto the

table with a *bang*. The Sect Leaders and Lan Wangji, who hadn't been paying much attention until then, turned to look at her in surprise.

She turned on her heel and marched away.

"If you're taking it off, don't put it on again. You really think you're so capable?!"

Because what could this mean except that she was leaving the sect?

"Who does she think she is, going as she pleases?" another member of her sect asked. "Who cares? What's she doing this to prove?"

"Ha. Women will always be women. They quit after you say a few harsh words-"

Madam Yu would *very much* enjoy a conversation with this particular person.

"In a few days, she'll definitely come back on her own."

"There's no doubt. After all, she finally managed to change from 'the daughter of a servant' to a disciple. She'll return soon."

"I don't think so~" Nie Huaisang commented with a sing-song tone.

"But… why would she just leave her *sect?!*" Jiang Cheng asked, mystified. "What's she going to do now? I doubt any sect will want to accept her now."

"Maybe she's fine with that," Wen Qing said. "Maybe that's better than staying there."

"But-" Jin Zixuan paused, a little stunned by what he'd just seen. "But… I can't imagine it would have been easy for her to raise her status to being a disciple of an actual sect. Is she… really just going to throw that away?"

Madam Yu certainly couldn't imagine doing that. Neither could Jiang Cheng, Madam Jin, Lan Qiren, or many of the others there. But…

But Wei Wuxian had. They weren't sure when, exactly, but he was clearly not a member of the Jiang Sect at the time of his death. The son of a servant and the daughter of a servant had been willing to give up everything they'd worked for. Their convictions were stronger than any materialistic intentions. Still...

"Everyone, she is gone already. Let's settle down," Lan Xichen requested. Immediately, the whispers that had been passed around vanished at once, everyone settling in.

It was just like a couple segments ago, when continuous, logical protests from Jiang Yanli did nothing, but a single word from Lan Xichen was enough to make Jin Zixun flee. Lan Xichen had never had anyone treat him the way they treated Luo Qingyang.

(And, similarly, Xichen had always trusted Jin Guangyao because of how the man acted around him. Unfortunately, as was now becoming frighteningly clear, people didn't treat him they way they treated everyone else.)

And thus, one by one, conversation became directed toward Wei Wuxian again. No one else spoke up in his defense.

(It was hard to tell, now, whether that was because no one believed in him or because no one thought they'd be heard.)

As Nie Mingjue had asked, what was even the point of this conference anymore? He laughed once.

"I don't understand," he muttered, rubbing between his brows. "No one listened to her at all. She was right. She was… how can they all be so…."

"Blind?" Wen Ruohan suggested. "You're right; they are. People like them need to be *controlled* before they can be allowed to have any power."

"You shut your mouth," Nie Mingjue hissed. "Having you completely in charge of them would be even worse than how things are now!"

"Really?" Wen Ruohan asked, directing his gaze out to the simulation once more. "Are you sure?"

Because, all around, bitter hatred spewed from everyone's mouths as they recounted Wei Wuxian's many misdeeds. How unfortunate the prison guards were. How evil the Wens who were saved must be.

Smiling once more, Jin Guangshan turned to Jiang Cheng and said, "He's been plotting to go to the Burial Mounds for a while, hasn't he?"

"*Why* would he want to go back *there?!*" Nie Huaisang asked, remembering all too well the horrors Wei Wuxian had experienced his first time through.

(Things no one at that conference knew.)

"With his skills, it would be child's play for him to set up a sect of his own," Jin Guangshan pointed out. "He's using this as a chance to leave the Jiang Sect so that he can do whatever he pleases. You put so much work into rebuilding Yunmeng Jiang, and yet he goes around stirring up trouble at every opportunity. He doesn't care about you at all."

Jiang Cheng paused, then, almost as an afterthought, protested, "That probably isn't the case. Wei Wuxian has been like this since he was young. Even my father couldn't do anything about him."

But Jiang Fengmian had never *wanted* to stifle him.

And Jiang Cheng….

"Even Fengmian-xiong couldn't do anything about him, huh?" Jin Guangshan chuckled lightly. "Fengmian-xiong just favored him."

Jiang Cheng flinched.

'Wei Ying, listen to me. Protect A-Cheng. You have to protect him even if you die, understand?' Madam Yu shouted.

Jiang Fengmian paused, then, slowly, reached out to ruffle Jiang Cheng's hair, whispering, 'A-Cheng, be well.'

He knew he was going to die. These would be his last words to his son.

Then, he turned to Wei Wuxian.

'A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him.'

There was most certainly a favorite between the two of them. It was not Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng hadn't been thinking clearly then. It was no surprise that his simulated self hadn't been able to fully analyze his parents' last words. He couldn't be blamed for some lingering insecurities.

But, if he took actions *based* on those insecurities — based on something that *wasn't even true* — then what would that mean?

"Sect Leader Jiang, you're not like your father," Jin Guangshan continued. "It's been a couple of years since the re-establishment of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect. Now is precisely the time to display your power. And yet Wei Wuxian doesn't even know how to avoid suspicion and judgment. What will the Jiang Sect's new disciples think if they see him? Don't tell me you'll let them view him as their role model and look down on you?"

With every word, the darkness in Jiang Cheng's gaze grew.

"Sect Leader Jin, you've said enough. I'll go to the Burial Mound and deal with this."

Satisfaction colored Jin Guangshan's expression.

"That's the right idea. Sect Leader Jiang, there are some things, some people, you shouldn't put up with."

Jiang Cheng nodded, standing up. Taking that cue, many other sect leaders stood up with him, all walking out as one. The sparks of hatred in this group were still burning bright.

Jin Guangshan gave a light sigh.

'*It's not like I don't understand, but… ah, my other self, you have such a narrow view of the situation.*'

He watched the simulated Jin Guangshan send everyone off with cold eyes.

‘*All you know is that Wei Wuxian got access to some form of new cultivation. For all you know, he read about it in a book. He hasn’t had time to show his true inventive power yet. I understand trying to separate Wei Wuxian from the Jiang Sect — there’s no reason to allow them to keep that kind of power if you can stop it — but you haven’t seen even a fraction of what Wei Wuxian is capable of. If you knew about all the improvements he’ll make to cultivation as a whole in just a few short years, I’m sure you’d be willing to let him stay in the Jiang Sect so long as you get Jiang Yanli to marry A-Xuan. At that point, it’ll just be a matter of time before there’s an opportunity to kill the Jiang brat and absorb the Jiang Sect into us.*’

However, as his other-self didn’t yet understand Wei Wuxian’s potential, he had deemed that too high a risk to accept and had instead gone for cutting him off.

“How unfortunate,” Jin Guangshan mumbled.

Behind fields and fields of Sparks Amidst Snow, the Venerated Triad was gathered.

“You’ve worked hard, A-Yao,” Lan Xichen said, nodding once at him in acknowledgement.

Jin Guangyao smiled in return: “It wasn’t hard work. Those who had to truly work hard were the ones attending to Sect Leader Jiang’s table. Some parts of it crumbled under his rage. Seems like he was really angered by all this.”

Jiang Cheng blushed.

To the side, Nie Mingjue scoffed: “Sure. All that clever talk was hard work indeed.”

The sarcasm was obvious.

Jin Guangyao had done many, many unforgivable things. However, Nie Mingjue couldn’t help but shift uncomfortably as he watched this.

Jin Guangyao’s smile froze in place. Lan Xichen remained silent. After hesitating for a few more moments, Jin Guangyao directed his attention to Lan Xichen once more.

“Er-ge, do you know where Wangji is? I saw him leave early.”

In response, Lan Xichen gestured toward the entrance to the garden. Lan Wangji stood there across from Luo Qingyang, the two of them conversing with solemn expressions.

Jiang Cheng squirmed in his seat.

(It wasn’t like the simulated Jiang Cheng hadn’t said anything. He *had* explained that he and Wei Wuxian owed them. He just… could have said a tad bit more.)

A moment later, Lan Wangji bowed, saluting her respectfully. There was a weight on his shoulders and a tension in his brows. Luo Qingyang returned the salute, appearing even more grave than he had.

Quietly, with barely enough motion to be seen, Jiang Yanli bowed as well. She knew full well why she had not been present at the conference. Regardless of her rank in society, this was a gathering for cultivators; she only counted as one by the loosest of definitions. Despite the years her mother had spent expressing her disapproval about it, this was the first time Jiang Yanli found herself truly wishing she could change that.

Right now, all she could do was be grateful for those who managed to protect Wei Wuxian in her place.

(Protect him from, mainly, the people gathered in this room watching the simulation. Out of the corner of her eye, Jiang Yanli saw several people looking away uncomfortably. After all, they had been right alongside Wei Wuxian every step of the way. Not once had he done anything they could truly say was immoral.)

Then, at last, Lan Wangji and Luo Qingyang rose. They nodded at each other one last time before she walked down the steps of Koi Tower, having left behind her sect and rank for the sake of what was right.

"That woman has more backbone than the mob of her sect," Nie Mingjue commented, impressed. Jin Guangyao nodded in agreement.

Nie Mingjue frowned. Not, this time, because of Jin Guangyao; his eyes were now focused entirely on his other-self. The simulated Nie Mingjue admired Luo Qingyang's nerve but not her opinions. He didn't agree with her, so he wouldn't speak up. Because the people Wei Wuxian was defending were *Wens*.

But Wei Wuxian was *right*, so-

"Two days later, Uncle Jiang left for Yiling," Jin Ling explained.

Jiang Cheng flinched. It wasn't for the words themselves, but rather the speaker. He hadn't forgotten about Jin Ling through all this, but the specifics — all the misinformation Jin Ling had, and all the hate Jiang Cheng's other self had encouraged for years — hadn't been at the forefront of his mind until this moment.

The simulated Jiang Cheng flew through the air, thirty disciples trailing after. The large crowd cast intimidating shadows on the world below as they cut through the sky at a rapid speed.

For a moment, Jiang Cheng thought back to the third segment, which showed him and Wei Wuxian entering the Cloud Recesses for the first time. Would the version of him from back then ever be able to imagine that he would bring a crowd like this to meet his Da-shixiong?

No. Definitely not.

They flew down, arriving at the entrance to the Burial Mounds. It was a flat area, far away from the pointed cliffs Wei Wuxian had been dropped into a terrifyingly short time ago. All around, corpses roamed.

Nie Huaisang swallowed nervously.

The Jiang cultivators held back for a moment, watching carefully. However, no matter how long they waited, the corpses never moved to do anything. Tentatively, one disciple stepped over the boundary-

A low roar of warning came out of every corpse in the vicinity.

Even the watchers tensed up at the reaction, still vividly recalling what happened to Wei Wuxian last time he was here.

(In the back of their minds, there was a small ringing sensation. It was a command, left by the patriarch, which they had no choice but to follow: 'don't let anyone in. Everyone is dangerous.')

(Including, apparently, the Jiang.)

Luckily that command didn't ~~yet~~ apply to Jiang Cheng. When he marched forward the corpses stepped aside, only returning to prevent Jiang Cheng's disciples from following after him.

"Wait at the bottom of the mountain," Jiang Cheng called back at them. "I'll go alone."

Before the disciples had time to protest, Jiang Cheng had already taken off again. He marched through the forest, not paying any mind to the blackened bamboo or leafless trees along the path. Calling it a 'path' might be a little too generous. The stones and dirt here were exactly the same ashy material as everything else on the mounds. Weeds were plentiful and Jiang Cheng occasionally had to step around large stones in the path. It wasn't a trail — trodden down by thousands of steps every day. It was a place that had never seen human life before. After all, no one would be stupid enough to stay here willingly.

(Unless they had no other choice, of course.)

After a great deal of walking, Jiang Cheng finally began to hear voices in the distance. He marched in that direction, his steps forceful and uncompromising. The weeds were crushed beneath his feet. Soon, he came across an area with a few tree stumps scattered about in an arrangement that resembled tables and chairs. Wei Wuxian sat on one; Wen Qing on the other. In the distance, an elderly man was hard at work plowing a field.

Allowing his leg to bounce as he thought, Wei Wuxian suggested: "How about potatoes?"

"No." The woman shook her head. "Radishes. Radishes are easy to grow. They don't die as easily, either. Potatoes are hard to look after."

"Radishes are disgusting," Wei Wuxian countered.

Jiang Cheng snorted.

And the watchers paused.

"...What?" Nie Mingjue asked.

"This is… not what I was expecting them to be talking about," Lan Xichen admitted.

"Yeah. Really terrifying threats to the cultivation world, these two are," Nie Huaisang piped in, earning him an (unfelt) whack on the head from Nie Mingjue.

As if they had already known Jiang Cheng was there, Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing turned around, unsurprised, to watch him approach. Once he got close enough, Wei Wuxian stood up and walked past Jiang Cheng without a word. Just as silently, Jiang Cheng followed him up the mountain, away from the Wens.

Jiang Cheng frowned, then shook his head. It would be silly to assume Wei Wuxian was intentionally leading him away from the weakened Wens. There was no reason for him to. There was probably something for them to look at on top of the mountain. Jiang Cheng wasn't his far future self ~~yet~~.

But Wei Wuxian's walk continued on. Soon, they passed by another group of people from the Wen Sect. The cultivators were busying themselves with a plank of wood, and, having taken off their robes, looked no different from villagers one would be able to find anywhere. The coarse cloth they wore now was much better for working, and the hammers and nails in their hands appeared to have long-since replaced their swords. As soon as Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng got close enough to be seen by them, the workers froze.

Their gazes didn't shift from Jiang Cheng's impressive robes until he was out of their sight once more.

Before the simulation, Nie Mingjue would have given almost anything to have the arrogant Wens look at the other sects that way.

It didn't feel so good, anymore.

Finally:

"...What are you doing?" Jiang Cheng asked.

Glancing back, Wei Wuxian responded, "Can't you tell? We're building houses."

"Building houses? Then what about the ones we saw at the bottom, tilling dirt? Don't tell me you're actually going to try farming here!"

"Of course we are. Didn't you already hear me and Wen Qing talking about it?"

Right. And the watchers had known basically from the beginning that Wei Wuxian would end up in the Burial Mounds once more. However, this still felt too fast. Wei Wuxian and the Wens were already planning to live out the rest of their lives here, but… surely there were other options? Surely, they had a few other ideas to try too.

‘*We Lans speak of our righteousness to any who arrive,*’ Lan Qiren thought, watching with heavy eyes. ‘*Boasting is against the rules, and yet the standards we hold everyone to speak of that nonetheless. Be humble. Be strict with yourself. Be ethical. Be just.*’

But, upon saving innocents (including a *toddler*), Wei Wuxian had not gone to them. He hadn’t gone to the righteous Lans, the brave Nie, or even the Jiang.

“He doesn’t trust us,” Lan Qiren muttered.

“Is he wrong not to?” Lan Wangji wondered, quietly.

No one spoke in response.

Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes and shook his head, asking, “Do you really intend on stationing yourself here in the long run? Can people survive in such a dammed place?”

“They shouldn’t have to.”

“I survived here for three months,” Wei Wuxian responded calmly.

As if those three months hadn’t been a never ending fight for his life.

“I can’t believe you’re trying to grow food on a mountain of corpses. Will it even be edible?” Jiang Cheng furrowed his brows.

“Believe me. When people are really hungry, they’ll eat anything they can.”

Nie Huaisang brought a hand to his mouth, feeling nausea rise up within him. The other heirs and Jiang Yanli had turned pale at the words and Wen Ruohan’s frown deepened.

Then, in an expression of what they had all been thinking, Jiang Cheng asked, “You’re not coming back to Lotus Pier?”

Wei Wuxian just laughed, explaining, “Yunmeng and Yiling are so close. I’ll just sneak back when I feel like it.”

Jiang Cheng snorted: “You wish.”

It was the same sort of interactions they used to have before the war — before everything that followed. However, even after seeing it, the watchers couldn't manage to relax.

(And, despite how many times she had tried to sow a rift between the two of them, Madam Yu found herself growing increasingly tense as time wore on.)

”Wei Wuxian, if you do-”

Jiang Cheng cut off. When Wei Wuxian glanced back, he saw a small figure hanging onto Jiang Cheng’s leg.

“A-Yuan?!” Wen Qing gasped out.

The child was about one or two, barely tall enough to come up to Jiang Cheng’s knees. Raising his chubby chin, the toddler looked up at Jiang Cheng with dark, round eyes.

Seeing him, Jiang Yanli breathed out a sigh of relief. It had been horrible to hear the sect leaders debate earlier — though calling ‘let’s accuse Wei Wuxian of anything we can’ a ‘debate’ was more than a little generous. It was beyond clear that no one there had any idea what the camps had actually been like. Putting aside the farce of an excuse used to catch Wen Ning (something Wei Wuxian *had* told the sect leaders about), the conditions of the camp were far too cruel. The fact that the prisoners included a child too young to have even been *alive* at the start of the war was something everyone needed to know.

But now, at last, her brother had seen.

Unfortunately, Jiang Cheng had no love in him at all.

“Ugh,” Jiang Cheng scowled, shaking his leg. “Where did this kid come from? Get him away from me!”

“Where did the kid *come from*?” Lan Xichen repeated, perplexed. Because obviously the answer was “the camps.”

A thought which *should* be filling Jiang Cheng with horror right now.

Wei Wuxian bent down and picked up the child, holding him in his arms as he said, “What do you mean ‘get him away?’ Can’t you talk properly? And, A-Yuan, why do you hug the legs of everyone you meet? Off you go — hey! Don’t bite your nails right after you’ve been playing with mud. Do you know what that mud is made of? Move your hand. Don’t touch my face either.”

Despite the cross words, Wei Wuxian’s mockingly stern attitude only caused A-Yuan’s smile to widen. For a moment, a strange feeling of inadequacy came over Madam Yu.

(She had rarely spoken to Cangse Sanren. Even less so after their children were born. Thus, she had only seen the wretched woman taking care of her son once. Wei Changze did most of the scolding in that family, but he had been away speaking with Jiang Fengmian at the time. Thus, when Wei Wuxian went a little too far into the lakes and nearly got himself hurt, it had fallen on Cangse Sanren to be the stern one.)

(Her manner of speaking at that time was almost exactly how Wei Wuxian spoke now.)

“Honestly, get your hands out of your mouth,” Wei Wuxian ordered, forcefully prying them out. “Where’s granny?”

At that moment, an elderly woman came hobbling over. She walked using a cane, her white hair standing out against the dark clothes she now wore. When her eyes landed on Jiang Cheng’s expensive robes, her eyes widened and she bowed lowly.

Wen Ruohan gritted his teeth.

Leaning down, Wei Wuxian placed A-Yuan by her side, ordering, "Go play over there."

A-Yuan nodded once and walked away, holding onto his limping grandmother's hand as he did. As they got farther and farther, A-Yuan began glancing back at Wei Wuxian nervously, as if trying to ensure he was still there.

~~**Whether A-Yuan consciously realized it or not, he and his family's lives would be over if Wei Wuxian decided to go home with Jiang Cheng instead.**~~

And, watching the pair depart, Jiang Cheng couldn't help but laugh: "The Sect Leaders all thought you'd gathered some of the leftover Wen forces and crowned yourself king of the hill. Seems it's only the old, the weak, the women, and the children."

Nie Mingjue had to look away at that.

As Wen Qing said, no one in her branch had fought in the war. They had probably done more for the Sunshot Campaign's side in all honesty. But, after the war ended, any members of her branch who could have fought ended up "falling off a cliff" before the year was up. The lineup of corpses at the camp had made that more than clear. Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing were the only ones in the Burial Mounds who could possibly pose any danger. And yet-

'Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, Jin Clan of Lanling, Lan Clan of Gusu, and Nie Clan of Qinghe have all taken the lead and burned the burial mounds to the ground,' the tavern guest gossiped.

Those guests had been wrong about nearly everything they said. However-

Upon meeting Jin Ling for the first time, Wei Wuxian learned the truth of Mo Xuanyu's parentage, muttering, 'At the first siege of the burial mounds, Jiang Cheng ranked first, and the Jin Clan must have been second. How hilarious that I've got his bastard son's body now.'

'First' in terms of how hard Jiang Cheng tried to destroy the Burial Mounds.

But Jiang Cheng himself had just admitted there was no army here, so-

"Where's Wen Ning?" Jiang Cheng asked. Wei Wuxian, who had begun grinning at the sect leaders' great misconceptions about the situation, glanced over slowly.

"...Why are you asking about him?" he wondered.

"There are countless people who have been asking me questions about that one," Jiang Cheng responded coldly. "Who could I get answers from but you?"

Tilting his head in acknowledgement of that, Wei Wuxian began to walk once more. Jiang Cheng joined him, the pair moving side by side until they reached a large cave. It was almost pitch-black inside, a small fire made on a few dried branches being the only thing keeping it alight. Candles would be too much of a luxury for them to afford at the current time. The dry, dirt-covered ground crackled under their steps.

Clink.

Jiang Cheng paused and looked down, realizing he had knocked something over with his feet. It was a half-finished compass, various characters and inscriptions carved out on the metal inside.

Jiang Cheng moved his leg to nudge at it again-

"Don't kick that. It's useful," Wei Wuxian called out. "I haven't finished that one yet."

"The Compass of Evil," Lan Qiren realized. "He started working on it already?"

(Or, rather, why start working on it here at all? Why were they building houses? Why did they genuinely feel like a death trap that tried to eat Wei Wuxian alive was the only place they could turn to?)

Right as Wei Wuxian picked the compass up, Jiang Cheng accidentally stepped on a crumpled up flag.

"Don't ruin it! That one's useful as well."

And it was. It definitely, definitely was.

Once, Wen Ruohan had given Wen Qing the finest medical equipment imaginable. She had grand halls, the finest needles, the cleanest work spaces, and a sect full of people who could cater to her needs. It would be impossible to not notice her talent and a crime to not put it to good use. Her betrayal was not something that could be overlooked, but, seeing how things had played out now, it was hard to treat her decision as a simple matter.

No matter what, Wen Ruohan's choice to allow her skills to grow couldn't be considered wrong.

If given the chance, Wen Ruohan would have given Wei Wuxian all the resources he could possibly have needed to see his creations through.

Instead, these priceless ideas laid in abandoned, crumpled heaps on the rocky ground.

Wei Wuxian carefully set them to the side.

"You're the one who just left them on the floor," Jiang Cheng pointed out. "It's not anyone's fault but yours if someone steps on them."

"I live here alone. What does it matter if I scatter a few things around?"

"A-Xian, you live *here?*" Jiang Yanli asked, looking around once more. Her mood sank further and Jiang Cheng felt his stomach twist uncomfortably.

(While this was better than Wei Wuxian's first time in the Burial Mounds, words could not express how little that meant.)

The pair walked deeper into the cave. An assortment of both recognizable and unrecognizable talismans were scattered along the walls and floor. Some were even

crumpled into balls or ripped to pieces, burn marks along their edges.

(Failed products, it would appear.)

The deeper in they went, the messier it got; Jiang Cheng's annoyance grew in synch. Finally, they managed to reach the main area of the cave. There was a person lying on the ground there, covered head to toe in talismans which each contained a faint, red glow.

The watchers had experienced a lot of resentful energy over the past few weeks. They had felt it wild and uncontrolled in the beasts all around, then watched it become seduced and restrained while under Wei Wuxian's control. This, though, felt like nothing they had experienced before.

"It's warm," Wen Qing muttered softly, kneeling down next to her brother's corpse. It wasn't really warm — not in the sense of temperature, at least — but the energy it gave off was soft in a way resentful energy had never felt before. It was coaxing and gentle; soothing, rather than rough.

Jiang Cheng scowled.

"You live here?" he asked. "Where do you sleep?"

Pointing at a pair of crumpled blankets in the corner, Wei Wuxian easily answered, "With those, I can sleep anywhere."

'Believe me. When people are really hungry, they'll eat anything they can.'

Lan Wangji took a deep breath, trying to stop his hands from trembling.

Jiang Cheng glanced back down at the motionless Wen Ning with a look of disdain, asking, "What happened to him?"

"He was a bit too fierce. I was worried he'd go out of control, so I've sealed him up so he can't move for the time being."

Wei Wuxian thought *Wen Ning* was being too fierce. That skittish, shy, trembling child who couldn't even look Wei Wuxian in the eyes when they first met had become *this*.

Although it was covered up by talismans, the part of his chest that had been crushed in was still impossible to ignore.

"Wasn't he a shy stutterer when he was alive?" Jiang Cheng asked, having noticed the same. "Why's he so fierce now?"

Although he was the one who asked, he didn't sound very curious. It was more confrontational, if anything — challenging Wei Wuxian's words to make sure all the information he was being given was right.

‘*So that I can do the right thing,*’ Jiang Cheng thought. ‘*So that I know the truth. So that I won’t be led astray.*’

In the back of his mind, some small part of Jiang Cheng told him that, if his and Wei Wuxian’s positions were reversed, Wei Wuxian would have a lot more questions about A-Yuan’s presence right now. Jiang Cheng’s future self, however, barely seemed to care about Wen Ning’s state, much less the child’s.

Jiang Cheng frowned slightly, looking down at Wen Ning’s corpse with a complicated expression. Not too long ago, he had been in the exact same position, refusing to eat or drink or otherwise move after losing his core, preferring to simply let himself waste away. At that time, Wei Wuxian, Wen Qing, and Baoshan Sanren saved him, but it was Wen Ning that made the first step to offer help. If he hadn’t done that, it was hard to say what would have happened.

And now that same boy was here — dead.

Jiang Cheng looked away. A moment later, unable to hide his curiosity, he looked up at his other-self, who continued staring down at his former savior with contempt.

Given the stress the simulated Jiang Cheng was under when he lost his core, it wouldn’t be surprising at all if he didn’t remember much of that time. However, he had admitted that he and Wei Wuxian owed the Wen siblings for what they had done. He knew full well that they had put their lives on the line to protect him, even if he didn’t remember the details.

Right?

But it was hard to describe the look in Sect Leader Jiang’s eyes as gratitude. He waited for Wei Wuxian to respond — for him to justify the seal he had placed on Wen Ning.

Thus, Wei Wuxian did:

“Wen Ning was indeed quite a timid person. But, as a result, he hid all his feelings within, bottling them up no matter what happened. Hatred, anger, fear, anxiety, pain — these emotions were pent up inside him for too long. They culminated into this after he died. The more nice a person is, the scarier they are when they lose their temper. The quieter he was in life, the fiercer he’ll be after death.”

“Haven’t you always said ‘the fiercer, the better?’” Jiang Cheng recalled. “The heavier the resentful energy is, the greater the hatred and the stronger the power.”

“That’s right, but… I don’t want to make Wen Ning into that kind of a corpse.”

Jiang Cheng scowled, annoyed at Wei Wuxian’s vague words.

It was a reaction that made sense. There were multiple kinds of corpses: walking corpses, fierce corpses, and regular just-dead ones. The most useful kind was fierce corpses, which Wen Ning already was, and Wei Wuxian also very clearly wasn’t trying to purge the energy to make him a regular corpse.

So:

“What do you want to make him into?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“I want to restore his consciousness.”

Jiang Cheng sneered and rolled his eyes: “Are you half asleep? Awaken his consciousness? What’d be the difference between a fierce corpse and a human being, then?”

Despite his question, it was clear that he didn’t think Wei Wuxian would be able to even come close to that. Which was the correct response if you didn’t know what the Yiling Patriarch was capable of.

But…

‘*Why don’t you know?*’ Wen Ruohan wondered. ‘*There was plenty of time between the Sunshot Campaign and this for Wei Ying to start inventing. Why did he only start after he arrived in Yiling? And it wasn’t desperation — I can’t imagine the Compass of Evil is useful for him right now. Were you and the other sects really so disapproving of demonic cultivation that he wouldn’t even* try *to create these things? That at least makes sense for the other sects — the more Wei Ying creates, the more power the Jiang Sect has — but why would* you *not encourage him to try?*’

One perhaps had to look no further than the conference that had just occurred to answer that.

‘*You fool,*’ Wen Ruohan thought. ‘*You could have had anything. Wei Ying would have made you anything — would have made you unstoppable — so long as his morals aligned with yours. You could still have everything. If you side with him right now, accept his foolish decision to save what remains of my sect, then you will have the world at your feet.*’

(And, though that didn’t really occur to Wen Ruohan, it would also be the right thing to do.)

But the future Jiang Cheng just scoffed once more.

“If you really do succeed, no one would need to cultivate. No one would even need to be human! They could just come to you and ask you to make them a fierce corpse!” he pointed out.

Wei Wuxian laughed, acknowledging, “You’re right. I know full well that this is too fucking hard. But I’ve already boasted to his sister that I’ll be able to do it so now everyone here thinks I can.”

He shrugged, still grinning.

“I don’t have a choice in this matter anymore. I have to succeed or I’ll have no face left-”

A clang of metal coming to an abrupt halt rang through the air.

One moment, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had been talking casually with one another.

In the next, Jiang Cheng had unsheathed Sandu and gone for Wen Ning's neck. If Wei Wuxian hadn't reacted as quickly as he did, blocking the blade with his bare hand, Wen Ning would have lost his head.

"What are you doing?!" Wei Wuxian snapped.

The answer was simultaneously unreachable and painfully clear. Jiang Cheng had unsheathed his sword and tried to cut off Wen Ning's head. Wen Ning — who had helped the future's juniors countless times, who had repeatedly saved Jin Ling, who had already saved *Jiang Cheng* from Wen Ning's own family — would have been destroyed.

'Wei… Wei-gongzi, I'm here to help you,' he said.

Wen Ning, who had come to the battlefield solely to help them, would have been dead for good.

Wen Qing felt the world go red.

"*How dare you?!*" she shrieked.

Jiang Cheng jumped at her voice, falling back into his seat. Protective, Madam Yu stood up at once to face the doctor, hissing, "Step back!" at her, but Wen Qing's glare didn't falter in the slightest. Her eyes only narrowed in fury.

"What am I doing? I'd like to ask what you think *you're* doing!" the simulated Jiang Cheng shouted back. "Wei Wuxian, you've been quite full of yourself these days, haven't you?"

'I've never seen anyone as full of themselves as him! Excuse my bluntness, but he's the son of a servant. How could the son of a servant be so arrogant?'

Wei Wuxian glared, snapping back, "Do you think I'd suggest something so preposterous if I had any other choice? Wen Qing and the others-"

"You've got no choice because Wen Qing and the other Wens are forcing you? Well, now you're forcing me to respond! A few days ago, at Koi Tower, countless sects surrounded me, demanding an explanation. My only choice was to come."

But the explanation he was looking for was right there. He had seen it himself just a short while ago. That explanation had wrapped itself around Jiang Cheng's leg, lifting its chubby cheeks to smile up at him with an unhesitant joy. The Sects were demanding an explanation? What part of a toddler being among those who were saved — being among 'the old, the weak, the women, and the children' — wasn't enough of an explanation for Jiang Cheng?

A moment after he thought that, the answer came to Nie Mingjue.

'*It's because they're Wens, isn't it.*'

And Jiang Cheng's hostility, fueled by everything that had been said to him thus far, seemed to crackle beneath his skin like lightning.

Slowly, Wen Qing's gaze turned to the side. A circle of glowing light was inscribed on the floor, covered in characters written by Wei Wuxian's hand and pulsing with power. By stepping into it, Jiang Fengmian had rejoined the outside world. Wen Qing couldn't do anything to the others while in the simulation, but that all changed once she got out-

"A-Qing, sit back down," Wen Ruohan ordered, calmly.

"Sit down?" she hissed, turning to face him. "You want me to just *sit down?!*"

The future Jiang Cheng's gaze slowly drifted over to Wen Ning once more. His grip tightened around his blade. In response, Wei Wuxian made the surrounding energy spike to attention, ready to intervene again if need be.

Wen Qing hadn't been able to do anything for her brother no matter what she saw happen to him. There was no one she could speak to — reason with — no one she could curse. The ones who had been involved in Wen Ning's death weren't here. Wen Qing didn't even know their names! They may have all promised to not punish anyone for things that had yet to occur, but the fact that this was an inability instead of a *choice* made it that much harder to swallow. Her brother, her A-Ning, was the best. He was so, so good. He had saved Wei Wuxian when he didn't have to — he had saved Jiang Cheng — he had gotten the Jiang parents' ashes back for them! This, right here, wasn't right. It wasn't *fair*. There had to be something she could do.

(And there was… so long as she left.)

"A-Qing," Wen Ruohan spoke again. "This isn't the end. There's plenty more for us to see."

"I know," she acknowledged. "I know that. But I can't just-"

"My only choice was to come," Jiang Cheng repeated.

Wei Wuxian looked back at him, unwilling to step aside.

"Fine! Then tell me, what exactly am I supposed to say to them?" Jiang Cheng asked. "What should I do when they all come to me demanding answers?"

"They want an explanation? There's nothing further to say; we're even already. The inspectors beat Wen Ning to death and Wen Ning became a fierce corpse and killed them. A tooth for a tooth, a life for a life — it's over now."

"It's over? How could it be? Do you have any idea how many eyes are watching you right now?! How many are watching your seal? If there's an opportunity there, you won't be in the right even if you are!"

And there, again, was a confession.

'Was he wrong?' Lan Wangji asked.

'...No, he's not wrong,' Jin Guangyao said. 'But it's because he's right that he can't say such a thing in front of them, right?'

Jin Guangyao had said it. Jiang Cheng had said it. Who knew how many other people agreed. It almost seemed like *everyone* thought Wei Wuxian was making the morally right decision here. And yet, fifteen years later, everyone would agree that Wei Wuxian was the most vile scum to have ever walked the earth. Jin Ling had stabbed him because of that.

And, as Jin Zixuan glanced to his father on his right, he couldn't help but recall that it was the *Jin Sect* that had used Xue Yang to reform the seal in question.

However, almost at a loss, Wei Wuxian just sighed: "It's as you've said: I won't be right even if I am. What can I do except jail myself here?"

Wen Ruohan's eyes narrowed at those words.

"What can you do? Isn't it obvious?" Jiang Cheng asked back, and, using his sword as a pointer, he gestured to Wen Ning's collapsed form. "The only way to settle things now is to end it before they get the chance to!"

"End what?"

"Burn this corpse right now and return the leftovers of the Wen Sect!"

With that declaration, Jiang Cheng began marching back out of the cave. Wei Wuxian ran around, cutting Jiang Cheng off and spreading his arms to block out all sight of the Wens. His gaze was angry and desperate. He was protecting them.

***From* Jiang Cheng.**

"Are you insane?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Without me, the only thing waiting for them will be death!"

"Why do you care about what kind of an end they'll meet? If they end up dead then fine! What does it have to do with you?!"

"Jiang Cheng! Watch what you say!" Wei Wuxian snapped. "Take it back! Don't forget who it was that helped us get Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu's corpses! Who returned to us the ashes that are in Lotus Pier right now?! Who took us in while we were being chased by Wen Chao?!"

"You're the one who should shut your mouth! Yes, they helped us before, but why can't you understand that right now any member of the Wen Clan is an enemy of the world?! No matter who they are, those with the surname Wen have committed the most heinous crime. Those who protect the Wen Sect will be condemned by everyone! All cultivators loathe the Wen-dogs so badly that they'll be happier the more painful a death those dogs receive! Whoever protects them will be standing against the world! Nobody will speak in their favor, and no one will speak for you."

And had they not, just a few minutes ago, watched a conference proving that very fact?

(Except it wasn't quite true, was it? Lan Wangji had tried. Luo Qingyang had tried. Lan Xichen had spoken up and made even Nie Mingjue pause and listen. They had waited for Jiang Cheng to explain. And then, because he was having a "bad day," Jiang Wanyin remained silent and the conference went on.)

There was a pause in the world.

"...I don't need anyone to speak for me," Wei Wuxian said.

"You can't even protect *yourself* now!" Jiang Cheng pointed out. "Why care about them? Whoever stands by them now will be labeled a public enemy."

"They never joined in any slaughter — they saved lives! You know that!"

"And so what?! They're from the Wen-"

Before anyone could react, Wei Wuxian had shot forward and punched Jiang Cheng in the jaw. The Sect Leader flew back and then stumbled a few steps, a shocked look on his face. He truly hadn't expected that.

The two martial brothers stared at each other, neither able to speak a word.

The simulation paused.

And, in the lull that followed, a laugh was heard.

"What was it the future Jiang Wanyin said, back then?" Wen Ruohan wondered aloud. "When he brought a *dog* to Wei Ying's feet? You told him he hadn't been careful enough with what he said to Jin Ling, didn't you?"

Slowly, the Chief Cultivator turned to look at him.

"'Have you forgotten who's the reason Jin Ling's had so many whispers behind his back?'" Wen Ruohan recited. "'You've forgotten the things you've said. The promise you made. But don't you dare forget how his parents died.'"

Lan Wangji glanced over.

"I wonder… how much worse is it to *remember* what A-Qing and her brother did for you and *still* accept their deaths?"

Jiang Cheng couldn't move.

After all, once that was brought up, the countless other lies told by the future became impossible to ignore. Wei Wuxian being "responsible" for the destruction of the Jiang Sect — the fact that him saving Jin Zixuan and Lan Wangji was used as the Wen Sect's excuse — was accepted as common knowledge. The "Wen army" he had apparently gathered together was the same. Although they didn't yet know what happened to Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan, these past experiences made the "truths" of the future impossible to believe. The future Jiang Cheng was, therefore, impossible to trust.

However, unfettered by that, Madam Yu marched forward.

“What are you trying to say, Wen Ruohan?” she asked, standing in front of her son. “You can’t blame this all on A-Cheng. It’s the sects as a whole pushing him into this situation. Everyone will consider him an enemy if he sides with them. It’s not his fault people hate the Wen Sect so much! None of this would be happening if you hadn’t started the war!”

A statement which was, unquestionably, true.

“A-Cheng is doing the best he can right now! How many options do you think he has? He can’t just do whatever he wants. Not everyone is you. Not everyone is Wei Wuxian!”

“*Clearly,*” Wen Ruohan snapped back, and the weight of that one word destroyed any relief Madam Yu’s words had instilled in Jiang Cheng. Their concerns only grew when they realized Wen Ruohan had focused his gaze on the inscriptions covering the floor below.

The Chief Cultivator’s smile gained a sharp edge.

‘*It’s almost laughable. Are they really defending this?*’ he wondered, eyes gaining a slight red hue as they reflected the light of the array. ‘*If you decide that what you can gain is worth the actions you take then fine! I certainly have no room to complain. But… you can’t do these things — make these choices — and still genuinely believe you’re in the right! No one is gaining anything from this! The Wens in the labor camp weren’t being applied to anything useful, they were just people the sects wanted to hurt. Isolating Wei Wuxian will indeed bring the Jiang Sect’s power down, but… you can’t just* throw away *a talent like him. That only takes away value from the world. There’s no point! There’s nothing to gain. They’re doing this because they’ve deluded themselves into thinking they’re in the right so all of this-*’

It was all-

It was just-

It was happening for *no reason*. Half the people involved didn’t even realize this was what they were being led to do. Wen Ruohan must have gone insane when he decided it would be okay to let Jiang Fengmian and Wen Chao leave the simulation. *This* was what the cultivation world got up to without his presence. Jiang Fengmian was too cowardly to stop it and Wen Chao would surely only make it worse. He needed to get out — find Wei Wuxian — find the unconscious forms of the other Sect Leaders and *make sure they-*

“Sect Leader!” Wen Qing shouted at once.

He paused.

Then, silently, he glanced back.

“...We have more to see,” she said. Her fists were clenched together tightly. Some of Wen Ruohan’s bloodlust had begun to slip out in the past few minutes, setting everyone else in the simulation on edge. Nie Mingjue had stood up, blocking off Wen Ruohan’s view of Nie Huaisang and Madam Yu had done the same with her children. The weaker cultivators had

fallen to their knees, unable to remain standing under this. Despite that, Wen Qing managed to maintain eye contact with the Chief Cultivator, not faltering even a little.

She took a slow breath out.

"...It's like you said," she continued, "We have a lot more to see. It will be a waste to act too hastily and miss out on everything else we need to learn."

Because, in all likelihood, something much worse was about to come.

Thus, just like Wen Qing had a few minutes before, Wen Ruohan forced himself to calm as well. As much as it bothered them, they both knew the best thing to do right now was to wait and see.

The simulation was still frozen, the future Jiang Cheng's stunned expression on full display. Even when Wen Ruohan's rage dissipated the simulation did not continue. It seemed it had overestimated the amount of time they would need to talk.

An awkward silence spread over the crowd. Jiang Cheng felt the most awkward of all. In his mind, various memories began to play.

'Jiang Cheng, listen up. When you become sect leader, I'll be your subordinate. I'll follow your lead just like my father followed your father. The Lan Clan has its Twin Jades of Lan; our Jiang Clan will have its Two Prides of Yunmeng! If anyone dares to say you're not good enough, I'll beat them up myself!'

Wei Wuxian's job was supposed to be protecting Jiang Cheng from others. That's how this was all going to work out. The only reason it might not, according to the initial segments of the simulation, was that Wei Wuxian would betray the Jiang.

And yet, right now, even the future Jiang Cheng had admitted that Wei Wuxian was in the right. It was just that, much like after the fall of Lotus Pier, what was 'right' wasn't Jiang Cheng's priority:

'Why? Why? Just why?!' Jiang Cheng had shouted. 'Are you happy now? Are you satisfied?! Why did you have to save Lan Wangji? Why did you do that? I don't care if Lan Wangji or Jin Zixuan dies! Just let them die! What's their deaths got to do with us? With our sect? Why did this have to happen? Why?!'

And then, just now…

'Why do you care about what kind of an end they'll meet? If they end up dead then fine! What does it have to do with you?!'

Except the real Jiang Cheng *had* gotten to know Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan. He did care if they died. And, even more than just themselves, if Jin Zixuan died, there would be no Jin Ling.

(And besides, that wasn't even why the Wens were there. They had found an excuse to burn down the Cloud Recesses first; if Wei Wuxian had really just stood aside they would have

found a different reason to come. They were there to set up Supervisory Offices. Punishing Wei Wuxian had just been an added bonus.)

(And right now, in much the same manner, the Wens didn't matter. This was about the seal and Wei Wuxian's power. If they thought there was a chance they could acquire those things then morality wasn't a factor anymore.)

Which, logically speaking, would mean…

"A-Cheng?" Jiang Yanli whispered, softly.

Jiang Cheng flinched.

"A-Cheng," she whispered again, stepping closer. Jiang Cheng stepped back, keeping his head down. For perhaps the first time he could recall, he was too scared to look his sister in the eyes.

What would he see if he glanced up now?

"A-Cheng, please look at me," she requested. However, he did not comply.

'Do what is right, even if it seems impossible.' How many times had his father repeated that to him? How many times had his mother screamed that, when she accused him of favoring Wei Wuxian? The reason why had always been simple: Wei Wuxian understood the Sect's motto better than him. He embodied it without even trying to.

A fact he had just proven once again.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jiang Cheng saw Wen Qing standing silently to the side. She and Wen Ruohan appeared to be having a strange staring contest with each other, communicating something non-verbally. Jiang Cheng felt nothing but hate for Sect Leader Wen. What else could he feel when staring at the man who had ordered his parent's execution? Wen Ruohan had killed some of Jiang Cheng's family — why *shouldn't* Jiang Cheng get to do the same to him?!

Well, for one, in the simulation Wen Ruohan was already long-dead.

And two: Wen Qing had fought back too.

~~And three, even if she hadn't, Jiang Cheng knew, logically, that she didn't deserve death.~~

And Wen Ning and A-Yuan-

"A-Jie," he muttered. "A-Jie, I-"

Jiang Yanli wrapped her arms around him and Jiang Cheng fell silent once more. They still couldn't touch, but the implied hug was felt nonetheless. The warmth Jiang Cheng knew would be there wrapped around him comfortingly.

“It’s okay, A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli whispered. “It’s okay. I won’t let this happen. I-I can’t fight, but I won’t let this happen! I won’t let A-Xian go through this. I’ll be right there with you if this happens to us and we’ll figure out a way to help him together!”

“Me too!” Jin Zixuan added. “I-I swear! My sect won’t do anything like this again! And if-if they do, I’ll be right beside you.”

Jin Guangshan frowned at the declaration.

“Us as well,” Lan Xichen agreed, Lan Wangji nodding too. Nie Huaisang looked over at his brother tentatively but grinned upon receiving a firm nod of agreement.

“We’ll all be prepared,” Lan Qiren confirmed. “We’ll keep anyone in a situation like this safe. This won’t happen. Not here. They won’t have to live somewhere like the Burial Mounds again.”

And that would be good. That would be perfect, but-

“I don’t think the *Burial Mounds* are the problem.”

The words slipped out before Jiang Cheng could think them through. Once released, they were impossible to take back.

(It was *their sects* that would launch the siege, after all. Rather than trying protecting them, doing nothing might lead to the best outcome there was.)

No one was quite sure how to respond to that.

Then, in the back of the room, Wen Ruohan began to laugh.

When the simulation resumed, his laughter wasn’t finished yet. Thus, it served as an unnerving backdrop over Jiang Cheng’s next words:

“Wei Wuxian, don’t you understand?” he asked, straightening himself up. “When you’re on their side, you’re a bizarre genius — a miraculous hero — a flower that blooms alone. But, the second your voice differs from theirs, you become a criminal: you’ll have lost your mind, ignored morality, and walked the crooked path.”

Which might indeed be true.

So Jiang Cheng’s solution, with all his power as the leader of one of the Four Great Sects, was to join the “them” instead.

(How many of those at that conference were equally certain Wei Wuxian was in the right and just unwilling to speak up?)

“Wei Wuxian! Do you really think you’re immune to their condemnation? Do you really think you can do whatever you want? That you can be righteous alone? There’s no precedent for something like this!”

“Then I’ll *be* the precedent!” Wei Wuxian shouted back.

“Have you really not realized what the situation at hand is like? Do you seriously need me to say it out loud?!” Jiang Cheng marched forward and grabbed onto Wei Wuxian's collar, shaking him as he shouted, “If you insist on protecting them, then I won’t be able to protect you!”

“Then there’s no need for you to protect me! Just go!”

Somehow, those words seemed to shock Jiang Cheng more than the punch did. He could do nothing but stare as Wei Wuxian brought a hand up, knocking Jiang Cheng’s grip off of him.

This Jiang Cheng still wanted to protect him. This Jiang Cheng was still trying to protect him. But, if Wei Wuxian wasn’t going to concede, they might have found a limit to what Jiang Cheng was willing to do.

“Just go. Leave me alone,” Wei Wuxian requested, his eyes dimming in defeat. “Tell the world I defected. From now on, no matter what Wei Wuxian does, it has nothing to do with the Yunmeng Jiang Clan.”

“What?” Madam Yu asked. Jiang Yanli’s eyes grew wide and Wen Qing’s face became pale. Jin Zixuan was trying to look everywhere at once, gauging others’ reactions as if doubting what he had just heard.

Lan Wangji stepped forward.

“Wei Ying,” he muttered softly. “Wei Ying, you won’t have any protection at all then.”

He would truly be cut off from them.

Madam Yu stood still, muttering, “But-but they said he… why would he….”

‘You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!’

Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu had both made him promise to protect Jiang Cheng. His choices were now putting the sect in danger. However, unlike Wen Zhuliu, his ‘debt’ wasn’t worth more to him than the lives of innocents. So instead…

“You’re doing this… all for the Wen Sect?” Jiang Cheng asked, face blank and uncomprehending. “Wei Wuxian, do you have a savior complex or something? Is it that you’ll die if you don’t stir up trouble?!”

“*Shut up!*” Jiang Cheng hissed, unable to standing listening to his other self for even a moment longer.

But Wei Wuxian barely seemed to register what Jiang Cheng had said, merely responding, “...That’s why we should cut ties now. In case I do anything that could affect the Yunmeng Jiang Sect in the future.”

It was a kind of loyalty that, for all of Wen Ruohan's accomplishments, he had never managed to find. It wasn't Wen Zhuliu's mindless obedience, but it wasn't Meng Yao's treachery either. Perhaps, if he had made different choices, Wen Qing would have offered him something like this. Perhaps not.

But-

'*Surely, surely, Jiang Wanyin won't be stupid enough to throw this away.*'

However, at that moment, an expression they had never seen on him before crossed Jiang Cheng's face. It was half desperation, some disbelief, some denial, and some hate. Just like Jin Ling had narrated before, this hate did not appear to be directed at just the situation, but rather at Wei Wuxian himself.

"...It's just like my mother said," he muttered. "You really do bring our sect nothing but trouble."

Jiang Cheng flinched once again.

"Attempt the impossible, huh? Fine. You understand our sect's motto. Better than I do — better than all of us do!"

He winced once more.

Jiang Cheng resheathed Sandu and, tone indifferent, said, "Let's arrange for a duel."

"What?" Jiang Yanli whispered.

At that moment, although the images before them changed to reflect what was being said, narration took over the explanation. With a heavy tone, Lan Sizhui read aloud:

"Three days later, the Sect Leader of the YunmengJiang Sect, Jiang Wanyin, had a duel with Wei Wuxian. They met in Yiling. When negotiations failed, they began to battle. Under Wei Wuxian's command, the fierce corpse Wen Ning struck Jiang Cheng once, breaking one of his arms. Jiang Cheng stabbed Wei Wuxian."

Sandu impaled his gut.

Wen Qing flinched, pressing against that spot on her own body unconsciously. That kind of an injury would stall even a cultivator. If it was experienced by someone without a core-

'*Surely, if my theory is correct, Wei Wuxian would have told him by now, right?*'

So maybe she was wrong. But, even then-

"Both sides suffered losses. They spat out mouthfuls of blood and cursed each other. In the public eye, they had finally fallen out. After the fight, Sect Leader Jiang made an announcement to the world:

“Wei Wuxian has betrayed the sect and publicly regards all cultivation sects as his enemy! Yunmeng Jiang hereby expels him, breaking all ties and drawing a clear line between us! From now on, no matter what he does, it will have nothing to do with the Yunmeng Jiang Clan!”

The simulation drew to a close.

In the silence that followed, those last lines replayed in everyone’s minds.

‘From now on, no matter what he does, it will have nothing to do with the Yunmeng Jiang Clan!’

Fine. Wei Wuxian had agreed to that.

‘Yunmeng Jiang hereby expels him, breaking all ties and drawing a clear line between him and us.’

That cut off some of Wei Wuxian’s options but it wasn’t the end of the world. He and Wen Qing had already started planning on becoming self-sufficient within the Mounds.

‘Wei Wuxian has betrayed the sect and publicly regards all cultivation sects as his enemy!’

“Well,” Nie Huaisang muttered. “That changes things.”

Everyone flinched.

(With the exception of Jin Guangshan, who only sighed in disappointment at the poor choices his other self had made.)

Slowly, bit by bit, everyone turned to look at Jiang Cheng. He flinched and, in the next moment, Madam Yu was standing in front of him again.

“What?!” she snapped. “Is there a problem?!”

“...Your son appears to have inherited your temper, Madam Yu,” Lan Qiren couldn’t help but comment. The words made Jiang Cheng clench his fists together tightly enough to draw blood. At that moment, a memory formed:

‘I shouldn’t blame him? If he hadn’t fought with Zixuan, none of this would have happened! Ha. Ever since you’ve brought him here, you’ve always favored him. Even over your own son! If it was Jiang Cheng who made a scene would you rush to Gusu like you did? Never!’

Then, after the Xuanwu Cave — after Wei Wuxian had almost died saving everyone — after Jiang Cheng got jealous…

‘He’s not strict with me. He just doesn’t like me,’ Jiang Cheng muttered.

‘What kind of person can’t stand his own son? Of course he likes you!' Wei Wuxian insisted back.

Perhaps already knowing that, if it came down to it, he would be ordered to put his life on the line to protect Jiang Cheng over himself.

But Jiang Cheng had insisted, 'It's true. He can't stand my mom, so he can't stand me either.'

That wasn't entirely true, but it wasn't completely false either. And this temper, right here, was exactly what Jiang Fengmian had wanted to change about him. This was exactly the sort of thing he had gotten lectured about that day. Because Wei Wuxian was always so much better — understood the sect's motto so much better — while Jiang Cheng-

'It serves you right to be bored to death! You shouldn't have played hero, and you shouldn't have cared for such a hell of a thing!'

In other words, 'you should have let the love of your life and Jin Ling's father die.'

'A-Cheng, there are some things that should never be said even if you're angry,' Jiang Fengmian had said.

And what was it that Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi had just said? His future self had been working late into the night. Right when he decided to take an early rest, he had been summoned to the conference. He'd had to apologize to everyone, which made his anger worse.

'When he heard the former Sect Leader Nie mentioned what had happened to his sect again, hatred sprouted within him,' Lan Jingyi declared. 'This hatred was directed not only at everyone seated in the room, but also at Wei Wuxian.'

'A-Cheng, there are some things that should never be said even if you're angry.'

Switching 'my Shixiong has decided to leave the sect,' to 'Wei Wuxian has betrayed the sect and publicly regards all cultivation sects as his enemy' probably counted under the bracket of 'things that should not be said.' Jiang Fengmian, in the end, had shown he loved Jiang Cheng more. He had always loved Jiang Cheng more. And Madam Yu's Zidian had responded to his commands — she loved *him* — and he had gone back to save her, too. He loved them.

However, this was still a part of them Jiang Fengmian disliked.

(And now, because Jiang Cheng never listened, the sects would be burning the Burial Mounds to the ground.)

Although reacting less strongly than her son, Madam Yu couldn't help but recall the same things. She had always known she had a quick temper and, throughout the years, she had heard no end to the complaints about it whispered behind her back. Her own sect, her husband, the Jiang Sect's disciples….

~~Well, hadn't they had a point? It was exactly that temper of hers that led the Wens to burn the Jiang Sect down, right? Of course Jiang Fengmian hadn't wanted to marry her; she destroyed the sect and then blamed Wei Wuxian.~~

Jiang Cheng had always taken after Madam Yu more closely than Jiang Yanli. That was something Madam Yu had always been fully aware of.

‘Sect Leader Jiang, take a good look at your biological son! Jiang Cheng is your flesh and blood!’ she shouted at him, knowing full well he and Cangse Sanren had never had an affair. ‘Even if you don’t like him because I’m his mother, he’s still your son!’

Because, as Lan Qiren said, Jiang Cheng had truly inherited that temper of hers.

They had wondered from the beginning of the simulation how Wei Wuxian could have become an enemy of the sects. The truth they now had was almost *unsatisfying* compared to what they had expected. It should be more. Jiang Cheng having a string of bad days shouldn’t have been a factor. Wei Wuxian should have done something truly wrong before this and-

“Then again, it’s not like the rest of us are all uninvolved,” Nie Mingjue muttered.

Everyone turned his way.

“Da-ge?” Nie Huaisang asked.

“A bunch of us were at that conference, weren’t we? Part of the reason Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin split up was because they thought we would do something to the Jiang Sect, right? If I’d just shut my mouth back when Xichen started pointing out that Wen Qing hadn’t hurt anyone-”

“It’s hard to say what would have happened,” Wen Qing interrupted. “Sect Leader Nie, you were blinded by your hatred and uncompromising to the point of ignorance. Your decision to forgive the sect leaders who changed sides at the end of the war but not even investigate enough to realize A-Yuan was there is something to learn from, correct?”

Nie Mingjue flinched but didn’t disagree. He nodded once.

“Good.” Wen Qing nodded back. “However, while you appeared to genuinely think your hatred of the Wen Sect was righteous, I’m not sure I can say the same about you, Sect Leader Jin.”

He jumped slightly, not having expected the abrupt mention.

“Miss Qing-”

“*Doctor,*” she snapped back. “Sect Leader Jin, you might have limited how much you spoke, but you were the first one to tell Jiang-gongzi that he had to ‘caution’ himself around Wei Wuxian — that Wei Wuxian didn’t respect him.”

“I-I-” Jin Guangshan stood. “Regardless of whether I was right or not, it was a reasonable conclusion to come to. Everyone was saying it. I didn’t even really say anything about your family-”

“Yes, you only spoke about Wei Wuxian. Because *my family* didn’t have any Stygian Tiger Seals for you to acquire.”

Everyone froze.

‘We can leave aside what Wei Wuxian did today for a moment. In any case, I’ve been a sect leader for many years and yet I’ve never seen a servant be so arrogant — so proud. Have you heard what people are saying? Rumors have spread that everything the Yunmeng Jiang Sect accomplished during the Sunshot Campaign was thanks to Wei Wuxian and Wei Wuxian alone! What nonsense!’

Because, for Jin Guangshan and Jiang Cheng, it really wasn't about what Wei Wuxian had done for the Wens. At most, Jin Guangshan just couldn’t do this while Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen would oppose it.

But-

“As I said when that scene first played, everyone was thinking it,” Jin Guangshan pointed out. “Even Jiang-gongzi agreed that it was an important point. I didn’t say anything wrong-”

“Until you flat-out lied to him about what Wei Wuxian had said.”

Jin Guangshan frowned, ready to berate whoever had spoken to the Sect Leader of the great Jin Sect that way, only to freeze at the last second. Staring back at him was Wen Ruohan, the smirk on his lips not hiding his growing impatience. In the pause that stretched out between them, everyone recalled what their Chief Cultivator was referring to:

‘In an event as important as the flower banquet, he dared to throw a fight right in front of you, leaving however he pleased. He even dared to say something like ‘I don’t care what Sect Leader Jiang Wanyin thinks of me at all!’ Everyone who was there heard it with their own ears-’

‘No,’ Hanguang-jun disagreed. ‘I did not hear Wei Ying say that. I did not hear him express even the slightest bit of disrespect towards Sect Leader Jiang.’

Jin Guangshan had floundered, after that.

So Jin Guangyao stepped up.

“Well, in any case, we shouldn’t come to conclusions so hastily,” Jin Guangshan continued. “How many times has the simulation led us in one direction only to reveal that the truth was completely different? More than that, how many times has Jin Guangyao lied to turn a situation into something favoring him?”

Nie Mingjue, who had been about to object to Jin Guangshan’s words, gritted his teeth at that. Similarly, Wen Ruohan’s anger became redirected momentarily.

“That snake has fooled every sect leader he’s had,” Jin Guangshan continued. “I have no doubt he would push for something like this if he thought it would secure my affection for him. Who knows what he told me before this all began. And besides, Madam Yu, the things I told your son were mostly copies of what you’ve told my wife over the years.”

“What?” Madam Jin flinched. “I never told you about any of that-”

“The walls have ears, my dear. In any case, everything I said was hardly news. People have been talking about Jiang Fengmian’s favor for Wei Wuxian for years. The use of his parentage was a regrettable decision on my part, but I’m far from the only one who has fallen prey to such temptations, accusing people of being the *sons of prostitutes* and such. Besides, trying to solve the problem we have is still better than doing *nothing*.”

Nie Mingjue and Lan Qiren couldn’t move. Lan Xichen and Jiang Yanli looked away.

“As for pushing Jiang-gongzi to go visit Wei Wuxian, that was the rational thing to do. Of course I would want a sect leader to handle a situation involving his own sect, especially considering how unwilling he was to share the details of the ‘debt’ he owed Wen-guniang. How could I have known it would play out this way? Don’t you agree, Sect Leaders?”

“No,” Lan Wangji said.

As always, a single word from ‘Hanguang-jun’ could command the attention of the entire room.

“Sect Leader Jin, you assembled the conference. The guiding force into making this a question of Wei Ying’s status was you.”

Lan Qiren nodded once, asking, “Are you sure your other-self didn’t expect this outcome?”

“Of course! He would be foolish to want this,” Jin Guangshan confirmed.

‘*Or, rather, ignorant,*’ Sect Leader Jin continued mentally. Wei Wuxian had so much more to offer than the simulated Jin Guangshan realized; the Stygian Tiger Seal was just the beginning. Rather than isolating Wei Wuxian to get the seal it would be far more profitable to separate Wei Wuxian from the seal — from his demonic cultivation, from his protection and power — and take hold of his mind instead.

What a pity.

However, Lan Wangji wasn’t done.

“‘He’s been plotting to go to the burial mounds for a while, hasn’t he?’” Lan Wangji recited, his memory as impeccable as always. “‘With his skills, it would be child’s play to set up a sect of his own. He’s using this as a chance to leave the Jiang Sect so he can do whatever he pleases. You put so much work into rebuilding Yunmeng Jiang, and yet he goes around *stirring up trouble* at every opportunity. He doesn’t care about you at all.'”

“Lan-er-gongzi, you-”

“'That’s the right idea. Sect Leader Jiang,'” Lan Wangji continued, and even Lan Qiren didn’t so much as blink at the interruption. “'There are some things, some people, you shouldn’t put up with.'”

Jin Guangshan gaped, thrown by Lan Wangji’s harsh glare.

“Jin Guangyao never spoke directly to you throughout the entirety of that conference. Are you trying to suggest that *everything* you said was made up of what he suggested to you ahead of time? That you don’t covet Wei Ying’s seal at all?”

“I suppose you would know all about *coveting him*, wouldn’t you?”

Lan Wangji couldn’t suppress his flinch. The image of Wei Wuxian being pressed — slammed — against the tree behind him formed in Lan Wangji’s mind. At that moment, Jin Guangshan began to step closer.

“Lan-er-gongzi, be reasonable,” he advised, looking down at the still-seated Lan Wangji. “Do you still think of yourself as a pure statue of jade? You should know by now that rumors can’t be believed. Your father is a perfect example of that, isn't he?”

Lan Qiren froze at those words. He had stepped between Jin Guangshan and Lan Wangji while the sect leader was still talking. However, after what Jin Guangshan had just said, neither Lan Qiren nor Lan Xichen could do anything but gape as Jin Guangshan walked right past, phasing through Lan Qiren's incorporeal body. Lan Wangji slowly looked up.

Then, voice too quiet for anyone else to hear, Jin Guangshan whispered, “What I’ve done was shown to everyone. What do you think they would say if they got a hint at what you did to him behind closed doors? The Concealment Zone, powerful though it is, doesn’t stop me from talking about it.”

Lan Wangji’s skin paled into a snow-white.

“I suggest you stay quiet, young master,” Jin Guangshan advised. “Unless you want everyone to know, of course.”

Everyone would know everything. How the future Lan Wangji had gone against the Sect’s rules — done exactly what he had feared his future self would do — had acted so horribly, horribly wrong. It made Lan Wangji sick just thinking about it. He had taken something from Wei Wuxian. He had stolen something precious and Wei Wuxian had just *accepted it.* Lan Wangji’s future self had broken the Sect rules in a horrible manner.

But…

But right now…

“Sect Leader-”

“I told you to keep your mouth shut, didn’t I?” Jin Guangshan said. “I prefer you when you’re quiet.”

Lan Wangji’s mouth closed.

However, under the weight of their own actions, no one else in the simulation seemed able to speak. The Wens were too distracted by what had occurred, Nie Huaisang wasn’t going to speak up, Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen felt too responsible to shift blame, Jiang Wanyin and

Madam Yu couldn't move at all, and Jiang Yanli and Lan Qiren were too ashamed over how *little* they had managed to do. If Lan Wangji didn't speak…

"There we go," Jin Guangshan smiled, pleased at the silence that had come over La Wangji. "Much better. You-"

"Uncle, Xiongzhang, I have something to tell you," Lan Wangji said, standing up. They looked toward him.

Jin Guangshan stepped back, eyes wide, and hissed, "Lan-er-gongzi, what are you doing?"

Lan Wangji paused, looking back at him, but looked away once more.

"Uncle, in the last segment… no, two segments ago. At Phoenix Mountain. When you…"

He paused, sorting through his thoughts. Almost on principle, Lan Wangji never spoke until he had carefully thought through everything he had to say. Now, however, he had no time to think.

"When the Concealment Zone activated and you were all frozen in space… I-I did kiss Wei Wuxian," he confessed.

The other watchers stared blankly, thrown by the irrelevant topic. They had suspected as much, but Lan Wangji had denied it. Or, rather, spoken vaguely about it. And Wei Wuxian's reactions hadn't added up.

That said…

"That's… great?" Nie Huaisang said as one of the few people who still had the mental capacity to speak. "I'm… glad to hear your relationship progressed."

"No. No that… didn't happen." Lan Wangji took a shaky breath. "He didn't know it was me. I took it from him while he was blindfolded. I… I disobeyed the Sect rules. I went against morality. I acted without his permission. I forced myself on him-"

"You what?!" Jiang Cheng stood up, finally registering what Lan Wangji was saying. "You — on Wei Wuxian? You did that?!"

"...I did," Lan Wangji forced himself to confirm.

Jiang Yanli paled.

"It was a breach of his consent," Lan Wangji elaborated. "Regardless of how he felt after, what I did was wrong. I… I swear I will never allow that to happen again. It won't happen in our world. Nothing of the sort will ever come to be. I… will tell Wei Ying what I did once we leave the simulation. If he doesn't want to see me, I will comply."

A brief silence passed throughout the room. What Lan Wangji was describing did seem bad. Jiang Cheng especially felt his stomach turn at the image it provoked. However, having not

seen it happen, not knowing the full details, and getting told it by the perpetrator himself made it altogether a little hard to be mad.

And, most of all…

'*We've just seen labor camps set up by the Jin. People were being tortured by a bunch of cultivators from all sorts of sects. Wei Wuxian saved them and we all condemned him for it,*' Lan Xichen thought. '*What Wangji's describing is bad, but… I may have tried to speak up for their side in the beginning, but I backed down far too easily. A toddler was living in those conditions. I'm one of the few people who could have done something about that. They're in the Burial Mounds now! Wei Wuxian didn't think he'd receive protection from us even though the people involved had never done anything wrong. The only place Wei Wuxian felt safe was one that had tried to kill him time and time again.*'

How were they supposed to pass any sort of judgment now? What Lan Wangji was describing was bad, but how could they, right now, act like they were any better? What right did they have to punish anyone?

(However, they were the only ones here. No one was going to do it if they didn't.)

So:

"Wangji."

"Yes, Uncle?"

Lan Qiren paused for a moment, thinking carefully, then said, "You will be punished severely once we leave the simulation."

They had promised to not do anything against real people for things that hadn't yet occurred. However, upon hearing this statement, Lan Wangji only nodded once.

"I understand," he said.

In the back of the room, Jin Guangshan frowned deeply.

Then, at that moment, Jiang Yanli walked forward.

"Second Young Master Lan?" she asked.

He turned to face her.

"We once talked about doing meetings together. A-Xuan and I; A-Xian and you. If A-Xian happens to accept your presence in his life once more I would like to be present for your first few meetings," she requested. "And I'll be talking to A-Xian on my own as well."

"I understand," Lan Wangji said again.

But, before he could say anything more, they heard a strange sound. Something clicked around them.

“Hello, Sect Leaders. Disciples,” Wei Wuxian greeted them, voice light and cheery. “Uncle Jiang and I have someone to introduce to you!”

“I’m honored to meet you,” another person said. “This one’s name is Meng Yao.”

“A-Yao?!” Lan Xichen gaped.

“Meng Yao?” Jin Zixuan added on. “Is… is that really you?”

Both Wen Ruohan and Nie Mingjue froze.

“...It is. It’s an honor,” he said again.

The words were a bit stiff and awkward but, given the situation, it was understandable.

“He’s been doing well,” Jiang Fengmian added on. “A-Xian has been showing him around.”

And keeping an eye on him. Although every person in the conversation knew that to be true, no one said it out loud.

“Wei Wuxian,” Wen Qing spoke up. “Is A-Ning okay?”

“He is. He’s actually just in the next room if you want me to grab him for you. He’s taking care of some of the kids right now.”

“No. No, it’s okay,” Wen Qing said. “I’m sure… he’s safe with you.”

Safer than he was with almost anyone else.

“...Okay?” Wei Wuxian supposed. “I’m… glad you think that.”

“San-niang, how have you all been?” Jiang Fengmian asked. His words were a bit hesitant, fearful of a negative response.

“We’re… fine,” was all she said. “It’s going fine.”

Jiang Cheng turned red in shame, wanting desperately to confess something — though he wasn’t quite sure what — in the way Lan Wangji had done just a few minutes before. However, instead, time ticked on. His silence remained.

“...That sounds a bit like how we responded after seeing Wang Lingjiao arrive at Lotus Pier,” Jiang Fengmian observed. “Did something… similar happen?”

Something similar to the whole Jiang Sect being destroyed and Jiang Cheng, blaming Wei Wuxian, strangling him against the ground for it? Well, in some ways, it wasn’t quite that bad.

(And in other ways, it was almost worse.)

“...You could say that,” Jiang Cheng confessed.

“A-Die,” Jiang Yanli spoke up.

“Yes?”

“Could you…” she paused. “Could you give A-Xian a hug for me?”

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian did a double take.

“Now?” Jiang Fengmian asked.

“Yes, please.”

None of the watchers made any comments on the matter.

“...Okay,” Jiang Fengmian agreed.

“Eh? Uncle Jiang?!” Wei Wuxian eeped a little as Jiang Fengmian’s arms, presumably, wrapped around him.

“Thank you, A-Die,” Jiang Yanli said, a sad smile forming on her face. Seeing that, Jin Zixuan adopted the same expression, relaxing as he did. Things were going very, very badly, but… the whole point of watching this was that they’d be able to fix it. Things would be fine. They would make sure things were fine.

Some of that had to start now.

Then, at that moment, Madam Jin cleared her throat.

“...Meng Yao?”

“Yes?” he responded at once. He didn’t recognize her voice, but everyone in the simulation was more than influential. It was best to be as respectful as possible.

Madam Jin swallowed once. Meng Yao, inarguably, would do things that couldn’t be condoned. There were plenty of things that Madam Jin wouldn’t trust him with and there was far more reason to be suspicious than accepting. However…

If Wei Wuxian didn’t seem to deserve what Madam Yu did to him, then could Madam Jin really say it was fine that Meng Yao had been pushed down the stairs of Koi Tower?

“...Meng Yao, consider this an open invitation,” she said. “Once I am out of the simulation I would like you to come to Koi Tower if you wish. I… would like to meet you, if you have time.”

There were a telling few seconds of silence on the other end.

“Th-thank you, Madam Jin,” Meng Yao responded. “I will be sure to take you up on that. It is a tremendous offer.”

There wasn't a hint of deceptiveness in Meng Yao's tone but everyone knew he didn't trust Madam Jin even a little. And why would he? He had been thrown down Koi Tower, in part, because of her.

But the offer had been made. It would be up to Madam Jin, in the future, to prove herself trustworthy to him.

She glanced over at her husband, but found him looking away. He made no attempt to speak to Meng Yao or even acknowledge his presence, trying to distance himself from the young man as much as he could.

"...If it's a similar situation to that one, I'm sure you have a lot to think about," Jiang Fengmian said. "We'll give you some more time to talk, then."

"Okay," Madam Yu agreed, though no one still in the simulation had much else to say. The connection with the outside world disappeared and they were left alone once more.

Then, at last, Wen Qing spoke:

"I really hate the future."

"Agreed," everyone said. For perhaps the first time since the simulation began, the feeling was unanimous.

With a soft scrape of wood on wood, Hanguang-jun slid a door open. It was the entrance to the Sect Leader's chambers. Despite occasionally leaving his seclusion, Lan Xichen still spent most of his time inside.

"Xiongzhang," he said.

But Lan Xichen didn't seem to hear. He was working rapidly, writing across a scroll at a rapid pace. Piles and piles of books and discarded papers lay strewn around, lacking the discipline and grace Lan Wangji had admired in his brother for some many years. He walked in.

"Xiongzhang," he said again, kneeling down in front of his brother's table. Lan Xichen jumped.

"Ah, Wangji," he realized, not setting the quill down. "I didn't hear you come in. Is something wrong?"

Lan Wangji paused, looking around the room once more. Books were laid open, copious amounts of notes covering every page. The candle stick was nearly used up, the flame trying desperately to hold on as the wax melted below. Without saying a word, Lan Wangji reached over and changed it for a new one.

"...Xiongzhang, the juniors and I are going on a night hunt soon. You should join us."

Lan Xichen blinked, looking surprised by the suggestion, before giving a regretful smile and saying, “I would love to, Wangji. But I’m afraid I still have some work to finish. I will have to join you another time.”

Lan Wangji frowned.

“...What are you working on?” he asked.

“I’m just brainstorming more ideas for how to handle the situation in the past. We can’t risk anything that will let Da-ge die, of course, but I think if I keep looking carefully enough I’ll be able to ensure that Meng Yao stays alive too. If the past Wei Wuxian could keep track of them at all times then there won’t be any real risks in play.”

“...The past’s Wei Ying will most likely pay attention to Meng Yao,” Lan Wangji agreed. “That may be all we can ask for.”

“Yes, it will be hard to get him to do more, but that’s exactly what my brainstorming’s for. Our Wei Wuxian talked about using his inventions as a way to gain some pull in that world, didn’t he? If we can take advantage of that — if we can get both Da-ge and A-Yao to agree — then it will all work out.”

“...Wei Ying and I have talked about it. We both think we were a little too eager to change the past, initially. Since they’re the ones who will actually live there, it seems better to let the inhabitants of that world decide.”

“And what if they choose wrong?” Lan Xichen asked back. “What if they make all the same mistakes we did? What if, in giving them this chance, we just make everything worse? What then?”

“Then we’ll try to help them,” Lan Wangji said.

“I know, but… but I know myself. When it comes to Da-ge and A-Yao… when it comes to Meng Yao I always make the wrong choice. My other self will too. I have to at least try to help him! If I don't fix this-”

“Xiongzhang, they’re already dead!” Lan Wangji snapped.

Lan Xichen flinched back. When he finally looked up, he found Hanguang-jun staring back at him with a heavy gaze.

“...I apologize for interrupting you, Sect Leader,” Hanguang-jun said. “However… they have both already passed in our world. It is important to remember those we have lost and try to adjust our actions based on what we have learned, but… the future deserves our attention too.”

“I know that,” Lan Xichen confirmed. “I am. I just worry about the past as well.”

“You worry excessively.”

“I’m not.” Lan Xichen shook his head. “I know what I’m doing.”

“What you’re doing is living in the world of the dead,” Hanguang-jun said. “You’re living entirely for people who are already gone. I am happy you have tasks to occupy yourself with, but you cannot live only through them.”

At those words, Lan Xichen’s face lost much of its cheer.

“Wangji, that’s… that’s easy to say when the one you lost came back,” he pointed out. “Not everyone is so lucky.”

A slight tension formed in Lan Wangji’s brows.

“Wei Wuxian came back to life,” Lan Xichen added on. “This — the past — is the only way I can reach them.”

“...It took thirteen years for Wei Ying to come back. During that time, was I acting how you are now?”

Lan Xichen couldn’t move.

(How had Wangji acted during that time? What had he said? Had he ever done anything like trying to *use* the most beloved person in his brother’s life to help someone who was already gone?)

(No. A question like that didn’t even need to be answered.)

Guilt filled Lan Xichen’s soul.

“Xiongzhang, I’m not asking you to forget them. I’m not asking you to stop trying. However, there are people right in front of you that need you too. Most of the juniors haven’t seen their Sect Leader in months,” he said. “Please, come with them.”

“...I see. I…” Lan Xichen paused, then, slowly, nodded once. “I… I knew that.”

He paused again, thinking carefully.

“I… see your point.”

With a trembling hand, he slowly set his brush down.

“No, you’re right,” he decided. “Alright, Wangji, I’ll join you.”

Lan Wangji didn’t quite smile, but his brother could see the happiness that bloomed there anyways.

Chapter End Notes

My quotation for Jiang Cheng's announcement to the world was taken from the audio drama. That said, it was technically taken from someone else's account of what was said in the audio drama for this scene. If I made a mistake or need to change it please let me know!
:)

The Calm

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to my beta reader Tintin!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Living in a sect run by Wen Ruohan meant there was no room for incompetence. Wen Chao's mistakes were forgiven on account of him being a necessary spare (Wen Ruohan, unlike Jin Guangshan, was not especially interested in the process of having another kid). For everyone else however, there was no way to survive in the sect without being fully aware of how the world worked. Wen Qing had done her best to protect her brother from that, but even she could only shield him from so much. You had to have talent worth millions to remain safe in Wen Ruohan's world.

(It was no surprise, then, that Meng Yao thrived there so well.)

All of this was to say that Wen Qing had long since stopped considering herself to be naive. She wasn't a child. Wen Ruohan would do whatever he wanted; there was no point in her being sensitive to things she couldn't control.

So why, then, was she so overcome by a childish, illogical sense of injustice?

'*It's not right. It's not fair,*' her mind cried out. '*This can't be what happens. It shouldn't be like this, so soon in the future. A-Ning can't be dead. He did so much for Wei Wuxian — so much more for the Sunshot Campaign's side than most of those Sect Leaders did! I know my brother. We might have only seen him at the beginning of the war, but there's no way he hurt anyone. There's no way he could!*'

(There *had* been no way.)

(Until, of course, he became a fierce corpse.)

But Wen Ning had done everything he could — had never done anything wrong. He was so kind, so good… didn't he deserve to live?

Sure, but since when had the world ever worked that way?

And what about Wei Wuxian?

Well, they already knew what would happen to him.

'Yiling Patriarch Wei Wuxian is dead!'

'Really? Who killed him?'

'Who else? His old friend Jiang Cheng, leader of the Jiang Clan.'

Wei Wuxian himself had confirmed that wasn't quite what happened.

However…

'Wei Wuxian has betrayed the sect and publicly regards all cultivation sects as his enemy! Yunmeng Jiang hereby expels him, breaking all ties and drawing a clear line between us! From now on, no matter what he does, it will have nothing to do with the Yunmeng Jiang Clan!'

~~If things continued down this path, and if Jiang Wanyin really did lead the siege against Wei Wuxian, then it seemed to Wen Qing that his involvement in Wei Wuxian's death was far from non-existent.~~

Nausea rose up within her.

'*That's right, the sects are going to invade,*' she thought. '*They're going to commence a siege on the Burial Mounds.*'

Then what about A-Yuan? Granny? How had Wen Ning ended up imprisoned by the Jin Sect yet again? How, exactly, had Wei Wuxian died?

(Why, after all the terrible things they had seen so far, did she feel like things were only going to get worse?)

She wanted to leave. Her brother wasn't dead outside of the simulation — not *yet* — but anything could happen to him. How was she supposed to protect him if she was stuck here, unable to move in the outside world?

(But what if the simulation revealed something she needed to know to keep him safe?)

(But what if while she was here, learning to protect him from a distant threat, something happened to render all her effort meaningless? What if she came back to a corpse?)

Wei Wuxian would protect him, surely. There was almost no one she could trust with her brother more than Wei Wuxian. And her brother would protect him.

(But *what if?*)

Countless fears gripped at her heart.

And thus, when the room began to darken once more, Wen Qing felt her blood freeze.

Brief flashes were shown once again, depicting the fight that had occurred between Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng. Countless blows were thrown, most of them missing by what appeared to be just luck. However, no injuries at all would have been suspicious. Wen Ning broke Jiang Cheng's arm. Jiang Cheng stabbed Wei Wuxian in the gut.

Just like Jin Ling had — would — in a future that now felt more real than ever before. Jiang Cheng looked away.

Ouyang Zizhen cleared his throat, announcing, "After the fight, because of the brutality of Wen Ning's performance, he was given a somewhat unfortunate nickname. However, that is a story for later-"

"Then why are you mentioning it now?" Jin Ling hissed.

"Because it's cool!" Ouyang Zizhen hissed back.

Though Lan Qiren couldn't see them, he was certain Lan Jingyi was nodding rapidly in agreement. The idea of the juniors — those children — being so cavalier about all this left a bad taste in his mouth. The things they had been told about this part of Wei Wuxian's life were quite different from what the watchers were being shown now, even if the overall story stayed the same.

"Anyways, although Sect Leader Jiang stabbed him in the stomach, Senior Wei wasn't concerned at all!"

The simulation shifted to show Wei Wuxian, his wound on full display.

Jiang Yanli flinched back. A bout of nausea came over Jiang Cheng.

However, Wei Wuxian merely stuffed his intestines back inside, giving a smile as if nothing had happened at all. He ordered Wen Ning to go hunt down a few spirits, picking up a large sack of potatoes on the way.

With his pitch-black robes, the blood was hard to see.

But that didn't mean it wasn't there. Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes and Wen Qing had to force herself to not run over. Illusion or not, the wound certainly *looked* realistic. And, within the simulation, her other-self would have access to none of the medical equipment Wen Qing had on her right now.

Wei Wuxian would be…

And *without his core-*

That theory of hers could still be entirely off. She might be reading too far into this. Baoshan Sanren could be real and know thousands of techniques Wen Qing had never even dreamed of before.

But-

"When they returned to the Burial Mounds, Wen Qing bandaged his wounds and scolded him as fiercely as possible, reminding him that it was radishes he had been told to buy."

No one so much as cracked a smile at that.

“After this, there came a number of ordinary days. Everyone lived in peace with one another. In the Burial Mounds, Senior Wei and the fifty-or-so Wens planted vegetables, made houses, refined corpses, and made new tools.”

Things they wouldn’t *have* to do if the sects had cared at all about what was actually right, in Nie Mingjue’s opinion. Despite that, all the flashes of scenes they saw showed people smiling brightly. Even Wei Wuxian, recently stabbed though he might be, looked more relaxed than he’d been before.

(And what did that say about the world — the people — he’d just left?)

“As the months passed, the rumors surrounding Wei Wuxian got worse and worse.”

“Months?” Lan Xichen repeated, his mouth falling open a little in shock. Although the last segment had dashed many of his hopes, he had still half-expected that, in the next few days, his other self would come down to the burial mounds. If the other Lan Xichen saw what was going on, changes could be made.

(But Jiang Cheng, who *had* gone down to the mounds, claimed Wei Wuxian was an enemy of the sects. Why would Lan Xichen need to investigate more?)

Even then, surely they would all be worried about what Wei Wuxian was going to do. Did they really investigate him so little as to not notice the *toddler?!* What was the other Lan Xichen doing, then?

‘*Probably playing around with Jin Guangyao,*’ something in the back of his mind said. The thought filled Lan Xichen with a new wave of concern.

And that only increased as the rumors themselves became known.

“Did you hear? Wei Wuxian, the Yiling Patriarch, has surrounded the Burial Mounds with fierce corpses. No one can get in!”

The other guests at the tavern leaned closer, a mix of fear and anticipation on their faces. With cheeks flushed from alcohol, they breathed heavily, their excitement growing.

“What do you think he’s doing up there?”

“What do you mean, ‘what is he doing?!’ Obviously, he’s building an army!”

“And snatching up all the women he can find, I bet!” a round-bellied man exclaimed, downing another jar of alcohol as he did. “Ah, though you don’t have to worry, Xiao-jie. I bet he only goes after the pretty ones.”

The woman to his left rolled her eyes, slapping him playfully on his head, then grew a bit more somber as she said, “The righteous sects will stop him soon, won’t they? My little sister doesn’t feel safe going even just as far as the Chang lake anymore. She’s been making the merchants she’s with take the long way around.”

“Good on her! I’ve heard the patriarch’s kidnapped over a hundred women by now!”

“I’ve heard it was over a thousand!”

“I heard the Madam telling her children to not go out late at night or else the Patriarch will catch them! Do you think he’s hunting down children too?”

“Must be. That sounds like exactly the kind of thing he’d do.”

A waitress arrived, asking, “Anyone up for another round?”

The tavern guests nodded at once, allowing their cups to be refilled.

But, despite the lull in conversation, none of the watchers felt like talking. Even Jin Guangshan could only give a small sigh, frustrated at the result. Wei Wuxian becoming completely cut off from the world didn’t really benefit anyone — not in the long run. And yet, that was exactly what was happening now.

“Businesses really are suffering from this. My cousin’s also been forced to go the long way around,” one guest said.

Another guest nodded, adding, “Anyone even somewhat-wealthy in Yiling is getting out of there as fast as they can. After all, all the wealth in the world won’t help them against a cultivator like him.”

“Ah, it’s so scary! I really do hope the sects will take care of him soon!” the young lady sighed.

“Don’t you worry,” the round-bellied man laughed. “They’ll take that traitor and his Wen-dogs and stick their damn heads on pikes for all of us to see!”

A round of drunken laughter spread around the table at that.

And Wen Qing shuddered slightly, the words of these random civilians enough to make her blood run cold.

“Still, be careful Xiao-jie,” a young man requested. “Who knows what he’s getting up to even as we speak!”

The other guests nodded. Behind them, a variety of images appeared depicting what they each thought Wei Wuxian might be doing at that very moment. Death, destruction, experimentation, armies — the possibilities seemed endless.

The watchers tensed.

The world darkened then lit again. Now, the Burial Mounds took shape before their eyes. There were cloudy skies, rocky grounds, and the caws of crows echoing in the distance. Resentful energy loomed throughout the valley, brushing against the watchers’ skin. It was much less wild than the Burial Mounds had initially been, but resentful

energy could only really be eased — never forced into compliance. Even now, lulled into obedience by Wei Wuxian's song, it seemed to sneak around, searching for its next kill.

Then, there was a twitch.

It had been given a command.

'*Up,*' the resentful energy seemed to say. '*Get up.*'

Why? A call for help? What was Wei Wuxian doing?

'*Up.*'

Wen Qing shuddered slightly, feeling the energy dance around her once more.

What was happening in the Burial Mounds?

The answer to that question came a moment later. There was a flash of red — a renewed call of resentful energy. The ground began to shake with the force of a thousand steps. There was a cry in the distance.

Uncle Four.

Wen Qing's heart skipped a beat.

'*No. No, no.*' She got up, stepping away from her seat. '*No, it can't be — the sects can't be here already! I... A-Ning, A-Yuan, Wei Wuxian-*'

The cries became louder and louder.

Auntie Two. Granny Wen. More and more voices entered into the symphony.

And Wen Qing marched forward, muttering a desperate, "No, no, no-"

There was a child's scream.

"*A-Yuan!*"

"Wei Wuxian! Stop right now!" the simulated Wen Qing screamed. Wei Wuxian's laughter was heard next. When he appeared, smile bright and wide, he was dodging Wen Qing's violently-swinging garden hoe. The most striking part of all would, of course, have to be his mode of transportation. He was riding atop a…

Well, it was a…

To put it in simple terms:

"Is that… a radish?" Nie Mingjue asked, staring blankly.

"Wei Wuxian! Stop! Stop now! When I get my hands on you-"

But Wei Wuxian barely seemed to be listening to Wen Qing's threats, cackling openly as she continued her chase. What he sat atop did, by any metric, appear to be a giant radish. However, this radish seemed to have grown in a strange, deformed manner that made it resemble an elderly man's face. Several parts of it were sticking out unevenly to serve as limbs. It sped ahead, fleeing Wen Qing's garden-tool based attacks with all its might. To the side, A-Yuan continued to scream, fleeing from a bouncing set of giant peas. In fact, all around, the feared Wen remnants were being assaulted by a variety of anthropomorphized vegetables and roots.

Lan Jingyi cleared his throat.

"To understand this current situation, we must go back to some time ago."

"...What additional information could we be given to make *that* any more reasonable?!" Lan Qiren demanded, slowly breaking out of his shock. Most everyone else was still frozen, not knowing what to say.

Then, at long last, Nie Mingjue said what everyone was thinking:

"*What?!*"

Nie Huaisang snorted once and then began to laugh.

What appeared next was Wei Wuxian, inside his cave, standing over Wen Ning's corpse.

Wen Qing flinched back as if slapped, not prepared for the sight of that.

Every visible inch of Wen Ning's body was covered in talismans, all drawn in blood. They pulsed with resentful energy, warm, welcoming, and strangely soft despite what that energy was.

The watchers had mostly grown used to feeling resentful energy by this point. That said, when faced with resentful energy as strange as what was here, it was hard to not be surprised.

Sweat was starting to fall down Wei Wuxian's face. Fatigue was clear in his expression, and his hand trembled just a little where he held it out. He was slightly thinner now, having no easy supply of food in the Burial Mounds.

Much like the last time he had ended up there. Once again, it was because of the Wens.

Wen Ruohan looked over the surroundings coldly.

(Though Wei Wuxian was slightly thinner than the last time they had seen him, he was much better off than when Wen Chao — when *Wen Ruohan's orders* — got him thrown in there the first time around. That said, this was still the Burial Mounds. Nothing about the current situation could be considered okay.)

After a few moments longer, Wei Wuxian let out a small sigh. Realizing he was too exhausted to perform the energy manipulation properly anymore, he lowered his hand.

The Yiling Patriarch then stumbled to the side, drinking from a chipped cup filled with water he had been keeping nearby. Once it was empty, he headed out.

In the valleys of the Burial Mounds, the elderly Wens were hard at work. They swung hammers as well as they could, crafting the furniture and houses they would need to live there. It wasn't like they could hire anyone to help them, after all. The rest of the Wens plowed dirt, sowing seeds with careful diligence.

Wei Wuxian walked through the steadily-forming town, a small smile on his face. He moved past the construction area and into the farms, pausing near one of the elderly men.

"Uncle Four," Wei Wuxian greeted.

"Ah, Wei-gongzi," the man said back. "What do you think? Shall we try to plow the entirety of the Burial Mounds today?"

"Of course! We want our crops to do well, don't we?"

Uncle Four nodded back, agreeing, "Certainly. A-Yuan's going to eat us dry, otherwise. A growing boy needs his food! And you too, come to think of it! You're only what? Twenty or so?"

Wei Wuxian tilted his head in acknowledgement, accepting the other's concern.

The watchers could all recall how the Wens had seemed when Wei Wuxian first saved them. The fear in their eyes had been impossible to deny. 'The Yiling Patriarch' was perhaps the most terrifying being they could imagine.

Now, however…

Lan Wangji smiled just slightly, noticing the Wens relaxing in Wei Wuxian's presence instead.

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to speak again, only to cut off when a small figure crashed headfirst into his leg, a doll of scraps in his hand. Little A-Yuan wrapped around Wei Wuxian's body, holding the bundle of stray fabric up for him to see.

"This!" he said.

Putting on an annoyed attitude, hands on his hips and all, Wei Wuxian scolded, "A-Yuan, quit it."

But A-Yuan was not deterred, requesting, "Speak!"

This time, Wei Wuxian couldn't quite manage to keep a fond smile from showing on his face. He rolled his eyes once then nodded, conceding defeat.

"Alright then. Let go of me," he requested, taking the scrap-monster from the toddler. He slipped two of his fingers inside, tilting it so that the two pieces of white and black

fabric on top looked like eyes. Then, kneeling down next to A-Yuan, he moved it this way and that, turning the puppet into a terrifying creature on the hunt for its prey. It then pounced on a giggling A-Yuan, just barely missing him. It tried again! With every failed attempt the tiger made, A-Yuan's laughter grew that much louder.

Jiang Yanli smiled, watching the scene. Wei Wuxian had always had a special amount of fun teaching their youngest disciples. Yanli had always thought Wei Wuxian would make a wonderful uncle for her child. The simulation had only made her more certain of that. Jin Ling — prickly and passionate and determined and so, so willing to change once Wei Wuxian entered his life — would love his uncle dearly.

Under normal circumstances.

(As she now recalled, Jin Ling had tried to *kill* Wei Wuxian last they had seen.)

Jiang Yanli shook her head. The fact that Jin Ling was one of the four who sent these memories back to them was more than enough proof that he regretted what he had done. There was no need to dwell on that before they found out what was going on.

(And yet the look of shock that had crossed Wei Wuxian's face when Jin Ling's blade sunk into his skin — the attack landing in the exact same spot Jiang Cheng's had during their fake battle one segment ago — had not left her mind.)

"Here you are now. Go play with this," Wei Wuxian said, trying to hand the toy back. However, as soon as he did, A-Yuan latched onto his leg again, squeezing tightly.

Wen Qing wondered if, outside the simulation, her brother was now playing with children just like this. He and Wei Wuxian had been left in charge of quite a number of kids, after all.

A-Yuan refused to let go.

"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian said warningly. "If you insist on sticking to me like this, I'll plant you in the field as a turnip!"

At those words, A-Yuan did indeed let go. However, rather than running away, he went over to where his Fourth Uncle was still plowing the field, sitting down in the middle of the freshly-tilled dirt.

Laughing, Wei Wuxian observed, "A-Yuan… you really want to be a turnip? Alright then, stay still! If you start moving, I won't be able to plant you."

In response, A-Yuan began piling some of the loose dirt around there onto himself.

"Alright, here we go," Wei Wuxian announced, kneeling down to throw some dirt on as well. "I'll plant a big turnip today. After several days, many turnips will grow out. Then everyone can eat to their heart's content!"

"But I'm not a turnip," A-Yuan protested.

Wei Wuxian paused, considered that for a moment, then declared, "We'll plant a child here then! If we water the child, give him enough fertilizer, and let him enjoy the sun often, we can grow many children!"

A-Yuan laughed.

'*Is his understanding of gardening or childbirth a greater cause for concern?*' Madam Jin wondered, huffing a laugh. Behind her, Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes. It was a little ridiculous for them to all be watching this. Surely, they had more important things they could see.

Then again, he couldn't really say he disliked this either. Kids had never been his thing, but it was still nice.

(His other-self had just declared Wei Wuxian an enemy to all the sects. It was somewhat reassuring to know that *this* was what came after.)

The Yiling Patriarch's grand plan had not reached its conclusion yet, however.

Wei Wuxian continued, "We'll water the new children well and get more from them, too. Soon, we'll be able to make an entire field of children!"

Upon hearing that, A-Yuan declared, "I want three older brothers and two older sisters."

"No problem!" Wei Wuxian assured, snapping his fingers together. "We'll give A-Yuan three elder brothers and two older sisters!"

"Will they look like me or turnips?" A-Yuan asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"Given how the first scene played out, it seems they'll look more like turnips to me," Nie Huaisang declared. Madam Yu sighed, still having many, many questions about that.

Which was not helped when Wei Wuxian hummed for a while before frowning and responding, "It's hard to say. Shall we find out?"

He snapped once more. One of the corpses that had been lingering around snapped to attention.

Try as they might, most of the watchers couldn't help but sit up straighter, too.

The corpse then came over as fast as it could, attacking the ground at lightning speed. It wouldn't be able to do something as delicate and exact as planting crops, but, if its only job was making a hole, then it could manage. Soon, an excavation large enough to fit a giggling A-Yuan inside was made. He was plopped in and buried shortly after, Wei Wuxian laughing all the while.

"Wei Wuxian, what are you doing?" Wen Qing asked, walking over. Gone were the expensive, sun-decorated robes she once wore. Now, firmer, thicker fabrics covered her body, a bucket of water resting in her hands. Nonetheless, Wei Wuxian startled as if

he'd been found by a vengeful god. He looked away, scratching awkwardly at the back of his neck as she marched over.

"Aunt," A-Yuan greeted. "We're trying to grow elder brothers and sisters here."

Wen Qing looked unimpressed.

Suddenly, something seemed to occur to Wei Wuxian. He spun toward A-Yuan once more, asking, "A-Yuan, how about we grow you some more aunts? If we get more of those, we'll have a much larger labor force!"

"Ah!" A-Yuan nodded rapidly in agreement.

Simultaneously, both the real and simulated Wen Qings rolled their eyes.

'*Honestly,*' she thought with a fond sigh. '*You better wake up soon, A-Ning. My simulated self will need your help if she wants to watch over Wei Wuxian.*'

"Alright, that's enough," Wen Qing declared, walking over and picking A-Yuan out of the dirt. "It'll be dinner time soon. Go wash up."

Pouting a little, A-Yuan complied.

Night fell and everyone began shutting down. The only sources of light under the perpetually cloudy sky were the torches the Wens had created earlier. A collection of dried-out twigs and leaves too thin and worn to generate much light laid scattered around the mounds. Right now, the Wens didn't even have enough money for candles.

Wen Qing sat within Wei Wuxian's cave, resting by her brother's side. He was still dead — nothing would change that — but now, at least, she could be with him. Wen Qing reached forward, grabbing hold of his ~~cold, dead~~ hand.

'*A-Ning,*' she thought softly. '*If, back then… if Wei Wuxian hadn't-*'

She cut off, not allowing herself to finish that thought.

The real Wen Qing swallowed once, equally unwilling to consider the possibilities.

But then, in the cloud of resentful energy below, she heard a groan.

"-ie."

She sat up straight at once, crying out, "A-Ning?"

Wen Qing stood again and, to her left, Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes.

The groaning continued, sounding far more pained than most fierce corpses' cries did. He trembled a little, his wails becoming more and more desperate over time.

"A-Ning!" Wen Qing shouted.

But her words couldn't reach him.

He was dead, after all. But…

Unable to stop herself, Wen Qing stood up and walked toward the corpse — toward *her brother* — stopping just beyond where her other-self was. She reached forward, her fingers passing through Wen Ning's form like he was made of mist. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lan Wangji step up beside her. He understood her frustration.

That didn't matter though. Right now, all Wen Qing could see was Wen Ning.

The corpse's thrashing became increasingly frantic. He was only being held down by the tightly sealed talismans sticking to every centimeter of his skin. Despite the bindings, he shook wildly.

His cries continued.

And the pain in them was hard to miss. Jin Zixuan clenched his hands into fists but forced himself to keep looking.

(Wen Ning had been beaten to death by the Jins, after all. He had no right to turn away.)

"Gah! Ah! Ah!" Wen Ning screamed.

"A-Ning!"

"-urts. *Ah! A*-"

"I'm right here! Jiejie is here! A-Ning!"

It seemed like Wen Qing's cries were going unheard.

Madam Yu watched with a complicated gaze. Without this boy, her and her husband's ashes would have been scattered into the wind. Her son and Wei Wuxian might have died as well. And now…

"Ah! Ah! Ah! A-"

♪

A single note rang out, stretching across the entirety of the mounds.

"Ah! *Ah!*"

🎵♪♪♪

"Ah!"

🎵🎵♪

"Ah. Ah, ah-"

♪

The melody was soothing and calm. Each individual note played for a long time, coming together into a song that resembled the slow, smooth paths of ripples on a pond. Combined with the forced lull of the music's command, it was no surprise that Wen Ning's struggles began to stop.

"Ah," he muttered one final time, returning to rest.

Wen Qing looked out.

The watchers were moved out of the cave, across several houses, to the roof of one of the shacks still under construction. Wei Wuxian sat there, playing on his flute with a serenity that seemed fundamentally opposed to resentful energy and yet fit Wei Wuxian perfectly.

The watchers couldn't help but calm as well. At long last, Wen Qing seemed able to breathe.

As Wen Ruohan watched her reactions, a strange feeling came over him. Unlike Wen Qing, Wen Ning had never displayed any true potential or use. His stuttering manner of speech and general unwillingness to stand out all culminated in someone only useful as, at most, a hostage. It had seemed like that was all there was to him. When the simulation began, revealing Wen Ning as a powerful fierce corpse, Wen Ruohan had felt nothing but excitement. Finally, the boy appeared to have some use.

But…

Wen Ning had a skill with archery that, if nurtured, could have saved them the embarrassment the archery tournament had been. He had a form of bravery that only revealed itself when there was something that truly needed to be done. He was pitifully lacking in ambition, but it wasn't quite right to say he only had use after death.

(A fierce corpse would be too stiff to perform archery and too brainless to show true loyalty. For every benefit the Ghost General brought, there was a cost in what Wen Ning had lost.)

'*I wanted the sects under me to show them where they belonged,*' Wen Ruohan recalled. '*People that stupid — people that thoughtless — needed to be controlled.*'

But that wasn't all of it.

'*My sons… Xu-er has some talent, but, without me, he would never know what to do. If he was in charge of all the sects, things would continue as they are. If Chao-er were in charge…*'

He didn't even need to think about that.

'*The Wen Sect is strong now, but, in the next few generations, it could lose all of that. It did lose, in the simulation. Something had to be done. I needed to establish it as a force no one could oppose. It wasn't like the sects had ever stopped me before.*'

However…

Wen Ning had been right there, and Wen Ruohan had ignored him all this time. If Wen Ning had been utilized properly and if the archery tournament had ended differently, Wen Ruohan might not have escalated things so soon.

(How many things — how many *people* — had Wen Ruohan had at his disposal and yet never thought to use?)

Those thoughts continued to linger in Wen Ruohan's mind as the simulation went on. Wei Wuxian's song continued to play, setting the entirety of the Burial Mounds at ease. Wen Ning had been set to rest once more.

The watchers had finally managed to resettle as well. Just in the nick of time, too. For, at that moment, their narration began again:

"Although things appeared to stabilize in the following days, A-Yuan's days of being buried were far from over," Lan Jingyi announced, lowering his voice ominously at the last few words.

The simulation shifted once more, taking them forward in time. The first one that appeared was little A-Yuan. Or, rather, A-Yuan's head. The rest of him was buried deep in the earth, leaving only what was above his neck. He cried out at his perilous situation, but Wei Wuxian only laughed from the side.

"Every day when Senior Wei was free, he would play with the toddler Wen Yuan, son of Wen Qing's cousin," Lan Sizhui said, his voice, for a moment, shaking just a little. "He'd either help him hang on trees or bury him in the ground, telling him that he'd grow faster if he was watered and bathed in sunlight. Then, Wen Qing would scold him again."

And indeed she did, marching over and shouting at the top of her lungs. The sight made A-Yuan smile at last.

They switched scenes again. Wei Wuxian and A-Yuan were now in the middle of Yiling, perusing through the market stalls.

"Senior Wei couldn't go down the mountain often. Since he was the only one who could suppress all the resentful energy in the Burial Mounds, he couldn't venture out too far or for too long. However, he was an active person who grew restless when staying in one place for an extended period of time. He would roam around town from time to time, excusing it as purchasing necessities. And Wen… um, Wen Yuan had been on the mountain for a long time. Senior Wei felt they shouldn't keep a child in a place with nothing but mud all the time so, one day, he took Wen Yuan shopping with him."

Madam Yu turned her gaze upon the pair, confliction twisting within her. When Jiang Fengmian had taken Wei Wuxian in, it had been because that boy was the son of his best friend. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, had protected Wen Yuan and the other Wens simply because it was the right thing to do. Protecting them was more than anyone could have

expected him to do. The child had family left; Granny Wen was somewhat frail, but there were still plenty of people who could look after him.

Wei Wuxian didn't have to.

But he wanted to, so he did.

Wei Wuxian walked through the town confidently, quite familiar with it thanks to his many excursions. Soon, he arrived at a vegetable vendor whose stall contained a large crate of potatoes. Wei Wuxian inspected them carefully, turning them around in his hand, then suddenly grabbed one to the side.

"Vendor, your potato is sprouting!" he declared, holding it up.

The vendor's relaxed body language vanished at those words. He straightened up as if looking at his greatest foe.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Can you make this a little cheaper?"

"You *want* those potatoes?!" Jiang Cheng gaped, aghast. "Get something else!"

Jin Zixuan nodded rapidly in agreement and Lan Xichen stared with wide eyes.

Wei Wuxian went from vendor to vendor, buying and bargaining where he could. A-Yuan stayed attached to his leg the whole while, clinging on tightly. However, as time passed by and Wei Wuxian's shopping continued, his arms started to get a little tired. Now, whenever Wei Wuxian came to a stop at one of the stalls, A-Yuan would let go momentarily, only grabbing on again when it was time for Wei Wuxian to move. They picked up carrots and containers and some hemp for the grannies to weave cloth out of and some clay to fix up the roofs and then, by the time they reached the yams, A-Yuan's exhaustion led him to let go of Wei Wuxian mid-stride. He had only been intending to let go for a second but, in that second, a crowd of people crossed in front of him, cutting off his view of Wei Wuxian. By the time they were gone, A-Yuan's protector was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh dear," Lan Qiren murmured.

Nie Mingjue frowned minutely in concern and Jiang Yanli squeezed her hands together tightly. A child getting separated from their guardian in town, while concerning, wasn't that surprising either. These sorts of things happened from time to time; it would probably be dealt with soon. Despite that, Jin Zixuan felt his heart rate double in speed.

(Who knew what other lies his sect had spread about the Wens. If the camp run by *his family* was willing to have a toddler there then, for all Jin Zixuan knew, any random person on this street might be willing to chop A-Yuan's head off if they found out who he was. If Jin Zixuan couldn't even trust his own family…)

(On the other hand, there was also the possibility that his sect was just uniquely awful. Jin Zixuan wasn't sure which option he feared more.)

A-Yuan began spinning around, searching for Wei Wuxian's legs to grab onto. However, every towering body around him looked identical, the dirt-covered pants forming a perplexing maze that trapped A-Yuan inside. He grew more and more scared at every moment, spinning around dizzily. He stumbled to the side.

And bumped into a pair of white legs.

"Huh?" Lan Xichen sat up.

But, before they could see who was wearing white robes on the dirty streets of Yiling, they returned to Wei Wuxian. He stood tall, looking around desperately for the toddler he had lost. His face had gone pale, deep worry etched onto it.

Which made sense. A child getting lost in the middle of a crowded town was definitely something to be concerned about.

(Most especially because of who that child was.)

Jin Zixuan felt his stomach do a unhappy flip.

Suddenly, a few wails rang out. Wei Wuxian turned toward the sound at once, pushing through the crowd as quickly as he could. Soon, he found himself in a group of bustling passer-bys gathered in a circle. Wei Wuxian shoved them aside then froze, realizing who was in the center.

Lan Wangji stood equally frozen, a bawling A-Yuan at his feet.

A chuckle. Then a snort.

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue scolded.

But that berate only served to make Nie Huaisang double over in laughter, clutching at his sides. Lan Wangji's ears flushed a bright pink and most of the other watchers could only gape.

Had they ever seen *Hanguang-jun* looking so… lost?

Nie Huaisang could barely breathe.

"Wangi-xiong, you seem so confused! This is amazing! You look like a father who's left home for months coming back to find out he has a kid!"

"It's not *his* kid!" Jiang Cheng pointed out.

"It might as well be!"

Which wasn't really fair. At this point in time, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were, at best, friendly acquaintances. Wei Wuxian had an immense respect for Lan Wangji, and Lan Wangji — given what the real one had confessed to at the end of the last segment — was already falling in love. However, neither of them had admitted as much to each other. It would be difficult for them to even describe themselves as friends.

Still, after watching the far-future, that was hard to keep in mind.

Much like Nie Huaisang, Wei Wuxian was also doubled over in laughter at this sight, almost tripping over his own feet in the process. A-Yuan was still bawling his eyes out at Lan Wangji's side, leaving Hanguang-jun looking somewhat overwhelmed.

All around, covering up the sound of Wei Wuxian's laughter, the passer-bys talked amongst themselves:

"What's happenin' here? The young'un cried so hard it scared me to death."

Nodding once with a sagely wisdom, an elderly man declared, "He was definitely scolded by his dad."

"See?! See?! It wasn't just me! They see it too!"

"Huaisang, be quiet!"

But Wei Wuxian had heard the old man's comment too, and his laughter only increased at those words.

Lan Wangji felt heat rising to his face. However, as he looked back and forth between his other self, A-Yuan, and the beaming Wei Wuxian, he couldn't help but feel a bit of jealousy as well.

(A-Yuan would probably — hopefully — have parents in their world. If so, something like this would never happen. It was a scene he would only ever be able to view from someone else's point of view.)

The simulated Lan Wangji felt none of the longing the real one did. Having heard the accusation of fatherhood, he looked up at the speaker with a stern frown.

"I am not," he declared.

However, Wen Yuan didn't know what everyone was talking about. All he knew was how terrified he was. Thus, out of instinct, he began to cry out:

"Dad! Dad! Dad!" he bawled.

"Ha!"

"See? I told you he's his dad!"

"Definitely his dad. Their noses look as if they were carved out of the same mold!"

Lan Qiren sighed.

“How sad. Look at how that little one’s crying. He was definitely scolded by his dad, huh.”

Huffing in annoyance, a woman added, “He doesn’t even know to pick up the child to make him feel better! He’s just going to let his son cry on the ground? What a dad!”

Lan Qiren sighed once more, louder this time, and Lan Wangji lowered his head in shame.

“Well, look at how young he is. I understand. First time being a dad, huh? I was like this back then too. I didn’t know anything. He’ll get the hang of it after his wife bears a few more.”

“Sounds like Wei-xiong has his work cut out for him~” Nie Huaisang sing-songed, making Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng choke on their own spit. Lan Wangji, by principle, was doing his best to ignore everything that came out of Nie Huaisang’s mouth, but even he couldn’t help but gape a little at that.

Nie Mingjue just gave a tired facepalm, no longer having the energy to circumvent his brother’s enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, Wen Ruohan watched the scene with a subtle, uncharacteristically small smile.

Some more concerned passers knelt down by the child, whispering, “Shh. Don’t cry.”

“Are you okay?”

“Where’s your mom?”

From behind: “Yeah, where’s the mom?! The dad isn’t doing anything, so where’s the mom?!”

At that question, even Jiang Yanli couldn’t help but glance Wei Wuxian’s way.

Wei Wuxian’s laughter was still going strong. However, seeing that A-Yuan was starting to cry so much that he couldn’t breathe, Wei Ying forced himself to stop. He stood up and pushed his way through the crowd.

“Huh? Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked, pretending he hadn’t been watching and laughing at Lan Wangji for the past three minutes. Lan Wangji looked over at once, eyes wide. They stared at each other for a moment before Wei Wuxian, strangely flustered, looked away. At the same time, A-Yuan looked over, finally finding a voice he recognized. He jumped up, running over with tears in his eyes to grab onto Wei Wuxian’s leg.

“Dad! Dad!” he cried.

A-Yuan had never met Lan Wangji before. While he was grabbing onto Hanguang-jun’s leg, the “Dad!” he was calling out for was, almost certainly, Wei Wuxian. As Wen Qing watched

her soon-to-be-born cousin holding on tightly to Wei Wuxian's leg, she felt a smile form on her face. First with Wen Ning and now with A-Yuan… Wei Wuxian was sliding into her family so naturally it felt like he'd been there since birth. How strange that, now that Wen Qing thought about it, she still hadn't actually met Wei Wuxian in person.

Soon, she promised herself.

The gathered peanut gallery observed A-Yuan's behavior with a far more critical lens:

"What? Who is this? Where's the mom? Where on earth is the mom?" they asked. "Which one is the dad?"

"Alright, alright. It's over," Wei Wuxian said, waving his hand in a shooing motion. Many frowned at the dismissal, but, after a bit, the crowd dispersed. They were here to see a spectacle but they weren't so interested as to forcefully stay.

If Lan Wangji were anyone else, he would have surely let out a sigh of relief.

Having scattered the crowd, Wei Wuxian looked back and said, "What a coincidence, Lan Zhan. Why are you in Yiling?"

"A night hunt," Lan Wangji responded. "I was passing by."

'*Or were you just concerned for Young Master Wei?*' Lan Xichen wondered giddily, then, frowning slightly, continued, '*No. Even if he was concerned, the night hunt probably isn't a lie. With the Yiling Patriarch now considered a threat, I don't imagine Wangji can just go visit him whenever he pleases.*'

They were no longer teenagers playing within the Cloud Recesses. At the very least, Lan Qiren would surely object to a friendly excursion with the Yiling Patriarch. Lan Wangji would only be able to go over unhindered if he had a separate excuse.

(In saving a child's life, Wei Wuxian had turned himself into an enemy of the Lan Sect. If Lan Xichen had heard such an absurd thing before the simulation began, he would have had no choice but to laugh.)

By now, the crowd had almost entirely dispersed. Everyone had gone back to the shopping they were doing before, granting Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji some privacy at long last. Hanguang-jun looked down, focusing on the small figure still clutching Wei Wuxian's leg.

"The child?" he asked.

"Mine," Wei Wuxian confirmed.

There was a pause. A beat went by. Then…

"Wait… wait, *what?!*"

Lan Wangji's brows twitched.

Then, act breaking, Wei Wuxian laughed, "Of course I'm joking! He's someone else's. I took him out to play."

"Obviously!" Jiang Cheng shouted. "How did you say something like that so straightforwardly?!"

But Wei Wuxian had already gotten the amusement he wanted out of his little joke and so moved on to ask, "What did you do? How did you make him cry?"

"I did not do anything," Lan Wangji protested.

Wen Yuan hugged Wei Wuxian's leg, still sobbing. Seeing that, Wei Wuxian nodded a few times in understanding.

'*It makes sense,*' he supposed. '*Although Lan Zhan has a pretty face, such a young child won't be able to distinguish a beautiful one from any other. All he was able to see was that this person wasn't friendly at all. In fact, Lan Zhan probably looks rather cold and strict. It's only natural he felt scared after seeing that.*'

A strange feeling of guilt filled Lan Wangji.

A-Yuan's eyes widened as he was picked up, his sobs coming to a halt when Wei Wuxian began bouncing him up and down.

"Shh. You're alright now," Wei Wuxian whispered warmly. "There, there."

For all that Nie Huaisang had (hopefully) just been joking earlier, Madam Yu could see his point. As much as she hated to admit it, Wei Wuxian really did seem like A-Yuan's father.

~~Then again, after the disaster her and Jiang Fengmian's marriage had turned into, Madam Yu supposed she was the last person who should be consulted on what a family should look like.~~

To the side, one vendor was still chuckling, amused by the scene. Upon noticing that, Wei Wuxian walked over to him and leaned to give a-Yuan a good look at the paper butterflies, pinwheels, rattle drums, and other trinkets.

"Look over here, A-Yuan. Isn't it pretty?" he asked.

Wen Yuan's focus shifted towards them and, sniffling, he mumbled, "...Yeah."

"Don't they smell nice?"

"Yeah," the boy nodded, enthusiasm growing.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, the vendor cut in, "They look good and smell nice. Young Master, won't you buy one?"

Wei Wuxian glanced over at the now-smiling A-Yuan to ask, "Do you want one?"

"Yeah!" A-Yuan nodded, somewhat embarrassed.

Wei Wuxian laughed at his reaction, nodding once and saying, "Then, let's go."

He walked away.

Jin Zixuan did a double take.

"Huh?!" he gaped, looking back and forth between Wei Wuxian and the slack-jawed vendor. "Wait, what?!"

Jiang Yanli laughed lightly, amused by both Wei Wuxian's ridiculous behavior and her fiance's reaction. Jiang Cheng, meanwhile, rolled his eyes, caught between amusement, disbelief, and annoyance at the scene.

"How bored are you — messing with a little kid like that. Just buy it for him! It's the least you can do!"

Poor A-Yuan, shocked by the trick Wei Wuxian played on him, could do nothing but stare back at the vendor with wide eyes. Tears began to form.

Then, like a savior clad in white, Lan Wangji stepped forward.

"Why don't you buy it for him?" he asked.

"Why should I buy it for him?" Wei Wuxian responded, not missing a beat.

"You asked whether he wanted one or not. Didn't that imply you were going to get one for him?"

Jiang Cheng, Jin Zixuan, and Nie Huaisang nodded rapidly in agreement (the last making sure to send a heavy look his brother's way, silently requesting some trinkets of his own).

(Nie Mingjue pretended he couldn't see.)

But Wei Wuxian merely shrugged, responding, "Asking and buying are two different things. Why should I have to get it for him just because I asked?"

"Don't ask then!" Jiang Cheng shouted from the side. Madam Yu sent him a disapproving look for his lack of control, but, in all honesty, no one here had any face to save around the others anymore.

Unlike Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji appeared lost for words. He simply glared at Wei Wuxian for a moment, not knowing how else to respond. Then, after a while, he glanced down at Wen Yuan.

(The force of his stare caused A-Yuan to start trembling once more.)

"Which one… do you want?"

A-Yuan stared back nervously, not understanding the question. Realizing the issue, Lan Wangji gestured toward the stall.

“Of the things there. Which one do you want?”

“Aw,” Jiang Yanli cooed. Lan Xichen smiled softly, enjoying the scene.

Nie Huaisang, on the other hand, lit up and turned toward Lan Wangji with a rather terrifying look in his eyes. The Lan didn’t know whether that look was over ‘the evidence of Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji being parents’ or ‘the ease at which Nie Huaisang might be able to get Lan Wangji to buy things for him.’

He decided he was better off not knowing.

However, A-Yuan simply shook his head. He clearly wanted the toys and was disappointed to have not gotten them, but he was hesitant to accept a present from Lan Wangji.

Jin Zixuan frowned.

(Had A-Yuan been hurt by adults too many times to trust even Lan Wangji?)

Zixuan couldn’t help but glance at his father once more, disheartening further when he saw that Jin Guangshan didn’t seem to be feeling anything but boredom at the current scene.

“One hour later,” Lan Jingyi announced.

A-Yuan was no longer crying now. Instead, he felt at his pockets, which were now completely stuffed with toys and other playthings Lan Wangji had gifted him. He couldn’t stop touching and observing them, disbelief still clear in his expression.

Wei Wuxian smiled from the sides.

‘*Did Wei Wuxian say what he did in the hopes that it would make Wangji get something for A-Yuan?*’ Lan Qiren wondered. ‘*He might’ve just been looking to mess with the vendor who had been laughing at them and play with A-Yuan a bit, but it’s not impossible.*’

Lan Wangji’s eyes were on Wei Wuxian, taking in everything with as analytically as he could. It hadn’t been that long since Wei Wuxian had hunkered down in the Burial Mounds, so he couldn’t have changed too much.

~~**A cultivator with a core as powerful as his probably wouldn’t have changed at all.**~~

However, his skin had become a little dry and flaky, the malnutrition weakening it a little. His arms were not yet stick-like, but they were certainly closer to that than they had been before. On the other hand, Wei Wuxian was smiling brighter than ever. Every time A-Yuan looked down at his pockets again, the Yiling Patriarch’s smile seemed to widen just a bit more. Although it was barely noticeable, Hanguang-jun began to smile as well.

Suddenly, there was a pressure on Lan Wangji’s leg. He looked down, finding that a now-beaming toddler had wrapped his arms and legs around him.

Wei Wuxian began to laugh:

“Congratulations, Lan Zhan! He’s taken a liking to you. He hugs the legs of people he likes, never letting go!”

“Well, he tries to not let go,” Jiang Cheng muttered, rolling his eyes. “You wouldn’t have lost him if he actually didn’t.”

(And, putting that aside, he couldn’t help but recall another person who had been grabbed. When A-Yuan wrapped around the future Jiang Cheng’s leg, the result had been a little different.)

After a moment of thought, Wei Wuxian patted Lan Wangji on the shoulder twice, declaring, “In my opinion, your night hunting can wait. Why don’t we go get some food?”

“Get some food?” Lan Wangji repeated.

“Yeah; let’s get something to eat. Don’t be so cold! You finally came to Yiling for once and I happened to run into you! Let’s reminisce about the past together. Come, it’s my treat.”

That plan made, Wei Wuxian got to work immediately, physically dragging Lan Wangji along. With Wei Wuxian holding onto his arm and A-Yuan still hanging onto his leg, Hanguang-jun was well and truly trapped.

“Vanquished like never before,” Nie Huaisang declared, nodding solemnly. This time, he made sure to speak too quietly for his brother to hear. However, having come closer to Lan Wangji throughout the scene, he was certain the second jade of Lan had heard what he’d said. And, indeed, Lan Wangji glanced back at him once.

Then looked away, unable to disagree.

(If Nie Huaisang wasn’t mistaken, there was a tiny, fond smile on his lips. He decided to count that as a win; everyone had been far too dour since the last segment.)

By now, Wei Wuxian had managed to drag Lan Wangji into a private room at a restaurant. A-Yuan had leg go of Lan Wangji’s leg at long last and sat to the side. A carved wooden statue was in one of his hands, two paper butterflies in the other. On the table, the pink pinwheels laid, ready to be used at a moment’s notice. He looked perfectly comfortable there, smiling as widely as he could.

Madam Yu felt her stomach turn at the sight.

The simulation had only shown one meal the Jiangs had together, right after the Wens announced they would be requiring heirs to be sent to their camps. It made perfect sense for Madam Yu to be unusually stressed at a time like that, but…

Well, what had occurred then wasn’t necessarily unusual.

‘How can you be so calm and unconcerned?! What do you think they plan to do if we ‘dare’ to disobey their orders? Wen Ruohan is pushing his luck! How arrogant. Either A-Cheng or A-Li must go… we’re literally sending them there just to be hostages!’

‘A-Niang, don’t be mad,’ Jiang Cheng requested as he stood. ‘I’ll go.’

‘Of course you’ll be the one to go! We can’t send your sister, can we?’

Her A-Cheng was the one in danger. He was the one with the most right to be angry. It made perfect sense that Madam Yu was angry on his behalf, but…

In a situation like this, where he was about to become a hostage, why did her son have to spend his meal placating *her?*

~~As he always did.~~

~~As they all had to, whenever she was home.~~

And then, just a few seconds later…

‘A-Li, stop peeling that!’ Madam Yu snapped, seeing her daughter hand the son of a servant some lotus seeds she had peeled out of the goodness of her heart. Or, rather, handing them to Wei Wuxian — someone she verbally proclaimed to be her brother as soon as Madam Yu was gone.

Wasn’t the situation the Wens were in now a worse one than what the Jiangs were in at that time? However, as Madam Yu looked over the simulation now, she couldn’t see anything but unrestrained joy on A-Yuan’s face.

She sighed, withholding the disapproving huff she wanted to make.

The waiter entered the room, handing them both menus to look over. Hanguang-jun began scanning through his, only to pause and look up when he noticed Wei Wuxian wasn’t doing the same.

“Go ahead: order,” Wei Wuxian offered.

Instead, Lan Wangji set the menu down before countering, “You can order.”

“No, no. I’m treating you, so of course you’ll be the one ordering. Really, order whatever you like. Don’t be so polite.”

They were being quite courteous to each other.

But there was a strange distance there, too.

In the past, when Wei Wuxian was at the Cloud Recesses, he would have finished that sentence with “don’t be such a fuddy-duddy.” After being brought back to life, he would conclude, “Then, Lan Zhan, are you saying I can get whatever I want? Are you sure you’re

willing to endure that?" Either way, his response would have been teasing and mischievous, but familiar and close, too.

Things simply couldn't be like that right now.

A feeling of wrongness permeated the watchers once more.

That feeling was only strengthened by the next thought Wei Wuxian had:

'*It's a good thing I didn't buy those poisonous sprouted potatoes earlier,*' he thought. '*I'll have enough money to treat Lan Zhan to something now.*'

The implication being, of course, that he wouldn't have been able to treat Lan Wangji if he *had* bought them. At that, Jin Zixuan couldn't help but recall his own disbelief at Wei Wuxian's ridiculous charade in front of the toy seller. He had been so confused. Wei Wuxian didn't have to get them for A-Yuan, but there didn't seem to be any reason not to.

(However, if sprouted potatoes were enough to empty his pockets, toys probably weren't even under consideration. Sure, one wouldn't be too expensive, but if that one could have instead been another potato to feed the Wens, then that was the obvious choice to make.)

Jin Zixuan's father had always gotten him everything he needed. Nothing was out of reach for the Jin Sect. If Jin Zixuan wanted a paper pinwheel, he would get it; if he wanted an exotic beast, it was his; if he wanted enough jewels to fill a room, they would arrive by morning. So long as it didn't belong to his father or mother, it was his.

The thought that those simple trinkets might be difficult to get hadn't even crossed Jin Zixuan's mind.

He flushed, ashamed at himself for not realizing sooner.

(To his side, Jiang Yanli reacted in the exact same way.)

Although Lan Wangji was more than willing to let Wei Wuxian order, the other's persistence paid off. Wangji looked over the menu once more before ordering. The items he had selected were all dishes that could make one's mouth burn just from hearing the name. It was, above all else, food that could never be found in Gusu.

Thus, Wei Wuxian commented, "Not bad, Lan Zhan. I thought you folks from Gusu didn't eat spicy things. You have quite the strong palate, don't you?"

A reasonable assumption to make. However…

Earlier, when forced to eat the spicy congee Wei Wuxian had made, the juniors had fallen to the ground, crying out from the magnitude of the spice. Wei Wuxian had been a little befuddled:

'Is it really that bad?' he asked. 'You're all from Gusu, but Hanguang-jun is much better at handling spice than you guys.'

‘Not at all, senior,’ Lan Sizhui corrected. ‘Hanguang-jun never has spicy food.’

Wei Wuxian had been surprised, then, recalling this very moment in Yiling.

‘...Looking back on it, I don’t think Lan Zhan actually picked up his chopsticks.’

The watchers all looked back and forth between the real and simulated Lan Wangji, eyes wide.

“...Not bad,” Nie Mingjue admitted, sending Lan Wangji a nod of respect. Grand, heroic gestures were one thing, but these little, unneeded acts spoke even more strongly of how much he cared.

Jin Zixuan narrowed his eyes, furiously taking mental notes.

As Lan Wangji looked over at his other self, he swallowed nervously. It would take hard work to bring his spice tolerance up to manageable levels, but he was more than willing to put the effort in. Risking death was a small price to pay if it meant he might be able to try Wei Wuxian’s cooking.

“You want a drink?” Wei Wuxian asked, gesturing toward the drinks portion of the menu.

Lan Wangji shook his head.

“Still sticking to the rules even when you’re outside — exactly what I’d expect of Hanguang-jun. I won’t order any for you, then.”

Thirteen years later Wei Wuxian was thrilled when Lan Wangji agreed to drink with him. However, he appeared almost equally amused when Lan Wangji refused. No matter what the second jade did, Wei Wuxian was just happy to be with him.

Jiang Cheng sighed but, this time, acknowledged that thought without any further fuss.

A-Yuan, still holding three toys in his left hand, reached up to tug at Lan Wangji’s robe. Seeing how the toddler prevented Lan Wangji from having even a sip of tea, Wei Wuxian spoke up:

“A-Yuan, come here,” he instructed.

When A-Yuan looked over at Wei Wuxian, a memory formed in his head:

‘*There! Now you’ve been planted like all the other radishes!’ Wei Wuxian declared. ‘If we water you well, you’ll grow up big and strong!’*

Below him, A-Yuan’s head poked out of the ground, his body buried deep in the dirt.

A-Yuan glanced at Lan Wangji, then back at Wei Wuxian. Then toward Lan Wangji, then back at Wei Wuxian. Toward the toy-giver, then back at the radish-burrier.

His face shifted into a firm, 'NO!'

(An illusion of those characters popped up behind him.)

Jiang Yanli began to laugh and Lan Qiren, watching that interaction, couldn't help but relax as well. His gaze turned soft.

'*What I wanted, really, was for Wangji and Xichen to grow up into people who could be happier than their father,*' he thought, growing nostalgic. '*I'm sure nothing official will happen until the thirteen-years later segment, but… if Wangji manages to make a family like this, even if that family is with the Yiling Patriarch, I can't really complain.*'

However, with that thought, came a second, far more terrifying one.

'Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, Jin Clan of Lanling, Lan Clan of Gusu, and Nie Clan of Qinghe have all taken the lead and burned the Burial Mounds to the ground.'

What, exactly had happened to A-Yuan, then?

The simulation didn't see it fit to answer that quite yet. Wei Wuxian's expression turned amused at A-Yuan's refusal, but he gestured to the spot beside himself again.

"You'll be in the way if you sit there," he explained. "Come here."

However, Lan Wangji allowed it with a simple, "It's fine. Let him sit."

Overcome with joy, A-Yuan draped himself over Lan Wangji's leg.

'*Between the two of them, I didn't expect Wangji to be the doting parent,*' Lan Xichen thought.

Wei Wuxian spun his chopsticks in his hand, laughing, "The one with the milk is the mother, but the one with the gold is the father — how unreasonable! You know-"

Wei Wuxian cut off as the doors slid open. Their dishes had arrived.

Lan Qiren had to fight to keep himself from recoiling at the sight of the burning red plates.

It was truly a sea of fire. Such a table would make a bystander break out in sweat just from the smell. However, Wei Wuxian's face merely lit up in glee. He immediately reached forward, sampling everything he could.

Several watchers cringed from just imagining the taste.

Luckily, A-Yuan's meal was spared the same fate. Lan Wangji had ordered a bowl of sweet soup for him instead. The thoughtful, considering act made Wei Wuxian smile warmly.

Considering a child's tastes when ordering for them was, in all honesty, the bare minimum. Lan Qiren had no idea why this simple fact made him feel so relieved.

‘*Well, perhaps you can blame your brother for that,*’ something in the back of his mind whispered spitefully. Although he frowned at the thought, Lan Qiren couldn’t counter it either.

(How long had it been since Qingheng-zun had last *seen* his children, much less had a meal with them? And to think, at the beginning of the simulation, Lan Qiren had feared that things would turn out even worse for Wangji than they had for the boy’s father.)

“A-Yuan, it’s time to eat,” Wei Wuxian said, knocking twice on the child’s bowl. However, the toddler wasn’t listening at all. Instead, he was completely captivated by the pair of butterfly toys Lan Wangji had given him.

A play was put on before their eyes.

The butterfly in A-Yuan’s left hand moved up and then, flitting back and forth nervously, tilted forward.

“I… I like you,” A-Yuan said.

The other butterfly immediately moved up, bouncing up and down with visible excitement and joy.

“I really like you too!” A-Yuan concluded.

Nie Huaisang sniffled, having to hold back tears at the beautiful performance.

Wen Ruohan, meanwhile, became even more quiet than before. Towards the beginning of the simulation, such a scene would have felt like a waste of time. In fact, even now, he wasn’t entirely sure what the point was. There was no value in something like this. No point — no worth.

And yet…

(A-Yuan wasn’t worth much as he was now, but children were nothing but potential. For only one child to have made it out of that camp…)

Wen Ruohan turned away.

And A-Yuan’s gripping performance continued on:

“What now?” the left butterfly asked, tilting just slightly.

The right butterfly surged forth.

“Let’s leave! We should go to a place with lots of flowers!” it declared.

“Together?”

“Yes! Let’s get married!”

Upon hearing that, Wei Wuxian couldn't help but laugh.

"Good Heavens, A-Yuan, where do you learn such things? You like me, I like you — do you even know what liking someone means?"

At that question, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan couldn't help but glance at each other, both laughing upon realizing the eye contact they'd made. Lan Wangji very sincerely hoped his ears were not bright red.

"Stop playing now. Come eat," Wei Wuxian instructed. "Come on. Your new dad got you this. It's good!"

"New dad?" Lan Xichen repeated. "Oh my, that was faster than I expected."

"Xiongzhang!"

"No need to worry," Wen Qing — of all people! — assured. "Our family will take good care of your brother."

Smiling happily, Lan Xichen said, "I leave him in your capable hands, then."

"*Xiongzhang!*"

At long last, with the butterflies happily married and away, A-Yuan put the toys back in his pocket. He took a slightly-too-large spoon in his hand and began drinking soup mouthful by mouthful. With every gulp he seemed more excited to drink than ever before. His hand sped up, forcing soup into his mouth at a lightning-fast rate.

Right before a disparaging comment on the boy's manners could come out, Madam Yu forced herself to reign it in. This was not a conference. No one there cared how messily the boy ate. At times like this, it would be best for Madam Yu to not say anything at all.

(And, now that she thought about it, A-Yuan had gone from the Jin's camps to the Burial Mounds; when would he have ever gotten to try something like this simple soup before?)

(That thought made her recall yet another orphan. One who, after being brought in by Jiang Fengmian, had lit up every time he got to try soup made by Jiang Yanli.)

A-Yuan continued eating happily. However, right before he finished the bowl, a thought suddenly occurred to him. He paused, setting the dish down, then pushed it toward Wei Wuxian. Unwillingness was obvious in his expression, but determination still managed to shine through.

"Xian-gege… Xian-gege, eat."

Those words caused a large grin to form on Wei Wuxian's face and he, sticking out his chest proudly, proclaimed, "Yes, very good! So you still know what filial piety means!"

"Speech is forbidden while eating," Lan Wangji pointed out immediately.

“Boo!” Nie Huaisang shouted his way. That, however, only got him a stern look back. The Nie heir turned to his brother, hoping for support, but found Nie Mingjue sending an equally disapproving look his way.

Thoroughly chastised, Nie Huaisang looked down.

A-Yuan, similarly, had begun busying himself with his soup again, not saying a word more. Wei Wuxian gave a betrayed cry:

“How can this be? I have to repeat myself a couple of times to make him listen to me, yet he’ll do what you say after hearing just once! Really, how can this be?”

“Speech is forbidden when dining for you, too,” Lan Wangji scolded again.

Wei Wuxian just laughed at that, swirling the liquor cup in his hand and commenting, “You really… don’t change at all, do you. No matter how many years pass.”

The smile on his face was easy to see.

They weren’t in the Cloud Recesses. Technically, Wei Wuxian didn’t have to follow the ‘no speaking’ rule. Despite that, he took no offense to Lan Wangji’s words. He wanted to eat with Hanguang-jun; hearing Lan Wangji recite rules to him again seemed to bring him nothing but joy.

But…

‘*I… I was there too,*’ Jiang Cheng thought. ‘*I was in Yiling first, before Lan Wangji. I saw A-Yuan then. If we had eaten together, I wouldn’t have stopped them from talking. I wouldn’t make them follow the Lan rules. Why…*’

Why wasn’t he there now?

‘*I don’t even have to have sided with them. If I just hadn’t said he was an enemy, maybe I could have-*’

But his other-self *had* said that.

Was it any wonder, now, why Wei Wuxian was so determined to avoid him after being brought back to life? Jiang Cheng would probably avoid his other-self too.

“Hey, Lan Zhan, why did you come to Yiling?” Wei Wuxian asked abruptly. “I’m familiar with this area. Want me to show you around?”

“There’s no need.”

Wei Wuxian gave a half-nod, having expected that answer. Cultivation sects often had secret tasks they couldn’t share with others as they pleased. Thus, there was no reason for Wei Wuxian to push.

He gave a small, pleased sigh.

“I finally got to meet someone I knew from before; someone who wouldn’t try to avoid me, too. It’s been so stuffy for the past few days.”

His voice was nostalgic and wistful. Longing and mournful, too.

(Because, for all that Jiang Cheng might’ve accused him of wanting to play the hero, there was nothing easy about what he had to do.)

“Hey, Lan Zhan, can you pass something along? Did anything big happen outside?”

If something had happened, Wei Wuxian wouldn’t have any way to know. Though it was to a lesser extent than before, the Burial Mounds had become his prison once more.

“...What would you count as something big?” Hanguang-jun inquired.

“You know, like if a new sect has sprung up out of nowhere! Has a clan expanded their borders? Any sects forming new alliances with one another? That sort of thing. Just small talk, you know? Anything big happen outside?”

There was a brief pause between them. Lan Wangji furrowed his brows slightly, choosing his next words carefully.

“...An arranged marriage,” he admitted at last.

“Really? For which sects?”

“The Yunmeng Jiang Clan and the Lanling Jin Clan.”

Wei Wuxian froze. As the liquor cup he’d been spinning in his hands came to an abrupt halt, some liquid splashing over the side.

Jiang Yanli’s eyes widened.

“Huh?” she asked.

For a moment, no one could speak.

That was happy news. Jiang Yanli had been looking forward to that since the day she had met her fiance. They already knew from the simulation that it was going to happen, but it was still a good thing. However-

“Wait. Wait…” she trailed off, glancing back at her brother, her mother, then over to her fiance. “If… if he reacted like that, then A-Xian… didn’t know?”

No response came. That was almost worse than confirmation.

“But…. that’s not-”

She looked back at her shidi once more.

Wei Wuxian's eyes were wide, but the mixture of emotions within was almost impossible to read. There was no one word that could encapsulate it well, because-

"A-Xian… is learning about my marriage… from Hanguang-jun?"

Just by itself, that sentence made no sense. It couldn't be true — not for him. A-Xian, who, at ten, had created pages upon pages of detailed notes to help plan her wedding? Her Wei Wuxian, who had stayed up late into the night telling her about how glorious it would be? Wei Ying, who had promised to be with her every step of the way?

She hadn't even gotten to *tell him?*

And now:

"I see…." Wei Wuxian set his cup down at last. "My Shi — ah, Maiden Jiang will be marrying Jin Zixuan?"

"Maiden *Jiang?!*" Jiang Yanli repeated, her voice breaking as she did.

Jiang Cheng had to look away.

"When will it be? When's the ceremony?"

"In seven days," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian nodded once, slowly, processing the information.

Jiang Yanli didn't look like she could even manage that.

"It… it won't happen with us, A-Li," Jin Zixuan promised. "We won't let it happen here-"

"But it still happened *there!*" she cried out, swerving toward him. "It's still… it's another world. That world isn't going to change. That A-Xian, he-"

She cut herself off once more.

And Madam Yu, watching, suddenly became very aware that this was everything she had wanted to see. Her A-Li was marrying Jin Zixuan; Wei Wuxian was no threat to Jiang Cheng — wasn't even part of the *sect*, much less the family.

And yet, watching this now, all she could feel was that this was completely and utterly wrong.

Wei Wuxian nodded once more, still not really having a reaction. Hands shaking, he lifted his cup again to take another sip. However, once it reached his lips, he realized that the last of the liquor had spilled out when he set the cup down. It was empty, now.

Slowly, he set it on the table once more.

Helplessness burned at Lan Wangji's soul. It was a familiar feeling but, this time, it was of a slightly different variety than before. When Wei Wuxian was thrown into the Burial Mounds, there had been nothing Lan Wangji could do. He couldn't interfere with the simulation and his other self was nowhere nearby. This time, his other-self was sitting right across from Wei Wuxian. However…

What, exactly, *would* fix this?

'*Well… I'd been expecting that to happen even before I left,*' Wei Wuxian supposed. With those words, a flashback formed. A forest, lush and overgrown in a way the Burial Mounds could never be, appeared around them. In the distance, a few bushes rustled.

Pop.

Pop.

Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian's heads poked out of them.

Then, closer to the watchers, a man in yellow stood.

"No! The man who was rude to Maiden Jiang can't have been me!" Jin Zixuan cried out. When he looked down, the object before him came into view: a pot with an unbloomed lotus flower inside.

Jiang Yanli's eyes widened a little. Jin Zixuan flushed bright red.

'*I was going to try growing one for her when we got out! Why is it revealing my plan before I even got to try?!*'

But, ignorant of the real Jin Zixuan's woes, the simulated Jin Zixuan muttered, "If… if I take good care of this precious violet lotus, then, when I give it to Jiang-guniang…"

An image formed before him. The lotus had bloomed fully, its petals spreading out proudly. Jiang Yanli appeared in front of it. As she looked down at the gift, her eyes sparkled.

"Wow, what a beautiful violet lotus," she said softly, her voice as gentle as a warm summer breeze. "You're amazing, Jin-gongzi."

Jin Zixuan laughed openly as she came close.

Then that image vanished, leaving only the rosy-cheeked, daydreaming Jin Zixuan in its place.

Jiang Cheng coughed to hide his scoff.

"A-Cheng, don't be rude," Jiang Yanli said, her words barely loud enough to be heard.

(It was important to be able to focus on the simulation. These scenes would most certainly have interested her at any other time. However, right now, it was hard to care.)

In any case, the simulated Jin Zixuan was full of optimism. He immediately set to work, picking up some fertilizer and dumping it into the pot. Thanks to the spiritual nature of the plant, that was enough to make its petals immediately creep open. It was only a tiny movement, but an enormous smile formed on Jin Zixuan's face. He could barely contain his excitement, scooping several more piles in.

"Add more. Add more," he told himself. "Quickly. Quickly, bloom."

Plop.

Plop.

Plop.

Plop.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng, still hiding in the bushes, made eye contact with each other.

"...Are you supposed to add that much?" Nie Mingjue asked at last. The other watchers paused, looked at the simulated Jin Zixuan, then looked towards each other to see what everyone else thought. They were some of the most educated people in the world.

Unfortunately, their knowledge on gardening left much to be desired.

The simulated Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were similarly ignorant, their expressions getting more confused the longer they watched.

"What is he doing?" Jiang Cheng whispered.

"I don't know. But, if he upsets Shijie again, I'll definitely punish him," Wei Wuxian declared.

Jiang Yanli's expression wavered. The meaning of what he was saying barely registered in her mind. There was only one word she could focus on.

"A-Xian," she muttered softly.

Just as she called him that, Wei Wuxian had always called her "Shijie." As he should. There was no reason for him not to.

There *shouldn't* be any reason for him not to.

(The simulation had shown them horrible things before, but Wei Wuxian trying to not call her "Shijie" felt wrong in a very different way than the Burial Mounds had. This political, social, internal change was better in some ways, and far, far worse in others.)

(He had heard about her marriage from *Lan Wangji.*)

The simulation darkened then brightened once more, revealing the sparkling lotus lakes of Yunmeng. The flowers here were all, noticeably, still buds. Dragonflies came to rest on their leaves instead of the small, wound-up petals, too heavy for the buds to support them.

Overlooking this sight, Jiang Yanli stood in wait.

"Jiang-guniang!" Jin Zixuan called out from the side. She turned toward him, a bit of surprise on her face.

"I… um," Jin Zixuan paused, shut his eyes, then bravely held out the pot with a rushed, "T-take this!"

(Simultaneously, Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin's heads popped out of the lake below.)

Jin Zixuan sighed again, wishing, once more, that the simulation wasn't so dead-set on embarrassing him all the time.

(On the other hand, this was — *slightly* — preferable to watching even more go wrong for Wei Wuxian. He supposed he should take his small victories where he could.)

The simulated Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng glared his way. Keeping half their faces below water, they observed Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan's interactions with narrowed eyes.

Jin Zixuan began:

"W-well." He cleared his throat. "To me, in my mind, you're just like… just like… um…"

He turned away momentarily, pulling out a slip of paper from his sleeve. Meanwhile, a dark aura began to rise from the plant.

The watchers, now sensitive to this, were easily able to recognize that as resentful energy.

"Oh no," Jin Zixuan muttered.

His simulated self turned around, smiling wide as he said, "Your aura is as beautiful as this lotus is!"

The second he finished talking, the lotus appeared to wilt on the spot. It turned an ashy gray, crumpling in on itself into a pile of rot.

"Excellent work, Young Master Jin."

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue shouted. "Can't you hold these sorts of comments in until later?!"

But his brother was undeterred, merely turning to Jin Zixuan to say, "Pay more attention to what Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong do. At the very least, I doubt it can make you worse!"

There was nothing Jin Zixuan could say in response.

Especially not when, flailing widely, his simulated self said, "Wait, Jiang-guniang, I-I can explain! I didn't mean anything like this! I just… it's just this lotus is-"

Suddenly, two projectiles burst out of the water from behind. It was the Yiling Patriarch and Sect Leader Jiang. The fact that their clothes were drenched all the way through didn't slow them down in the least.

"*Aaaah!*"

Jin Zixuan was sent flying.

"Stay away from my Shjie!" Wei Wuxian shouted after him.

Consolingly, Jiang Yanli patted Jin Zixuan twice on the head. She might not be able to actually touch him, but doing that still felt appropriate. Jin Zixuan buried his face in his hands, unable to watch for even a moment longer.

The simulated Jin Zixuan surfaced at last, facing Wei Wuxian's enraged shouts head on. He sighed in frustration, lowering himself just slightly so that his mouth was underwater. The pathetic stream of bubbles that formed perfectly encapsulated his feelings on his attempt.

'*I can't give up so easily,*' he thought.

As Jin Guangshan watched, he couldn't help but think that he really should have pushed Jin Zixuan harder in the boy's youth. If he had convinced Jin Zixuan to come with him and Jin Zixun to a brothel, the boy probably wouldn't be struggling so much now.

Well, he could always fix that mistake once the simulation was over.

There was a change of scenery. A rustle in the bushes. Jin Zixuan popped out right in front of Jiang Yanli, holding a wooden sculpture out to her.

"Jiang-guniang, I carved this myself. Please accept it," he requested. "It represents the strength of my feelings for you."

The wooden carving — a fake model of the Jiang sect's bell — snapped in two a moment after.

Jin Zixuan flinched back as if he'd been stabbed.

"Jiang-guniang. Please, accept this!" Jin Zixuan said, holding out a finely decorated hairpin. "It-it demonstrates my eternal loyalty to-"

Attracted by the glittering gold, a bird swooped down and snatched the pin away. Having shut his eyes in nervousness, the simulated Jin Zixuan didn't notice until it was too late.

This time, the embarrassment seemed to have stabbed Jin Zixuan in the back. He collapsed onto his hand and knees.

Within the main hall of Yunmeng, Jin Zixuan approached her with a steaming bowl of soup. Jiang Yanli looked down at it, which Jin Zixuan took as his cue:

"Jiang-guniang, I made lotus and pork rib soup for you. Have a taste!" he requested, beaming.

Her smile turned somewhat awkward, concern rising within her.

"Ah, don't worry. It's not poisoned or anything," he promised. "Here: I'll drink it to show you."

And thus, he did.

He collapsed on the floor a moment later.

Jin Zixuan didn't even have to look to know that the loud *thump* he heard couldn't be good.

They were brought out to the lakes once more. Enough time had passed by now that the buds were about half bloomed. Apparently, he had been at this for a while.

"I'm not sure whether to admire your tenacity or fear your terrible luck," Nie Huaisang said.

"Both," Jiang Cheng declared.

"At this point, I'm half-tempted to believe he's been cursed," Nie Mingjue added on.

Lan Xichen laughed a little, commenting, "That sounds like exactly the kind of thing the townspeople would suspect the Yiling Patriarch of."

And, this time, he actually had a motive.

Jin Zixuan just wilted further.

Madam Jin, watching this, couldn't help but smile. It was almost the exact opposite of the many, many interactions Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan had shared in their youth. She was always chasing after him, unable to get even a second glance.

'*How does it feel now, Zixuan?*' she thought, smugly. '*If you had listened to me and given Jiang-guniang a chance, you wouldn't be in this situation at all right now.*'

(Of course, if Madam Jin hadn't pushed it and had just let Jin Zixuan meet Jiang Yanli normally, there might have been no problems at all. That was beside the point, however, so she decided to not pay much attention to it.)

The simulation moved back inside, bringing them to the same medical facility Wei Wuxian had woken up in after his run-in with the Xuanwu of Slaughter. This time, however, the patient lying there was Jin Zixuan.

He blinked his eyes open.

Upon finding himself looking up at the ceiling, an understanding of what just happened came over him.

"Oh, I'm done for!" he cried out, burying his face in his hands. "That couldn't have gone worse. Jiang-guniang hates me even more now!"

A light laugh came from the side, resounding like the tinkling of bells.

"Oh no," Jin Zixuan muttered, still not looking up. "Oh no, no, no, no."

There was no way for him to have not recognized that voice.

Lan Wangji sent him a carefully disguised look of pity from the side.

"Miss Jiang," Jin Zixuan said, sitting up. His cheeks had flushed bright pink once more, but Jiang Yanli just smiled at the sight. Reaching forward, she cupped Jin Zixuan's cheek. As an additional token from the spirits, pink hearts began to materialize around the pair, giving off a soft glow.

"Young love," Madam Jin muttered.

(Had she ever felt something so pure?)

The watchers' view was pulled back to where Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng gazed in from outside. The Yiling Patriarch gave a short 'humph' and Jiang Cheng glared, but neither intervened.

As Jiang Cheng's other self had said, there was nothing they could do. Jiang Yanli liked him, after all.

'*Well,*' Jiang Cheng thought, glancing at the real versions of his sister and her fiance, '*I guess… there are worse people she could have picked.*'

That scene faded away, returning them to the room where Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian were eating together. The carefully-blank smile Wei Wuxian wore was just as heavy as it had been before.

Jiang Yanli tensed slightly, feeling her good mood vanish at once.

(Wei Wuxian had been right there, defending her all the way. How could someone who had watched all those things happen have heard about the marriage a week before it occurred — and from *Lan Wangji?* No matter how many times she repeated that question in her head, denial was all she could feel.)

At this moment, Jiang Yanli felt her own powerlessness more than ever before. It was one thing to not be able to help in a life or death battle; this was something else entirely.

And now…

‘*Jiang Cheng… didn’t tell me,*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*If I hadn’t met Lan Zhan today, how much longer would it have taken me to find out?*’

Jiang Cheng tensed.

(He had been trying to not think about the same thing.)

You could make all the excuses you wanted — the sects were watching the Jiang too carefully, so maybe it was dangerous; Wei Wuxian was busy taking care of the Wens, so perhaps foreknowledge of Jiang Yanli’s wedding would have made it difficult for him to stay — but that probably wasn’t the real reason. The simulation had been rather clear on the future Jiang Cheng’s feelings, after all:

‘When he heard the former Sect Leader Nie mention what had happened to his sect again, hatred sprouted within him. This hatred was directed not only at everyone seated in that room, but also at Wei Wuxian.’

Jiang Cheng had tried to convince him to return home. Instead of agreeing, Wei Wuxian had ~~abandoned them~~ refused. Jiang Cheng, in response, had declared him an enemy of all cultivation sects. Was the political situation they were in a factor? Certainly.

(But, even if it wasn’t, the bitterness his other self felt would probably be more than enough reason to keep this from Wei Wuxian.)

Too quietly to be heard, Jiang Cheng gave a hollow laugh.

“Two Prides of Yunmeng, huh?” he muttered.

Still processing, Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. He breathed in, letting some serenity wash over him.

‘*Let’s be honest. Even if Jiang Cheng had told me, nothing would be different. He’s already announced that I defected from Yunmeng. I’m not supposed to be affiliated with them anymore. Even if I had been told about it, I wouldn’t be able to attend the wedding banquet. Really, it was right for Jiang Cheng to not tell me. If he was the one I heard this from, I don’t know what I would’ve done.*’

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?” Jiang Cheng asked. “I… what would have been wrong about hearing of it from me?”

“Nothing, obviously,” Madam Yu scoffed. “He’s just…”

She trailed off, not having an answer either.

“He’s trying to look on the positive side of things,” Lan Xichen pointed out. “He’s always been good at that.”

‘A-Xian, you were born with a smiling face,’ Jiang Yanli had said. ‘Always smiling, never minding sorrowful things. No matter what situation you’re in, you can always be happy.’

Which was an amazing thing. It spoke to the strength of Wei Wuxian's character. When Jiang Yanli said that, there were only good intentions behind her words.

'It's that temperament of yours that allows you to stand A-Cheng's bad temper.'

But the things happening to him now weren't fine just because he could *take it.* Lan Wangji, watching with an unreadable expression on his face, stood up. He walked forward, only stopping when he was by Wei Wuxian's side. The simulation was made of the spirit's memories; Wei Wuxian wouldn't be able to feel him.

Still, it felt right.

Meanwhile, standing farther back, Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes.

'*Wei Ying said that it would be difficult given that Jiang Wanyin had announced he'd 'defected from Yunmeng.' Is he just trying to not focus on the additional things the Jiang brat said? Does he not* want *to consider his status as an enemy of the sects?*'

Or, locked away in the Burial Mounds and cut off from most communication, did he just not know?

It was hard to say. Wei Wuxian's expression seemed to reveal nothing about what he thought. Unusually quiet, he picked up the bottle and refilled his cup. His hand shook just a little.

"...Either way, Jin Zixuan was let off way too easily," Wei Wuxian declared. "Lan Zhan, what do you think about this marriage?"

For a while, Lan Wangji didn't respond.

"Ah, that's right. No point in asking you. What thoughts could you have on the marriage anyway? It's not like you ever think about these things."

Wei Wuxian liked and respected Lan Wangji. Everything he had done so far made that more than clear. However, Hanguang-jun was not the person he wanted to hear about Jiang Yanli's marriage from.

Wei Wuxian emptied his cup in one gulp, continuing, "I know that, behind closed doors, everyone will be saying that my Shijie doesn't deserve Jin Zixuan. Ha! In my eyes, though, Jin Zixuan is the one who doesn't deserve my Shijie! It's just that she had to, um… ah."

(She had to go and fall in love with Jin Zixuan.)

Jin Zixuan clenched his fists together, steeling his resolve once more. He would win over Wei Wuxian if it was the last thing he did!

(He had to. Even the simple fact of Wei Wuxian being too heated to remember to call her 'Maiden Jiang' had made Jiang Yanil's eyes water momentarily.)

Cheeks flushed with alcohol, Wei Wuxian slammed his cup onto the table and declared, "Lan Zhan! Do you know? My Shijie deserves the best person in the world! Her wedding's going to be a grand banquet! One everyone admires and praises, even after a hundred years! Nothing will be able to compare to it!"

As he spoke, an image appeared. A young Wei Wuxian, twelve at most, sitting with Jiang Cheng. Papers laid strewn out between them, depicting their plans for the marriage.

A memory from better times.

"I'll watch my Shijie get married in absolute splendor," Wei Wuxian said.

"Mn."

And, at that, Wei Wuxian couldn't help but laugh.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, why did you answer?" he asked, his drunken expression gaining a bitter edge. "I… won't be able to watch it anymore."

Jiang Yanli was certain getting stabbed through the gut would have hurt less than this.

"I-" she cut off. "A-Xian, I…"

No other words came.

Jiang Cheng could remember those nights as well — the planning he and Wei Wuxian had done, huddled in bed under the moonlight; their shared promise to defend Jiang Yanli if Jin Zixuan tried anything even remotely funny. Those were the naive dreams of children, but…

'*Was it worth it?*' Jiang Cheng wondered. '*Future me, what about this — about any of this — seems worth it to you? What did you gain from declaring him an enemy of the sects? Why did you have to say that? Why couldn't you have stopped for once in your life and* thought *before you said anything?!*'

For maybe the first time in his life, Jiang Cheng felt like he truly understood what his father had been trying to say.

A-Yuan, having finished his soup, began playing with the butterfly toys once more. Unfortunately, the long antennas of the two butterflies had gotten tangled up mid-kiss. No matter how many ways A-Yuan tried to pull them apart, they wouldn't budge. Seeing this, Lan Wangji reached over, taking the butterflies from A-Yuan and untangling them with ease. He returned them to A-Yuan.

It was this simple, quiet interaction that seemed to break Wei Wuxian out of his thoughts at last.

"A-Yuan, stop rubbing your face," he scolded, managing a smile. "There's still soup in your mouth. It will dirty your clothes."

Lan Wangji reached forward once more, this time using a white handkerchief to wipe the soup off A-Yuan's mouth.

"Lan Zhan, what a surprise. I never expected you to be so good with children. If you keep treating him like this, he might not be willing to come back with me!"

The smile on his face certainly *looked* genuine. In isolation, this would have been a purely lighthearted scene.

"What do you think, A-Yuan? Is Hanguang-jun plotting to lure you back with him?" Wei Wuxian poked Wen Yuan a few times, making the boy giggle with glee. "Oh dear. And if he does manage to tempt you into going with him, there'll be nothing I can do! I'll just have to go back to Auntie Qing by myself and face her wrath. You wouldn't make me go do that, would you A-Yuan? You-"

He cut off suddenly, reaching into his sleeve to pull a talisman out. It was already burning, the blue flame not catching anything else on fire but turning the talisman into a pile of ashes nonetheless.

Both Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan perked up, intrigued by the sight of yet another invention from Wei Wuxian. The Yiling Patriarch, on the other hand, appeared far more concerned.

"Oh no," Wei Wuxian muttered, standing up. "Excuse me, Lan Zhan. I have to go back!"

He picked A-Yuan up and ran out of the inn. He was physically fit enough to run amazingly fast, but that was nothing in comparison to the speed he would have if he had ridden on his sword.

Wen Qing clenched her hands into fists.

(She couldn't help but wonder if her other self would have done the operation if she had known what Jiang Cheng would eventually do to them. It was a petty, pointless thought, but one she couldn't help but consider.)

Someone cleared their throat.

"The talisman was the core of a warning array Senior Wei had set up on the Burial Mounds," Ouyang Zizhen explained. "If something happened on the Mounds after he left, like the array being broken or blood being shed, it would burn up at once."

Which explained his frantic rush over.

It did not, however, explain why he was going on foot.

A white flash appeared and Lan Wangji fell into step beside Wei Wuxian, asking, "Why do you not mount your sword?"

"I forgot to bring it!"

Jiang Cheng groaned, nervousness about the general situation boiling over into frustration.

Wen Qing looked over at him and then, pursing her lips together, forced herself to look away once more.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were running as fast as they could, but the look on Wei Wuxian's face showed how quickly they were running out of time. Without saying anything, Lan Wangji wrapped his arm around Wei Wuxian's waist, sending them both into the air atop Bichen. The people in the streets looked up in shock at the sight. A-Yuan, meanwhile, began to cheer loudly.

"Thank you!" Wei Wuxian said.

Lan Wangji nodded once, rushing on. Soon, the Burial Mounds came into view. The black peaks towered high into the sky, the roars of countless fierce corpses echoing through the forest. The resentful energy felt nearly as thick as the first time they saw the Burial Mounds, lacking the soothing lull Wei Wuxian had brought it into since then.

Lan Qiren slowly sat down again, feeling nauseous at the sensation. Jiang Yanli stumbled a little, collapsing to her knees, and Nie Huaisang huddled closer to his brother. Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen tensed.

'*What could have caused the talisman to go off?*' Nie Mingjue wondered. Countless scenarios filled his mind, each more horrifying than the last. At the very top of that list was the thing he most feared this would be: his other self, getting access to the Wens while Wei Wuxian was away. It didn't seem very likely. If that had occurred, it probably would've been mentioned in the future. However…

There was a chance, and that terrified him more than words could describe.

Bichen descended, allowing the passengers to get off. As soon as their feet touched solid ground, something flew toward them. Lan Wangji batted it away with Bichen, making the mass of resentful energy fall to the ground.

Then, in the distance, there was a scream:

"A-Ning!"

Wen Qing stood before she even registered what she was doing, her heart pounding in her chest.

In the middle of the forest, around a dozen Wen cultivators stood before Wen Ning. The corpse's unseeing white eyes were revealed as talismans flaked off him one by one. Two other fierce corpses rested in his hands, already torn to shreds. Blackish blood dripped off of them as Wen Ning pounded them into the ground over and over again. He then threw one, sending it crashing through trees at a high speed.

The person closest to Wen Ning was Wen Qing. She held a sword in one hand. With her other hand, she reached into her sleeve and pulled out a new talisman. As Wen Ning

moved his arm up and down, repeatedly slamming the corpse he was holding on the ground, she approached. Right when he seemed distracted, she jumped forward and tried to place the talisman on him. However, before she made contact, he swung back, shattering her sword and blasting the talisman away. Wen Qing stumbled at the force. She was knocked off balance; she couldn't dodge. Thus-

"Qing-guniang!" Jiang Yanli gasped, barely able to breathe under the resentment. Too scared to look, she shut her eyes.

The instant before Wen Qing was crushed, a blast of resentful energy knocked Wen Ning away. Glowing red talismans flew in a line, wrapping around 'the Ghost General' like a serpent and sealing his arms to his sides. The corpse grunted and groaned, but could not move.

Quite a few watchers breathed out sighs of relief at that. They couldn't wait for Wen Ning's consciousness to come back.

Wen Ning's struggling continued on.

"Didn't I say to never touch the talismans on him?" Wei Wuxian demanded as he got close.

"Nobody touched them! No one even went into the cave! He tore them off on his own and suddenly went into a rampage. He destroyed the seals at the blood pool and cave as well. All the fierce corpses in the blood pool got out! Wei Wuxian, go help Granny and the others! They won't be able to hold on for much longer!"

Before Wei Wuxian could do that, however, hissing noises came from above. Wei Wuxian looked up, finding a pair of fierce corpses in the trees.

"Wen Ruohan!" Nie Mingjue spoke up at once. "Of the Wens there, how many can fight?!"

Wen Ruohan glanced back briefly, observing Nie Mingjue for a mere moment before responding, "Wen Qing, Wen Ruling, and Wen MoRang can. However, from what I saw, Wen MoRang has lost his leg and Wen Ruling's missing a few fingers. I don't know how well they'll be able to fight."

(And, putting that aside, both were now so old that any training they had gotten in their youth was almost worthless.)

Nie Mingjue gritted his teeth together, turning back to the simulation with hands clenched tightly enough to snap a sword in two.

At that moment, Wen Ning noticed the corpses in the trees. Wei Wuxian had been trying to deal with them in a way that wouldn't aggravate Wen Ning so he hadn't managed to subdue them yet. The Ghost General roared, breaking free of his restraints and shooting up. He grabbed onto the corpses before anyone could react.

Wei Wuxian pulled out Chenqing, calling out, "Lan-"

He cut off, realizing there was no need. He had wanted to ask Lan Wangji for help, but Hanguang-jun was already at work. His zither was pulled out. The strings vibrated under his hands.

🎵♪🎵

All corpses in the area flew back at once.

And Wei Wuxian breathed out a sigh of relief in turn.

The real Lan Wangji did the same, though in a nearly-unnoticeable manner. The fact that his other-self had managed to be there was almost a complete coincidence, which made it especially lucky that it happened to be during such a necessary time.

Hopefully, when the simulation was over, he would be able to provide help just the same.

Then a single, sharp note rang out.

♪

The watchers jumped a little, feeling it call their attention.

The Ghost General, having just landed on the ground, paused and looked toward the source of the sound.

“Wen Ning! Do you remember me?” Wei Wuxian asked.

To the side, three guqin notes rang out:

🎵♪

With that, the corpses were subdued.

Without even thinking about it, the real Lan Wangji mimed playing those same notes, trying to see clearly what his other-self had done to make them so effective.

Wen Ning lowered his body, a deep growl coming out of his throat. Wei Wuxian raised his flute again, however, at the last moment, realized Wen Yuan was hanging onto his leg. He immediately abandoned the notes he was about to play, picking the boy up and throwing him to Wen Qing.

“Take him-!”

Before he could even finish his request, Wen Ning crashed into him like a tidal wave. Wei Wuxian was sent flying back, causing him to crash into a rocky cliff edge. The wind was knocked out of him. He coughed out blood a moment later.

Wen Ruohan’s frown deepened.

It didn't matter how groundbreaking or miraculous Wei Wuxian's inventions were. Cut off from cultivation society, he would have to do each part of the discovery process by himself. When things went wrong, he would have to deal with it alone. If not for Lan Wangji's presence there that day…

How many more revolutionary discoveries would Wei Wuxian have made if he had gotten the support his mind deserved?

(And how much of a role had Wen Ruohan played in sending him there now?)

Lan Wangji looked back at the sound and, upon seeing the state Wei Wuxian was in, rushed toward him at once. Wen Qing had passed A-Yuan to someone else, quickly running to him as well. Lan Wangji got there first, all-but embracing Wei Wuxian as he sent over spiritual energy through their linked hands.

Lan Xichen couldn't help but smile slightly at the sight.

However, Wen Qing vastly different reaction to the matter:

"Let him go. It's not necessary! Let me do it! I'm Wen Qing!"

And Wen Qing was indeed one of the top medics in the world.

Nonetheless, this request of hers did cause several people to look at her strangely. As far as they could tell, there weren't any problems with the treatment Lan Wangji gave.

It didn't matter; Wei Wuxian's focus laid elsewhere.

"Don't let him go!"

Wen Ning didn't appear interested in finishing Wei Wuxian off. Rather, arms hanging low, the corpse was now stumbling toward the bottom of the mountain. There, the rest of the Wens were hiding from fierce corpses.

"Everyone, run! Run! He's going toward you!" Wen Qing shouted, unwilling to leave Wei Wuxian behind. Wei Wuxian was far less concerned about his injuries however, shoving Lan Wangji aside and running after Wen Ning himself. Lan Wangji followed.

"Where's your sword?" Hanguang-jun asked.

Wei Wuxian whipped out twelve talismans, shouting back, "I don't know where I put it!"

"You don't *know?!*" Madam Yu repeated, her son giving a frustrated groan as their shared concerns piled up. "Ugh. Wei Wuxian, you're not Nie Huaisang! Of all the thoughtless, irresponsible, careless-"

"*Shut your mouth*," Wen Qing hissed back, not even bothering to look away from the simulation. Although Madam Yu was rather affronted by the command — turning to gape at

the doctor, astounded by her audacity — she then simply gritted her teeth together. Arguing felt like a lost cause.

(Especially since, as far as she could tell, most situations were improved when she kept quiet for just a bit longer.)

The twelve talismans Wei Wuxian threw burst into flame, lining up into something resembling a chain of fire to hold Wen Ning down. With a flick of his wrist, Lan Wangji strummed his zither.

♪♪♫

Like a tremendous pressure had fallen on top of him, Wen Ning crashed into the ground. However, it wasn't long before he began to struggle forward again, moving toward the Wens once more.

Ignoring the wound to his chest and the blood trickling out of his mouth, Wei Wuxian held up Chenqing and began to play:

♫♫♪♪♪

Despite the condition he was in, the notes were flawless.

An ocean of calm settled over the watchers at once. It was a wave of serenity mixed with an artificial exhaustion.

'Isn't it hard to do things? Wouldn't doing nothing be far more nice? Come on, just lay down for a bit.'

♫♪

Nie Huaisang all-but collapsed, slouching against his chair and looking a few seconds away from taking a nap.

And, combined with the attack from Lan Wangji's zither, the musical force was enough to make Wen Ning kneel. However, at that moment, Wei Wuxian coughed. His own blood was choking him, forcing him to stop.

Which shouldn't have ever happened. Inventions like this — *miracles* like this — should not be left to a two-person team in the middle of the Burial Mounds. There should have been a sect full of cultivators around to help. There should have been trained personnel on-call in case anything went wrong. Anything except *this*.

Wen Ruohan sighed, rubbing his temples tiredly.

Seeing the state Wei Wuxian was in, Lan Wangji had begun to imbue even more power into his zither. The tremendous force crashing down on Wen Ning was certainly felt, but didn't stop him — not completely. The conflict continued on, reshaping the ground around Wen Ning into a crater as more and more of the Burial Mounds cracked under

the force. The corpse's ferocious growls became louder and louder with every attack it felt.

Then:

"Young… Master…"

"A-Ning?" Wen Qing asked. She rushed over, standing directly in front of the illusion of her brother.

And Wei Wuxian reacted as well:

"Lan Zhan, stop for a moment," he requested.

Lan Wangji set a hand against the strings, stopping their vibrations.

Slow and tentative, Wei Wuxian stepped closer and asked, "Wen Ning?"

Wen Ning struggled to lift up his head. Where there had been nothing but white before, there were now a pair of black pupils. Those pupils widened as Wen Ning made eye contact with Wei Wuxian.

"...Young… Master Wei?"

The words were said slowly and clunkily, but were recognizable nonetheless.

"He's back!" Nie Huaisang cheered, finally shaking off the state Wei Wuxian had put him in. Many of the other juniors also grinned widely, pleased to see him again.

But none of them could compare to Wen Qing.

"A-Ning!" she shouted, throwing herself at him. He stumbled slightly at the sudden contact, falling back from the force. However, he didn't attack. Instead:

"Sis… ter?"

'*Able to recognize more than just his master,*' Jin Guangshan thought. '*I suppose his consciousness really was restored.*'

Wen Qing was certain of that too. Tears in her eyes, she pulled Wen Ning close.

"It's me! It's me! It's your sister, A-Ning!"

The real Wen Qing swallowed once, too overwhelmed to speak. They knew that Wen Ning's consciousness would be brought back. However, after having to watch her brother as nothing more than a fierce corpse, it had felt a little hard to believe. Some part of her had wondered if something was going to go wrong.

But now, before her eyes, her whole family began to cheer, ecstatic at Wen Ning's return. Her other-self continued sobbing in Wen Ning's arms, the other Wens shouting

in joy.

Wei Wuxian walked over, kneeling down by Wen Ning's side to ask, "How do you feel right now, Wen Ning?"

"I… I…" Wen Ning paused, drawing himself back. "I want to cry right now… but I can't. What's-"

Wei Wuxian patted his shoulder twice, his face turning solemn as he responded, "You remember, don't you? You're already dead."

Wen Qing clenched her fists together, wishing she could deny that fact. For all that Wei Wuxian had brought his consciousness back, Wen Ning's stiff, infrequent movements proved he was no longer alive. No matter how much time passed, his eyes would never blink again.

(That said, words could not describe how much Wei Wuxian had done for them. Wen Qing swore she wouldn't forget it.)

Her other self wouldn't either. With trembling hands, the simulated Wen Qing reached forward and cupped Wen Ning's face. It was surely cool to the touch, lacking any warmth he might have had before. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but the smile on her face was undoubtedly real.

'*I should probably give them some time alone,*' Wei Wuxian thought, turning away. Wen Ning and Wen Qing's family members were rushing up the hill, cheering loudly. This was for Wen Ning's family. As such, it wouldn't be appropriate for him to stay.

Jiang Yanli frowned just slightly at that. Wei Wuxian was the reason for this happy moment; he shouldn't feel like he was intruding. It was…

Painfully familiar.

'There you go again,' Jiang Fengmian sighed. 'Blaming him for everything.'

'I shouldn't blame him?! If he hadn't fought with Zixuan, none of this would have happened! Ha. Ever since you brought him here you've always favored him. Even over your own son! If it was Jiang Cheng who made a scene would you rush to Gusu like you did? Never!'

Wei Wuxian had listened carefully, hearing every word. And then…

'A-Cheng, be well,' Jiang Fengmian said. 'A-Ying, A-Cheng… you must look after him.'

Wei Wuxian hadn't been surprised.

Always the intruder; always the outsider; always the person who didn't belong. Jiang Yanli had tried her best to make Wei Wuxian feel at home. She had meant it when she told Jin Zixun she considered Wei Wuxian to be her real brother. However, as always, there seemed to be so much she couldn't do.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian called out. “You’re here anyways. Why not take a seat inside?”

Lan Wangji nodded once.

In the next instant, the two of them were at the top of one of the Burial Mounds’ cliffs, staring at the entrance to a cave. Lan Wangji looked up, reading the sign scrawled at the front.

“The Demon Slaughtering Cave?” he asked.

Wei Wuxian grinned, responding, “That’s right! I came up with the name myself. How is it?”

Lan Wangji remained silent.

“I know, I know,” Wei Wuxian said, giving a thoughtful nod. “In your heart, you’re definitely thinking ‘not very good.’ After the news got out, I heard some people in town talking about it as well, saying that, as someone who cultivates in the demonic path, I’m a demon myself. ‘How could he be so shameless as to call that place the demon-slaughtering cave?’ Or so they said.”

They pair entered the cavern, the light dimming with every step they took.

“But, you see, they have it completely wrong!” Wei Wuxian declared. “The name actually means something completely different! They didn’t understand it at all!”

“...What does it mean?”

Wei Wuxian laughed as though he’d been waiting for Lan Wangji to ask, announcing, “It’s simple: I often sleep like I’m dead inside this cave! A cave that a demon frequently dies in — isn’t that a demon slaughtering cave?!”

Despite the bright smile on Wei Wuxian’s face, those words made Nie Mingjue frown deeply. When Wei Wuxian used the term ‘demon,’ he meant it jokingly and playfully. It was the sort of thing Wei Wuxian might say about himself as a way of getting A-Yuan to chase after him on a mission to slay a demon. It was the kind of thing he might whine to Jiang Yanli about in order to be pampered. It was also, however, a title he couldn’t escape.

(The townsfolk were going to call him that no matter what. If ‘demon’ referred to him regardless of what he did, he might as well use the title himself.)

As Nie Mingjue watched Wei Wuxian laugh about it, he couldn’t help but recall the things people from the far future would say about him every chance they got. To them, ‘Wei Wuxian’ was synonymous with ‘demonic.’ These same ideas had contributed to Jin Ling stabbing him; they weren’t just words, anymore. So what? Wei Wuxian cultivated with resentful energy; therefore he was a demon?

(What would those same people have said if they knew how Nie cultivation worked? Would they turn on him as well? Or would they continue to sing his praises as if he could do no

wrong?)

The simulated Lan Wangji appeared similarly concerned, remaining silent for several long moments as Wei Wuxian brought him further inside. The cave was lit faintly, but, other than the dirty surroundings, seemed closer to a lab than a demon's lair. Papers and inventions were strewn about, just like Jiang Cheng had seen when he was last here.

Eventually, Lan Wangji asked, "What about the blood pool?"

"It's right there," Wei Wuxian responded, gesturing to the side. The area he was indicating was a pool of dirty water which, in the dim light of the cave, could switch between looking black or red at any time. The line of talismans meant to form a protective array around it had been broken by Wen Ning. Wei Wuxian walked over and set it up again.

Several watchers breathed out a sigh of relief, feeling the heavy resentment in the air dampen slightly at that.

(For all that Wei Wuxian was making great use of it, the Burial Mounds was not a place anyone should be.)

Lan Wangji fully agreed.

"...The dark energy is dense," he observed, staring at the blood pool with an unreadable gaze.

"It is," Wei Wuxian confirmed. "Fit to nurture dark creatures. I use it to 'raise' fierce corpses that haven't been completed yet. Wanna know how many there are at the bottom? To be honest, I don't know either. The water in the pool has started smelling more and more like blood, though."

Lan Qiren frowned, the long-worn instinct to criticize 'unrighteous practices' pulling at his mind once again. If Wei Wuxian had suggested doing something like this in one of Lan Qiren's classes, he would have gotten a far harsher punishment than the one he'd ended up with. This was-

Well…

It was wrong. It felt wrong and was wrong, but it wasn't unjustifiable in the way Lan Qiren might have viewed it before. After all, as opposed to stopping the production of fierce corpses and allowing the Wen remnants to be taken again, this was vastly preferable.

(And, though far from the biggest contributor, the Lan Sect was one of the groups pushing him into this situation.)

Lan Qiren looked away, the criticisms he'd had washing away under a wave of guilt.

His nephew's concerns were not dissipated so easily:

“Wei Ying.”

“What?”

“Can you really control it?”

“Huh?”

Wei Wuxian glanced back, allowing Lan Wangji to observe him fully. Hanguang-jun’s eyes scanned up and down, taking in everything he could. Wei Wuxian’s pale skin, whether that was due to the lighting or his own lack of blood, stood out starkly against the dark rocks of the cave. His smile was just a little too sharp — a little too wide — to appear normal. For all that his stance was casual, his eyes were alert and wide. It had been him against the world for a while, now.

(The blood he’d been coughing out still stained his robes.)

“What? You mean Wen Ning?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Of course I can control him. Look, his consciousness has already returned. He’s an unprecedented fierce corpse!”

“And what will you do if he loses consciousness again?”

Wei Wuxian grinned, laughing off Lan Wangji’s concerns with a simple, “l was with him like that before. I’m the one who controls him. As long as nothing happens to me, nothing will happen to him either.”

“But what if something *does* happen to you?!”

“It won’t.”

“How can you be sure?”

“It won’t and it can’t!” Wei Wuxian snapped back.

The watchers stepped back a little, feeling resentment tense defensively around him.

Lan Wangji looked around the dark cave once more, his eyes falling on the Stygian Tiger Seal. It was surrounded by chains made of resentment, locked away in a dark corner.

“My blood is needed to undo the seal,” Wei Wuxian said. “It will be fine.”

Lan Wangji looked back to him and asked, “Do you intend to stay like this from now on?”

“What’s wrong with staying like this? What, is it not good enough for you? This mountain is even bigger than the Cloud Recesses! The food is much better too.”

“You’d barely had enough money for *potatoes!*” Jiang Cheng hissed.

Wei Wuxian, unsurprisingly, didn't respond.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said at last. "You know what I mean."

Those words made Wei Wuxian pause.

Then, after a bit of consideration, he laughed once more and said, "Lan Zhan, you really are… something else. I'd moved the conversation to a different topic, but you brought us right back here again."

"Because this is important, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli whispered as well. There were dark circles under Wei Wuxian's eyes, most likely left over from sleepless nights of work to bring Wen Ning's consciousness back. He was far thinner than he'd been before — not quite as bad as the first time he left the Burial Mounds, but close. Far too close.

Wei Wuxian's smile dimmed and then, when he opened his mouth to speak, he suddenly began to cough. Lan Wangji rushed to his side at once, just in time to see some of the blood that rose up in Wei Wuxian's throat. Hanguang-jun reached over to grab Wei Wuxian's hand.

"What are you doing?" Wei Wuxian asked, stepping back at once. It wasn't technically a flinch but it certainly resembled one. There was a tentative wariness in his eyes. The lack of trust cut a wedge between them, keeping Lan Wangji from stepping forward.

Lan Xichen frowned deeply. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had trusted each other immensely before the war began. In the cave of the Xuanwu of Slaughter, they'd made a perfect team. Now, however…

'*Why won't he let Wangji heal him?*' Lan Xichen wondered. '*Surely he could trust him for that.*'

Some ways back, Lan Qiren looked away, disliking where his own thoughts were going.

(The reaching motion Wangji had done momentarily reminding Lan Qiren of Qingheng-jun instead.)

However, as everyone watching the simulation knew, Lan Wangji meant no harm.

"Your injuries," he said.

"No need, no need. Why bother using spiritual energy for such a small wound? It'll get better after I sit around for a while."

"Wei Wuxian, just let him help you!" Madam Yu snarled, her concerns, for once, being *for* the boy instead of against him. "If you're bad enough that you start coughing up blood at random, you need some treatment! Lan-er-gongzi is the strongest cultivator there, aside from you. If you would just let go of your damn arrogance for a moment-"

"*You* have no right to describe him that way," Wen Ruohan snapped at once. Madam Yu paused and turned toward him, a look of shock on her face. Rather than looking back at her,

Wen Ruohan turned to Jin Guangshan instead.

Understanding the meaning of the gaze at once, Sect Leader Jin stepped forward and said, "We Jin are much closer to the Jiang than the Wen. If necessary, we'd be happy to provide support at any time on the Chief Cultivator's behalf."

Now that those words had been spoken out loud, the position the Wen and Jin Sects shared on the matter was abundantly clear. Jin Guangshan wasn't sure why Wen Ruohan didn't want the others to question Wei Wuxian's refusal to accept treatment, but he saw no reason to ask.

(The Jins' involvement in the Sunshot Campaign and the subsequent labor camps made the alliance between Jin Guangshan and Wen Ruohan questionable at best. For now, a bit of appeasement seemed wise.)

As everyone fell silent once more, Lan Wangji watched silently, looking back and forth between Wei Wuxian and Wen Ruohan with narrowed eyes.

'*Even Wei Ying thought he'd been a little arrogant at this point in his life. When he was forced to watch his younger self from Nie Mingjue's perspective, he'd been rather embarrassed,*' Lan Wangji thought. '*I can see why. He's refusing to even consider something going wrong. He won't let me help, he won't hear my concerns. He…*'

He was still using demonic cultivation.

However, could Lan Wangji really say that the color of his skin or the exhaustion in his eyes were because of that? Was figuring out a way to restore consciousness while simultaneously being considered an enemy of the whole world somehow *not enough* reason? It would be more surprising if he wasn't exhausted, given the state of things. He had an entire community to feed and barely enough money to order a meal. Wei Wuxian refused to give up demonic cultivation — to even consider things going wrong.

Because, at this point, the things he was doing were the last options he had. He-

"What was that?! You'll get better after some sitting around?" Wen Qing shouted as she stormed inside. "Come here!"

She slapped Wei Wuxian on the back once, making blood fly out of his mouth. Lan Wangji helped steady him, only relaxing upon realizing that Wen Qing had merely removed the corrupted blood from his body. After making sure Wei Wuxian was alright, he turned his attention to the fourth person to enter the cave.

A now-awake Wen Ning looked back.

Wen Qing took in a deep breath, her heart clenching with both grief and gratitude at the sight of her dead-but-not brother. It was far from a good situation, but…

It was still her brother. She could accept this if she had to.

After watching Wen Ning for a few seconds longer, confirming that the corpse's mind had returned, Hanguang-jun began walking away.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Lan Wangji glanced back, explaining, “It’s time for me to go.”

"Huh?" Wen Ning asked. "Wait, is it because — I can go if you want! I was just-"

Wen Ning's fluster of panic was interrupted when A-Yuan rushed toward Lan Wangji with a frantic cry of, “Brother!”

The child tried to chase, but Wei Wuxian picked him up before he could, glancing up at Lan Wangji to say, “You’re going already? I’ll see you off, then.”

Lan Wangji stayed silent.

In that silence, A-Yuan looked up and asked, “Brother, you won’t be eating here?”

‘*Only a monster would be able to say no to that face!*’ Nie Huaisang thought, admiring A-Yuan’s cuteness. ‘*I really have to learn how to make an expression that looks like that.*’

Similarly unable to resist, Lan Wangji reached forward and patted A-Yuan on the head. The young boy lit up at the action.

“You wanna know a secret, Gege?” he asked. “I heard there’s going to be a lot of good food today!”

And if Lan Wangji stayed with Wei Wuxian — as his other-self would thirteen years later — he would get to try.

However-

“This brother here has food waiting for him in his own home. He won’t be staying,” Wei Wuxian announced.

Lan Wangji tensed. They had spoken amicably earlier, lacking most of the aggression that had appeared between them during the sunshot campaign. It had gotten worse just now, but…

But, despite the disappointed ‘oh’ A-Yuan gave, Wei Wuxian’s gaze remained firm. Maybe he didn’t want to ruin Hanguang-jun’s reputation; maybe he thought requesting that he stay would be asking too much; maybe he didn’t trust him fully; maybe he just wanted Lan Wangji gone. Regardless, he certainly wasn’t trying to make Hanguang-jun stay.

And Lan Wangji had already forced himself on Wei Wuxian once.

Even now, the image of Wei Wuxian being pushed against a tree remained rooted in his mind.

After doing that, how could he even *consider* trying to stay when Wei Wuxian didn’t want him to? How could he dare to insert himself into Wei Wuxian’s life, when he so clearly didn’t belong? They were managing to survive on their own; if he wasn’t wanted, Lan Wangji had no right to intervene.

~~Except, as Lan Wangji couldn't help but recall, his far-future self would do exactly that, literally dragging Wei Wuxian back to the Cloud Recesses to ensure he didn't escape. Hanguang-jun's intentions hadn't been clear, so he stuck by Wei Wuxian's side until they were. All of this was done by a Lan Wangji who had experienced Wei Wuxian's death.~~

~~As much as it felt like they'd gone over so far, there was clearly a lot left for them to learn.~~

Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and A-Yuan (still tucked under Wei Wuxian's arm) walked toward the edge of the Burial Mounds, unimpeded by the corpses all around. Eventually, they reached the foot of the mounds, both coming to a stop. They waited for a bit, the cool evening air brushing past, but, still, neither spoke.

The silence felt heavy.

"Lan Zhan, you asked if I intended to stay like this from now on," Wei Wuxian began. "To be honest, I'd like to ask you something in exchange. Aside from this, what else can I do? Give up the demonic path? Then what about everyone here on the mountain? Give them up? I can't do that either!"

A conclusion the real Lan Wangji had already come to. An answer that made Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, Lan Qiren, and Jiang Cheng have to look away. After all, this situation wasn't an unavoidable result of the behavior of outside forces — it was a direct result of their actions. Maybe not *just* their actions, but that was undeniably part of it.

With the situation as it was, what right did they have to judge Wei Wuxian at all?

"If you were in my position, I'm sure you would make the same choice I did."

Hanguang-jun said nothing in return.

Lan Qiren looked back briefly, then had to look away once more. A bitter taste formed in his mouth.

Wei Wuxian gave a small, helpless shrug, concluding, "Nobody will give me a nice, broad road to walk on. There's no way for me to protect what I want to protect while giving up the ghostly path."

Wen Qing, Wen Ruohan, and Nie Huaisang couldn't help but direct their gazes slightly downward at that, to the place where Wei Wuxian's core *should* be. Their movements caught Lan Wangji's attention. Although his face didn't change at all, his mind began to turn.

When Wei Wuxian had pushed away his offer of help earlier, Lan Wangji had interpreted it as, quite simply, a rejection. Wei Wuxian didn't want to be indebted to Lan Wangji and so refused the offered qi. Now however, another thought came to the Second Jade.

'*Is something… wrong with his core?*'

No answer came. Even the simulated Lan Wangji remained silent, having no response to Wei Wuxian's words.

"...Thank you for keeping me company today," Wei Wuxian said. "Thank you for telling me the news about my Shijie's marriage too."

Jiang Yanli flinched at the reminder.

"Let the self judge right and wrong; allow others to direct praise or blame; let gains and losses remain uncommented on," Wei Wuxian said. "I don't care what others say. I know what I should do. I believe I'll be able to control it."

Hanguang-jun's gaze turned tired. He wasn't satisfied with an answer like that, but there was nothing more he could say.

Wen Ruohan gave a light hum.

Wei Wuxian's priorities and thought process were completely alien to Wen Ruohan's mind. The Chief Cultivator focused on nothing *but* the gains and losses every time he had a choice to make. To him, it seemed like the only thing worth considering.

If Wei Wuxian had resembled him in that way, he would never have gone against the world to save the Wens.

However, if he didn't do that, he wouldn't be Wei Wuxian.

Lan Wangji looked down at A-Yuan one last time, then up again. He and Wei Wuxian made eye contact, neither speaking a word. The pair then nodded once at each other and bowed respectfully.

(For all they knew, they would never see each other again.)

After that, Lan Wangji turned and began walking away. As Wei Wuxian watched him depart, that strangely blank expression he'd worn before returned.

(He'd been so excited when he first saw Lan Wangji in Yiling. It was the first person from his old life he'd seen in months. For all Wei Wuxian knew, it was also the last person from his old life he'd see for a good while longer.)

Lan Wangji clenched his hands into fists, frustrated beyond belief and yet unsure of what he wanted his other-self to do. The people in the Burial Mounds weren't living well, but they were surviving. They were excited to build homes for themselves, escaping what the great sects — including the Lan Sect — had done to them. Would they trust him enough to accept his money? Would they feel comfortable being indebted to someone like him? Would they still be able to sleep at night if he had stayed? Would he have actually been able to help them so long as they were considered public enemy number one?

Maybe. It was hard to say.

(But, after Phoenix Mountain, the one thing he couldn't do was force Wei Wuxian to let him stay.)

And thus Hanguang-jun walked on, his shadow getting smaller and smaller in the evening sunset. Wei Wuxian watched silently, still holding A-Yuan in his arms.

Lan Wangji's bright eyes seemed to dim.

Then, at last, Wei Wuxian began to return. Step by step, he walked up the mountain, farther and farther from the second jade of Lan.

'*Come to think of it, I told Lan Zhan I'd treat him to lunch, didn't I? But then, with everything that happened, he ended up paying for it anyways,*' Wei Wuxian realized. '*Well, Lan Zhan's so rich anyways, it's no big deal if he pays for me once more. He only bought a meal and a few children's toys; he must still have some money on him. If worst comes to worst, I'll treat him next time.*'

It was exactly as Lan Wangji had feared it would be: Wei Wuxian felt like he had to pay him back for something as simple as a single meal. For everything that their older-selves would become, the versions of them here were barely even friends. Of course Wei Wuxian would feel bad for owing a mere acquaintance so much. Was it any wonder he'd reacted so negatively to Lan Wangji after being brought back to life?

'*Why is he here?' Wei Wuxian had thought, stepping back. 'I need to get out of here.'*

Because Hanguang-jun, like any other righteous cultivator, would want to stop a wielder of resentful energy. It was a natural assumption to make. After everything…

'Wangji, a question for you: do you actually hate me?'

Lan Wangji continued writing.

'Hey! You're still ignoring me,' Wei Wuxian complained. 'What should I call you to get a response? Wangji? Wangji-xiong? Lan Wangji?'

No answer came.

'Lan Zhan!'

Lan Wangji could still recall how embarrassed he'd been to watch those scenes at the time. Looking back on it now, the Cloud Recesses felt so painfully distant.

(They had seen it only a few days ago — less than two weeks had passed since then! And yet…)

'GET LOST!' Lan Wangji screamed.

That moment had, at first, been embarrassing to watch. Later, Wangji had found himself looking back on it fondly, sad for what had been lost since then. Now, the only thing he felt was regret.

Step. Step. Step.

Wei Wuxian was continuing up the mountain. In A-Yuan's hands, the grass butterflies fluttered about.

"Xian-gege, will Rich-gege come again?" A-Yuan asked.

Wei Wuxian laughed, wondering, "Who's Rich-gege?"

"The rich gege is Rich-gege."

"Who am I, then?"

"You're Brother Xian. Poor-gege."

Wei Wuxian faltered, clutching at his chest as if he'd just been stabbed by those words. Then, growing a devious grin on his face, Wei Wuxian snatched the butterfly in A-Yuan's hands away.

"You like him just because he's got money?"

"Give it back! He bought it for me!" A-Yuan complained.

Madam Yu had heard her husband mention, once, how good Wei Wuxian was with kids. She had been in the process of berating him for picking the boy as head disciple, so the words hadn't really meant much to her then. Looking at this now, however, she could see what he meant. No matter what he was going through, Wei Wuxian was always willing to put on a smile for the child.

(When was the last time she had genuinely smiled at her own kids?)

With a grand flourish, Wei Wuxian set the butterfly down on his own head, declaring, "I'm not giving it back. You even called him 'dad!' What about me? You've only ever called me 'brother,' an entire generation below him!"

"I didn't call him dad!"

"I won't listen to another word! I know what I heard!"

Unable to resist, Jiang Yanli began laughing a little, covering her mouth with her hand. Even if they didn't know the far future, just this would already make it clear that Wei Wuxian would be a great uncle for Jin Ling, someday.

~~If he had ever been allowed to see the boy.~~

~~If Jin Ling hadn't stabbed him as soon as he found out who he was.~~

A-Yuan's protests continued:

"I didn't call him that! I didn't!"

“I don’t care anymore! I want to be someone above brothers and dads in seniority! So, what should you call me?”

However, after thinking for a moment, A-Yuan admitted, “I don’t want to call you ‘mom.’ That’s weird.”

“What?” Madam Jin asked, breathing out a disbelieving laugh.

“Who told you to call me ‘mom?!’ The one with higher seniority than them is the grandad! Say ‘grandfather!’ You don’t even know this?”

“How did the boy even come to a conclusion like that?” Jin Guangshan wondered.

Wen Ruohan hummed lightly, supposing, “He is currently living in a community with Qing-er. Perhaps that is influencing his perception of things.”

After thinking it over for a moment, no one could disagree. Small smiles formed on most of their faces. Watching Wei Wuxian interact with A-Yuan felt so soothing in comparison to everything else that had happened.

“Do you really like your Rich-gege so much? You should’ve said so sooner. If I’d known that, I would’ve asked him to take you away earlier!”

A-Yuan’s eyes widened in horror.

“His sect is rich, but it’s very scary! He’d take you back, lock you inside, and have you copy scriptures all day!”

“I’m sure A-Yuan would be a much better behaved child than you, Wei Wuxian!” Lan Qiren couldn’t help but snap. Wei Wuxian was righteous, yes, and, given that he had grown up under Madam Yu’s system of punishments, Lan Qiren could understand why Wei Wuxian disregarded the rules as easily as he did. That said, *nothing* would make Lan Qiren forget having to watch his drunk nephew tie Wei Wuxian’s wrists up with his forehead ribbon! A-Yuan would make an infinitely better Lan!

(Granted, of course, that the Lan Sect was willing to spare his life. Lan Qiren couldn’t imagine anyone in the main branch killing a child for their last name. However, many, many things in the simulation had seemed almost impossible to believe. They had happened regardless.)

“R-rich-gege wouldn’t do that!” A-Yuan protested.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. You wouldn’t believe some of the things he did to me back in the day! I spent hours upon hours trapped in that library of theirs.”

A-Yuan’s eyes widened.

“I won’t go,” he whispered, shaking his head. “I still want Granny.”

“You want Granny but not me?”

“No! I want Xian-gege too!” He held out his hand, counting one by one. “Also Rich-gege, Qing-jie, Ning-gege, Uncle Four, Uncle Six-”

“Alright, alright,” Wei Wuxian said, setting the butterfly back in A-Yuan’s hands. “That’s enough. I’m going to be drowned amongst all the people!”

A-Yuan put the butterfly back in his pocket, watching Wei Wuxian’s hand with wary eyes. Then, after ensuring the toy was safely secured, he looked back in the direction Lan Wangji had just left from. The man could no longer be seen.

“...Will Rich-gege ever come back?” he asked.

Lan Wangji stopped breathing for a moment.

Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, didn’t falter at all. His smile remained just as strong as before as he bounded up the mountain, bouncing A-Yuan a bit in his arms.

(However, even then, it took him a few seconds to respond.)

“...Probably not,” he admitted at last. “I doubt he’ll come back again.”

“Why not?”

“There is no ‘why.’ In this world, everyone has their own things to do… their own paths to walk. He’s busy enough already; how could he have time to flutter about down here?”

“Wei Ying-”

‘*We aren’t walking on the same sort of path anymore, after all,*’ Wei Wuxian concluded in his head.

Wen Ruohan huffed a half-laugh at that. Nothing that had been said was funny, but the sound came out of him regardless. A situation like this, for someone like Wei Wuxian… it just made no sense.

‘You’re doing this… all for the Wen Sect?’ Jiang Cheng asked. ‘Wei Wuxian, do you have a savior complex or something? Is it that you’ll die if you don’t stir up trouble?’

Calling it a ‘savior complex’ wasn’t quite right. It wasn’t as though Wei Wuxian *wanted* to sacrifice for this. If he saw any other way of keeping the Wens safe, he would have taken it. He wasn’t trying to be a hero; he just couldn’t accept the camps.

(A feeling that was costing him quite a bit.)

As Lan Wangji had noticed, Wei Wuxian was concerningly pale. Right now, he was cut off from almost everyone he had ever known. He had no golden core anymore and the person he gave his to had declared him an enemy of all the sects. As Wen Ruohan watched Wei Wuxian carry A-Yuan up the Burial Mounds, he felt his hands clench into fists.

“What a waste,” he muttered again.

The youngest Wen was similarly downtrodden. A-Yuan asked no further questions, but the simple “oh” he gave transmitted his feelings well enough. When Wei Wuxian noticed A-Yuan’s reaction, he held the boy out in front of him, bouncing him up and down a bit.

“Ah, whatever. Who cares about the nice, broad road?” Wei Wuxian asked, projecting loud confidence in every way he could. “This is fine! We have everything we could need right here! The radishes we grow are fit to feed the emperor. No matter how dark it gets, I’ll keep walking the single-plank bridge all… night?”

Just as Wei Wuxian was getting to the end of his sentence, he realized that the light surrounding him didn’t match the word ‘night’ at all. He looked around. Compared to before, the area was almost completely unrecognizable. The shacks had been swept clean, the weeds were removed, and red lanterns hung on the sides. A soft yellow glow filled the mounds.

Wen Qing stepped forward, a warm smile on her face.

“Don’t just stand there,” she said. “Hurry! It’s time for dinner.”

Wen Ning, Granny, Uncle Four, Uncle Six, Aunt Three — everyone stood behind her, waiting for Wei Wuxian to come.

Not too long ago, those same people had cowered before Wei Wuxian, terrified of the power the Yiling Patriarch could invoke. Even after they lost their fear, there had still been a distinct separation. ‘The Yiling Patriarch’ and ‘the Wen Remnants.’ That was exactly why Wei Wuxian had left earlier. Wen Ning’s return to consciousness had been a moment for him to spend with his family; Wei Wuxian didn’t belong.

“Aren’t you going to come?”

Slowly, the shocked look on Wei Wuxian’s face turned into a smile. He laughed a little.

“It’s nice to be able to see the way back. Alright, I’m coming.”

He walked over to them. No one backed away.

Which was a good thing. Of course it was a good thing.

So why, then, did it make Jiang Cheng’s chest hurt so much?

(Jiang Yanli’s eyes had gone a little dim. Despite the smile on her face, her expression didn’t really look happy. They had seen Wei Wuxian in the Jiang Sect after the war. He wasn’t teaching, he wasn’t playing — he would barely even smile. He couldn’t recognize most of the disciples of the Jiang Sect. Sure, he had still behaved somewhat normal around Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli, but even they had noticed how different he was being.)

(Or, to put it another way, how different the people around him were. In the past, the bright young master of the Jiang Sect had been the fourth most sought after marriage partner there was! Now, the Yiling Patriarch incited nothing but fear.)

(It was only in this small safe-haven that he could truly be free.)

As Wei Wuxian sat down, conversation began anew. The food that had gone untouched all this time was finally being eaten. Wei Wuxian was served a plate as well and, as chopsticks flew through the air, the party began to reach full-swing.

"You've worked hard, these past few days," Wen Qing commented suddenly. Wei Wuxian did a double take.

"What's this?" he asked. "You're being so nice to me all of the sudden! Should I be scared?"

Wen Qing rolled her eyes once but then, softly, continued, "Everyone wanted to eat with you and thank you. However, since you've been running around or shutting yourself inside your cave for days on end, they had to wait. They didn't want to disturb you. They thought you didn't like interacting with others and didn't want to talk to them."

A statement so fundamentally opposed to the Wei Wuxian from the Cloud Recesses that it was almost hard to swallow.

A statement that seemed to match 'the Yiling Patriarch' just fine.

(But, despite that reputation of his, Wei Wuxian's true nature seemed to have been uncovered by the Wens bit by bit. Now, not a single one looked scared.)

"A-Ning woke up today, so Uncle Four said we had to have dinner with you no matter what. It's fine if you ate while you were outside. At the very least, have a couple drinks."

Wei Wuxian brightened up, asking, "There's drinks here? Wine?"

"Yeah, there's wine, there's wine," one of the aunts confirmed with a laugh. "Fruit wine, made from wild fruits on the mountain! It's quite rich!"

Just like those shacks of theirs, they had to make do with what they had right there.

And yet, now, they acted like they had all the wealth in the world.

Wen Ning, squatting beside the table, explained, "Uncle four likes to drink as well. He knows how to brew berries so he made these specially for today. He's been trying a lot for the past few days."

"Really? Then I'll have to try some!"

Hearing her brother speak, Wen Qing's eyes widened a little. In part, of course, for the words themselves. The sheer scale of what Wei Wuxian had done for them was settling in once

again, now that she got to see what each member of her family was now able to do. However, more than that:

'*A-Ning isn't stuttering anymore,*' she realized. '*As a corpse, he's too stiff and needs to talk more slowly. That's keeping him from tripping over his words by accident, too.*'

It would probably still happen if he was especially nervous, but this change stood out starkly nonetheless. It wasn't just his appearance that was different, now.

Once, the phrase 'the Ghost General' had filled Wen Qing with a disgusting, nauseating, sinking feeling. However, it was still her brother. He was certainly different now, but that didn't mean it was all bad.

As she looked back out at the scene before her, she felt the pain in her heart start to soothe.

"It really is rich!" Wei Wuxian declared, licking his lips after taking in his first gulp of the wine. He reached over, grabbing some more. It was only a few words, but every Wen there started to beam brighter than the sun.

(Wasn't this how the Wen Sect should be? Wasn't this what their sun should mean?)

Although it was covered by his robes, Wei Wuxian's chest still had the symbol of the Wen Sect branded atop. At the time, it had been a fun form of irony — a bit of proof, in Wen Ruohan's mind, that Wei Wuxian should belong to the Wens. A mark of ownership, to some degree.

'*He's ours,*' the Chief Cultivator thought once more.

However, even he was aware that that thought carried with it a slightly different meaning than it had back then.

The world went dark.

Lan Sizhui's voice returned:

"In just three days, almost every cultivator had learned a terrifying piece of news: Wei Wuxian, who had defected from the Jiang Sect and created his own home in Yiling, had created the highest level of fierce corpse yet. It was incomparably fast, strong, fearless, and ferocious. On top of that, its consciousness was preserved."

"...It's?" Jin Ling asked.

Wen Qing, who had been wondering the exact same thing, tensed slightly.

"This is an explanation of what 'every cultivator' knew. Describing him like this… felt most accurate.," Lan Sizhui explained.

Even the future's juniors seemed to have been overcome with a somber mood.

Lan Sizhui cleared his throat.

“Everyone was in shock. There could be no peace anymore! Wei Wuxian would definitely make these fierce corpses on a large scale, then use them to found his own sect and take over the cultivation world.”

Even the common folk had been whispering about that at the beginning of the segment. Regardless of the truth there, their fears were real.

“Many young would be attracted to the unorthodox evil, flocking to him one after another. The righteous path of cultivation would have a grim future. Dark times were ahead.”

After the scene they had just watched, such words seemed ridiculous.

However, nothing they could say to correct this would be heard.

“Civilians and cultivators alike grouped up, discussing what Wei Wuxian would do with the Ghost General he had made. However, now that he had returned to consciousness, the fierce corpse was mainly being used for manual labor.”

The general in question was shown, sacks upon sacks of goods hanging off his arms as he carried them up the mountain, an earnest expression on his face.

‘*That’s… definitely Wen Ning,*’ Nie Mingjue had to admit.

Their line of sight moved back a bit more, showing a hoe being lifted into the air. It swung back down, impacting against the hard ground. Its wielder was Wen Qing.

‘*Dark times, huh?*’ Jin Zixuan thought, raising one brow. Then, unable to help himself, his gaze drifted to his father once more. He looked away immediately after. There was no indication that Jin Guangshan had been involved in this set of rumors. Meng Yao might have been the one responsible, or maybe the Jin Sect wasn’t involved at all. There was no reason for him to blame his father.

~~Except, of course, for the things Jin Guangshan had *already* done.~~

Wen Qing's hoe swung down over and over again, reshaping the land below. The famed doctor now looked perfectly at place here. She had gone back to wearing her Wen robes — they could only make so many new clothes — but the once-white gown was now stained all the way through with dirt and grime. More and more dirt flew into the air all the time, landing on her and staining her cloak more black than ever before. After a while longer, she paused briefly to wipe some sweat off her forehead. Naturally, her eyes drifted to the side. And-

“Wei Wuxian, what are you doing?!” she shouted. “The harvest is so bad already! Stop eating food!”

Wei Wuxian paused, the large radish he’d been happily munching away at still in his hands.

“Go figure something out! We won’t be able to last like this!”

Wei Wuxian made a displeased expression but, nonetheless, complied with her request.

Next thing they saw, Wei Wuxian was sitting down on the ground, rolling a weed in his mouth. He watched Wen Ning, a thoughtful expression on his face. The fierce corpse was kneeling on the ground with A-Yuan, overlooking some plants with him.

"How can we have a better harvest?" Wei Wuxian muttered.

For all his talents, Wei Wuxian was much like Jin Zixuan in that gardening was not his strong suit. Now that Wen Ning was back, Wei Wuxian's skills would be best applied to figuring out a way to improve things for them all. The Jin heir breathed out a small sigh of relief, feeling less embarrassed by proxy now.

Meanwhile, A-Yuan and Wen Ning were trying to figure out which radishes were ripe for picking. They looked over the plants' leaves, stems, and heights, going through one by one. Then, finding one that seemed to match what they were looking for, A-Yuan made a bright smile and gave it a tug. The radish did come.

Along with a skeleton's hand, which was still gripping on.

"Uwagh!" Wen Ning gaped, the sound not resembling something even close to what a human could make. The Ghost General quickly snatched the radish from A-Yuan's hand, stuffing it (and the skeleton) back underground.

The future Jiang Cheng had said a number of things the real one didn't agree with. However, the man's assertion that the Burial Mounds were not a place suitable for growing food felt pretty undeniable, now.

Wei Wuxian gazed over at the place the skeleton's hand had just been. He stared and stared and stared. Then, with a snap, he grinned.

"Got it!"

An idea had come.

Madam Yu couldn't help but feel skeptical.

Once again, Wen Qing lifted her hoe into the air. She swung down again and again. Then, pausing to wipe her face, she glanced over.

"Wei Wuxian! What are you doing now?!" she demanded.

It was not the first time she had asked that and it surely wouldn't be the last. Wen Ning had always been such a sweet boy, so this was the first time Wen Qing had ever had such a troublesome younger brother.

But having the ingenuity and willingness to try out crazy new things was a large part of what it meant to be an inventor. Thus, when their view panned out to reveal an enormous seal Wei Wuxian had written on the ground in blood, no one could really be surprised.

“I have a bold idea!” Wei Wuxian declared.

Jin Guangshan and Wen Ruohan walked around, observing the characters Wei Wuxian had written in more detail. Writing out a talisman on the ground was certainly unorthodox, but so was basically everything else the Yiling Patriarch did.

(Besides, they probably didn’t have the money for proper talisman paper anyways.)

Despite her earlier shouts, Wen Qing was equally aware of what Wei Wuxian was capable of. She looked closely.

“What is it meant to do?” she asked.

Continuing to write the circle out, Wei Wuxian explained, “People can now be turned into walking corpses. The principles of circulating energy remain the same. So, why can’t we take these wilted radishes and bring them back to life?”

It was only now, with the circle already written out, that the watchers managed to recall what the first scene had been: the radish shaped like an elderly man running away while Wen Qing chased after. Wei Wuxian, sitting atop, had been cackling like mad.

“Okay, even with context that still makes no sense.”

“That doesn’t sound workable,” Wen Qing commented.

“Just watch and see!”

“I’m looking,” she conceded. “Not. Going. To. Work.”

Nie Huaisang grinned at the assertion, sitting on the edge of his seat.

The circle glowed bright red, coloring the nearby houses with its light. The symbols written down began to rotate, the circle spinning just a short ways off the ground. The wilted radish leaves below the circle twitched.

Many of the watchers jolted as well.

‘*Up!*’ the resentment seemed to call. ‘*It’s time to get up!*’

The sprouts continued to grow, becoming greener and livelier with every passing second. Wei Wuxian’s theory hadn’t been without merit. In some ways, it was successful. Wen Qing’s eyes widened.

“It… really worked.”

The world went dark.

“Well, that’s ominous,” Nie Huaisang said.

Nie Mingjue just sighed, muttering, "I'm starting to wonder if the spirits who put this together consulted your future self while they were getting this done."

"I doubt it. If I was in charge of the pacing, Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong would have gotten together long ago."

When the world brightened again, they were back in civilization. Hanguang-jun walked through the city streets, his zither strapped across his back. No one was speaking especially loudly, but, to someone like Lan Wangji, their words were easy to pick up.

"Did you hear?" a passer-by said. "Yiling is in trouble again."

Hanguang-jun's footsteps came to a halt.

"Eh? What happened?"

"Apparently, there's now a new kind of yao in that area."

"Wow."

The pair of civilians continued walking, leaving the watchers' line of sight. However, Hanguang-jun remained facing them, his brows furrowing just a little at their words.

'*A new kind of yao,*' he thought, briefly glancing in the direction of the Burial Mounds.

Lan Wangji's future self probably hadn't ever intended on going to the Burial Mounds again. Even the last time he was in Yiling he hadn't meant to end up there. However, if his help was needed now…

The simulation changed so that the Burial Mounds were in view.

The sudden influx of resentful energy barely even phased the watchers anymore, both because of their own experience and how much Wei Wuxian had dampened the hostility there. That said, they weren't completely unaffected. There was a new sensation here now. Little pinpricks of adrenaline seemed to tickle at their skin.

***'Up! Up! Up!'* it said.**

Lan Wangji stepped into the village once more. He paused for a moment, looking around. Although the shacks were shabby and crude, far more of them had been put up than the last time he was there. Fences were placed around the crops — mainly to keep track of the different crop fields, rather than any actual protection. There weren't any wild animals that would take them; the Burial Mounds were not a place for life, after all.

Or, at least, they *hadn't* been.

Lan Wangji scanned around once more, looking for movement of any kind. However, no matter how far he walked across the small, makeshift town, the results were inconclusive.

‘*Where are the demons?*’ he wondered.

Then, the radish leaves to his side shook. Lan Wangji jumped back, unsheathing his sword and pointing it at the suspicious plant. The leaves twitched a few more times, as though something underneath was trying to escape. The dirt shifted — the ground was breached!

A tired, dead-eyed, frowning radish popped out.

Even having seen it before, Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but give a heavy facepalm at the sight.

Lan Wangji stared. The radish gazed back.

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. . .

. . . . . .

Seven dots appeared over Lan Wangji’s head. Crows cawed in the distance. The radish remained where it was.

“Waah!” A-Yuan screamed. Lan Wangji looked back just in time to see the toddler getting chased by a demon-eyed set of enlarged peas which bounced after him. Behind that, the other Wens were being assaulted by a collection of radishes, potatoes, and turnips, all filled with resentful energy.

That said, it was hard to describe them as dangerous. At most, they seemed to be nuisances, grabbing on tight to the heads and hair of their Wen victims. Uncle four was lying flat on his stomach, twitching as a large radish jumped on his back. Auntie Two was in a tug of war with one of the turnips, trying to pull a pot away from it. The Ghost General, the most fearsome corpse ever created, was buried under a large pile of potatoes, all of whom pulled at his hair with all the cruelty of a five year old bully.

Lan Wangji stared.

Then-

“Wei Wuxian! Stop! Stop now! When I get my hands on you-”

Wen Qing’s shouts were met with only cheerful laughter, Wei Wuxian smiling widely as he rode one of the radishes to escape Wen Qing’s grasp. The hoe she wielded swung over and over again, but the surprisingly speedy radish continued to evade.

Lan Wangji’s eyes followed him from one end of the Burial Mounds to the other then back again. All the while, he didn’t say a word. Then, at long last, he sighed.

He left without even bothering to greet Wei Wuxian.

Which was, probably, all for the best. As mentioned before, even *with* context that scene made no sense. That said…

"A-Xian… seems very comfortable around you all now," Jiang Yanli pointed out, sending Wen Qing a small smile. "I'm glad. He wouldn't risk doing anything like that with resentment if he was worried it would scare you. You're all much closer."

"Perhaps we're a little *too* close now," Wen Qing speculated, rubbing her brows tiredly. Really, Wei Wuxian was a much more wild younger brother than Wen Ning had ever been.

(However, there was no one Wen Qing trusted with her family more than Wei Wuxian. After what they had just seen, 'her family' seemed to include him.)

A small smile formed on her face.

The world faded to black.

Light returned, as always, and the watchers began to relax in their seats once more. Jiang Yanli was among them, pleased that the segment had ended on such a positive note.

Or, rather, she wanted to be pleased.

'*This is good. It's wonderful that A-Xian feels so comfortable around them now. I would never ask for anything else.*'

And she wouldn't. As she had said, she viewed Wei Wuxian as her actual brother. More than anything else, she wanted him to be happy. Right now, isolated as he was, the Wens could make him that way.

However, a certain level of loathing was there too.

'*He learned… about my marriage… from Lan Wangji,*' she thought again. Wei Wuxian wasn't invited. He wouldn't be able to come. He would never know what she looked like while wearing her wedding robes — never get to see her dressed up like that. His connection with her was almost completely cut off.

~~The Wens were taking her place.~~

There were still a few days left before her actual marriage. Maybe, just maybe, something would change.

(But, even if it did, that would feel like the bare minimum after all this.)

And Jiang Yanli-

"A-Li," she heard from her left. Looking over, she saw Madam Jin approach.

"Madam?"

“A-Li, don’t blame yourself,” she whispered. “You’re a member of the Jiang Clan marrying into the Jin Clan. That offers you wealth and security greater than almost any other. However… women in situations like ours have protection without power. Your abilities — the things you’d be able to do for Wei-gongzi — will always be limited. We’re not following you right now. For we all we know, you tried and tried but couldn’t manage to find anything that would work. I… acknowledge that you view Wei Wuxian as your brother. I will try to help you ensure this does not happen in our world.”

Madam Yu watched the conversation occur, remaining silent all the while.

“Ah,” Jiang Yanli gasped briefly, then, smiling a bit more genuinely, nodded once. “Thank you, Madam Jin. I will try to keep that in mind.”

“...You don’t agree?”

“I… I don’t disagree,” she clarified. “I know that what I can do is limited by many things. However, this is still… it doesn’t feel right.”

It didn’t. Not at all.

Jiang Cheng agreed completely.

(And yet his other-self was one of the main reasons the situation was as it was.)

(Jin Zixuan, whose sect was another one of those reasons, felt the same.)

The two heirs looked down, not feeling like talking to anyone at that time.

In direct contrast, Lan Wangji appeared unusually willing to speak.

“Xiongzhang?”

“Hm? What is it, Wangji?” Lan Xichen asked.

“What do you think… is going to happen to A-Yuan?”

That one question was enough to make almost everyone in the room freeze. They had all been wondering, but no one wanted to ask.

(Least of all Jin Guangshan, who was pretty sure the answer would make Wen Ruohan sever ties with him completely.)

“The Burial Mounds… at the beginning of the simulation, they said it was burned.”

Madam Yu huffed, pointing out, “They said many things back then. How many of them have been true?”

Which was a fair point.

That said, no one seemed especially reassured.

Wen Ruohan looked to the side for a bit, watching Wen Qing closely. His niece's disloyalty during the Sunshot Campaign debatably cost the Wen Sect their victory. However, in equal measure, it was the only reason why the clan was still alive. It wasn't really fair to say that Wen Qing had turned on her family. She had turned on him, yes, but not the Wens as a whole.

(Wen Ruohan had been thinking a lot about what he wanted to do once the simulation came to an end. He could still declare war on the other sects. It was entirely within his power to do so. He had wanted to, more than once.)

(Was it worth risking this, though?)

(If the suffering of the remaining Wens had been *for* something — to make a statement, to get information, to gain wealth is some way, shape, or form — maybe Wen Ruohan could have understood. As it was, however, in trying to prevent the cultivation world from continuing in its foolish ways, he had only managed to make them worse.)

At that moment, Wen Ruohan noticed Jin Guangshan approach:

"Your Excellency," the other said. "You appear concerned."

Wen Ruohan didn't respond.

"There must be many things you want to change," Sect Leader Jin continued. "I know, in having sent your sons out, you've lost a lot of your ability to interfere with the outside world. However, both my son and wife are still here. If you would like them to pass a message along to Wen-gongzi, I would be happy to help."

Wen Qing glanced over, watching carefully. Many of the other watchers tensed as well.

However, in the end, Wen Ruohan merely shook his head, explaining, "There's no need for that right now. Let's first see how things play out in there."

Calm returned to the gathered crowd.

A little ways away from Wen Ruohan, Nie Mingjue was scowling at the ground. He tapped his foot against the floor, frustration seeping through. When, out of the corner of his eye, he saw his brother looking around the room nervously, a deep pit seemed to form in Nie Mingjue's gut. He remembered what Huaisang looked like at A-Yuan's age.

And now…

"Xichen…" Nie Mingjue called out. "Do you… think we would kill a toddler?"

"...Us?"

Nie Mingjue nodded once.

(They had all been wondering, at least a little.)

"No, of course not," Lan Xichen said. "I mean…"

He paused, thinking a bit more. No matter what, he couldn't imagine himself ever being brought to that point. For Nie Mingjue, that only seemed possible if he was actively going through a qi deviation. Otherwise, surely, there was no chance of that.

But something was going to happen and that something would involve them.

A-Yuan smiled up at Wei Wuxian, giving a toothy grin.

"Of course not," Lan Xichen repeated. It was all he could say.

Jiang Cheng, on the other hand, couldn't even manage that assurance.

'At the first siege of the Burial Mounds, Jiang Cheng ranked first, and Jin Guangshan must have been second.'

There had been no hesitation in Wei Wuxian's mind when he asserted that the Jiang Clan had tried the hardest to kill them.

'Ugh,' the future Jiang Cheng scowled, shaking his leg. 'Where did this kid come from? Get him away from me!'

Jiang Cheng wouldn't kill a child. He wouldn't. Of course he wouldn't. He could be annoyed by one without wanting to kill them. Sure, the Wens had killed his family (~~not these Wens, though~~) and begun the war (~~Wen Ruohan had done that~~) and taken Wei Wuxian from him, but Jiang Cheng didn't want them *dead.*

(Wen Ning had saved him. Hadn't the future Jiang Cheng, in just the last segment, tried to skewer Wen Ning's corpse?)

As Jiang Cheng glanced over at Jiang Yanli, who sat to his right, he took in the growing horror in her expression. She was considering what might happen to A-Yuan. Even just intellectually speaking, Jiang Cheng knew A-Yuan didn't deserve to die. Yes, Jiang Cheng had wanted revenge, but…

'*I wouldn't,*' he told himself.

Wei Wuxian stretched his arms above his head, giving a soft sigh. Jiang Fengmian and Wen Ning had gone to the Wen Sect again, bringing with them the next prototype advancement to the Píngxíng Gateway. The pendant had proved to be a tremendous success. It allowed the wearer's spirit to leave their body, going through the world without touching anything. They could still be seen, but they couldn't interact with anything physically. In the meantime, it would place the user's actual body into a state identical to those in the Great Sleep. As a tool for information gathering, it was debatably unmatched.

However, that wasn't the intended purpose.

'See, I've been thinking about it,' Mo Xuanyu said. 'If I can send information to you all in real time, there's no reason I wouldn't be able to project information regarding 'me' into your world as well. My words, my movement… if we could create a visual of that, it would seem

like I'm standing in the middle of the room. You could send back information on whatever's going on around me at that time. If we do it seamlessly enough, it'll be like my spirit's actually there.'

Wei Wuxian had been thrilled by the suggestion.

Actually making it work, however, was a long way away.

'*Progress has to start somewhere though!' Wei Wuxian had declared when he was first bringing his plan up to Wen Ning and Jiang Fengmian. The two of them had paused, looked at each other, then shared a knowing smile.*

'Alright then, A-Xian,' Jiang Fengmian had condeeded. 'If you think this is worth trying out, we'll be happy to help.'

Right now, both Jiang Fengmian and Wen Ning had talismans attached to their chests that would send information Mo Xuanyu's way in real time. Considering the weird things Wen Ning had heard last time he was in the Wen Sect, getting a third opinion on the matter couldn't hurt. Besides, it would let them test the moveability of the information-return technique rather well. Everything they heard or saw would be sent over, making Mo Xuanyu feel like he was standing right beside them. Maybe. In theory.

Regardless, a meeting between Jiang Fengmian and Wen Xu was almost impossible to keep secret. If an attempt to do so was found out, the other sects would begin watching them even more intently than they already were. As such, it was best for Jiang Fengmian to go to the Wen Sect through more official means.

And, as a result, the Jin Sect was well-aware he was gone.

"What? Aren't you going to invite us in?" Jin Zixun asked. "We came all this way. Receiving guests properly seems like the least you can do."

'*After all, you're nothing more than a servant of the Jiang Sect,*' he seemed to imply.

Wei Wuxian smiled back pleasantly, but, instead of inviting them in, asked, "Where's Meng Yao?"

There was a brief moment of silence between them.

A short while ago, Wei Wuxian was in Jiang Fengmian's office, sorting through some mission reports from the disciples. Thus, when Jin Zixun arrived at the sect, Meng Yao had been the one to greet him. He had taken over receiving guests for the Jiang Sect in recent days, giving Wei Wuxian more time to work on the Píngxíng Gateway. Under normal circumstances, he would listen to the guest's request and decide whether to dismiss them, to write down the request to show Jiang Fengmian later, or to allow them an audience with the sect leader at his earliest convenience.

Jin Zixun had demanded an audience with the sect leader at once.

The sect leader was not there.

Jin Zixun, young master of the Jin Clan, wasn't willing to accept that as a response.

(Under normal circumstances, the behavior he exhibited following that would be more than enough reason for Meng Yao to kick him out. He was disturbing the sect; it was best to make him leave. He might be high ranking, but Meng Yao had dealt with troublesome people like that before.)

(However, those previous times, the 'troublesome person' hadn't been Meng Yao's own cousin.)

"Young Master Jin," Meng Yao attempted, "Sect Leader Jiang won't be back until at least tomorrow. If you'd like, I can set up a room for you in-"

"No need," Jin Zixun dismissed. "Just bring some tea."

He began walking toward the main hall once more.

"Young Master?!" Meng Yao ran around, physically blocking him off. "As I mentioned before, Sect Leader Jiang isn't here right now. The main hall is currently being used, so, right now-"

"What's it being used for?" Jin Zixun asked. Meng Yao paused. Wei Wuxian had decided to temporarily repurpose the hall into a workshop for the disciples under thirteen years old. They were all gathered into groups in there, working on various puzzles as one. Unfortunately, explaining the truth of the situation might just provoke Jin Zixun more.

It didn't matter either way; Meng Yao was pushed aside and walked past soon enough. He gritted his teeth together.

However, this time, he didn't move to stop them.

Meng Yao owed Wei Wuxian greatly for the opportunity he had been given. He never would have been able to imagine he'd be invited into Yunmeng like he was. Additionally, Meng Yao was determined to win more of Wei Wuxian's favor through his work. If he did, the chances of him being able to meet Jin Guangshan increased exponentially.

However, between Wei Wuxian and Jin Guangshan's own nephew, it was clear who the more direct route was. If Meng Yao forcefully stopped Jin Zixun now — if he succeeded and, as a result, lowered the Jin Sect's reputation — Jin Guangshan might refuse to meet him on principle!

(Might view him as a nuisance, rather than a son.)

There were plenty of conceivable reasons for Meng Yao to fail at stopping Jin Zixun. For one, his cousin was a cultivator; someone who hadn't even formed a golden core yet wouldn't put up much of a fight. Additionally, Jin Zixun had brought with him at least a dozen people, all of whom were willing and able to push Meng Yao aside. Finally, considering their respective ranks in society…

Well, there were plenty of reasons Meng Yao might fail.

Thus, he stood aside.

When Jin Zixun's entourage walked past him, not a single one paid a second glance. Even while wearing formal robes gifted by Wei Wuxian, Meng Yao wasn't worth their notice. They continued all the way to the central doors, Jin Zixun's escorts throwing them open at once.

"Shixiong?" A-Lu asked from within. "Eh? No… who-"

"Huh? A bunch of brats?" Jin Zixun asked, raising a brow. "Get them out of here."

His subordinates stepped forward at once. Of course they did; this was what they were there for. Jin Zixun hoped to take advantage of Jiang Fengmian's absence to show the world — or, at least, the people of Yunmeng — that Wei Wuxian was still as far below him as before. After all, it would be rather difficult for Wei Wuxian to simply kick a young master like him out. With Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli, and Madam Yu still asleep…

'*Still,*' Meng Yao wondered, '*Does he not fear retaliation from Jiang Fengmian?*'

Several children were picked up and thrown out of the main hall.

'*No matter how easy-going Jiang Fengmian's personality is rumored to be, something like this will not go unchallenged. Even if they leave before the sect leader returns, this will not be without consequence. Maybe I misunderstood their goals? Or maybe I'm just misinformed about Jiang Fengmian. Or maybe…*'

Meng Yao frowned.

'*Or maybe Jin Zixun is just a man who puts no thought into anything he does.*'

(Meng Yao's favorite tactic was reasoning someone into agreeing with him. Such a strategy would never work on someone like that.)

"You — you can't do this!" A-Yue protested loudly. "Da-shixiong said we could be here! You can't throw us out!"

Jin Zixun scoffed a bit at that, asking, "Do you have any idea who I am?"

A-Yue faltered a little at that question, recognizing the robes the man wore. Even leaving that aside, a preteen girl would inevitably have difficulty arguing with a man in his late twenties. She took a slight step back.

Just in time for her brother to straighten up and say, "Wait, I know you! You're the guy who challenged Da-shixiong to a fight with seven other people and *still* got beaten up!"

There were a few seconds of silence following that. From the back, Meng Yao cringed.

Fury burned in Jin Zixun's eyes.

“You little brats…” he hissed. “Wei Wuxian clearly taught you all wrong. Bring them here! I’ll give them some proper discipline!”

Two members of his entourage grabbed hold of A-Yue and A-Lu’s arms. A third reached into a chest and extracted a firm bamboo cane for Jin Zixun to use.

“Hey, stop it!”

“Let me *go!*” A-Yue shouted.

Jin Zixun had stormed in so abruptly — so suddenly — that Wei Wuxian hadn’t yet been informed. Meng Yao had told one of the other disciples to update Wei Wuxian on Jin Zixun’s arrival, but, given how far away Wei Wuxian had been, he probably wouldn’t hear about it for a fair bit longer. Most of the adults were out on night hunts, having been spread out quite widely by Wei Wuxian. Meng Yao was the only one here.

“Stop it! Stop it! Da-shixiong won’t let you-”

“That Shixiong of yours will understand,” Jin Zixun assured A-Lu, taking the cane he was handed. By now, every child except A-Lu and A-Yue had been taken outside. Jin Zixun raised his arm, bringing the cane up high.

Meng Yao stepped forward: “Young Master Jin-”

“Huh? Is there a problem?” Jin Zixun demanded, disinterested and annoyed. Meng Yao felt his mouth fall shut.

(Everyone referred to Jin Zixun as “Young Master Jin.” With Jin Zixuan still in the great sleep, that title could only be used to refer to one person. Until Meng Yao met Jin Guanghsan — until he proved his worth to his father — that would remain true.)

(If Meng Yao became an enemy of Jin Zixun now, it might always be true.)

But, behind Meng Yao, little Mo Yu was looking up at him with hopeful eyes. He seemed to believe that Meng Yao would be able to solve the issue easily.

~~Save A-Lu and A-Yue, like Wei Wuxian had saved them.~~

Mo Yu, looking up at him, had seemed truly at home in Wei Wuxian’s arms. The head disciple of the Jiang had already offered one of Jin Guangshan’s bastards a place to stay. He offered one to Meng Yao as well.

Jin Zixun was a closer connection to Jin Guangshan — to Meng Yao’s real, rightful home — but…

“...You are in Yunmeng right now, Young Master Jin. I apologize for the disrespect these two have caused you. I can assure you, the sect will punish them for what they did.”

Meng Yao’s words were proper and straightforward.

But, rather than listening, Jin Zixun merely raised a brow and asked, “Who are you? You’re not dressed like a disciple of the Jiang Sect.”

Smiling pleasantly, Meng Yao responded, “I belong to a new organization that Young Master Wei is trying to create. We have not yet decided on a name-”

“Ah, that one,” Jin Zixun scoffed. “It’s supposed to serve as a neutral party between the sects, isn’t it? *Please.* What right does a nobody like you have to try and command the Jin-”

“He’s not a nobody!” A-Lu shouted again despite the way tears were beginning to form in his eyes. “That’s Yao-ge. Meng Yao! He’s not nobody!”

Jin Zixun clenched the bamboo in his hand, looking a half-second away from swinging it again. However-

“Meng Yao?” one of his subordinates repeated.

“What?” Jin Zixun asked. “You know that name?”

Everyone turned their gazes on Meng Yao once more, and Meng Yao felt his stomach drop.

“He’s one of your uncle’s bastards, isn’t he? The one that got thrown down the stairs?”

Those last few words were all that everyone needed to hear to know exactly who he was. Mocking grins formed on their faces.

(So unlike the calm, impressed smiles Wei Wuxian had given Meng Yao every time he returned with a flawless report.)

“That’s right. I remember now,” Jin Zixun said, his attention redirected. “It was at my cousin’s birthday party, wasn’t it?”

‘*It was my birthday, too,*’ Meng Yao thought back, trying to keep his bitterness from showing. Voicing such an idea would only make the situation worse. He swallowed back the nervousness he felt, trying to smile politely.

“Ha. That explains it,” Jin Zixun muttered. “Seriously, what has the Jiang Sect come to? To think it’s considered one of the Five Great Sects when the sons of servants and prostitutes are littering its halls.”

Meng Yao’s smile didn’t so much as twitch, but, equally, there seemed to be nothing he could say in exchange.

“So, you’re Zixuan’s brother?” Zixun asked, mockingly. “I’m not sure I see the resemblance.”

“He’s not!” a small voice said from the side.

To Meng Yao’s horror, the source of those words were Mo Yu.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“He’s not that person's brother, he’s my brother!” the child protested, tears forming in his eyes. “Our fathers are the same. He’s my gege!”

It took Meng Yao a second too long to realize he should have denied that immediately.

Jin Zixun cackled, “Another one? What, is the Jiang Sect trying to make a collection? Hey, bring that kid over, too.”

It didn’t take long for Mo Yu to be scooped up and carried to where A-Yue and A-Lu kneeled.

Meng Yao took a deep breath, trying to sort through his thoughts.

Jin Zixun wasn’t going to kill anyone. The kids’ bones probably wouldn’t get broken; their cores wouldn't be damaged. In all honesty, this was essentially bullying among children (disregarding Jin Zixun’s actual age). After it was over, people who heard about it from outside could easily be made to send their disapproval the Jin Sect’s way. Politically, it was a terrible choice for him to make.

On the other hand, if Meng Yao stepped in and turned Jin Zixun’s attention entirely on him, everyone who heard of this would have a very different reaction:

‘Oh, he went and disciplined one of Jin Guangshan’s bastards? Well… I guess that makes sense. The Jiang Sect and the Jin Sect are so close; I can’t believe they thought accepting a bastard onto their grounds was a good plan…. Huh? He wasn’t even part of the Jiang Sect? Oh, then I guess what the Jin did is completely fine.’

What happened to the children wouldn’t even be considered anymore. Jin Zixun would view him as a direct enemy and the Jiang wouldn’t be able to ask for retribution. Everything would be fine if Meng Yao stepped aside.

(The kids would simply lose all trust in him as a result.)

But there was no peaceful way to solve this, now. Jin Zixun had figured out Meng Yao’s identity; whatever he did now would affect his ability to join the Jin Sect later. On the other hand, if he could change Jin Zixun’s opinion about him — impress him, somehow, by helping him bring down the reputation of the Jiang Sect — if he could indicate he had worth, even as a subordinate — he might be able to go to the Jin Sect immediately.

But-

Wei Wuxian bowed once and saluted him, as though he were meeting an equal. Even after Meng Yao had agreed to join him, the respectful nods Wei Wuxian would send his way remained.

‘Gege!’ Mo Yu would smile, trailing after.

Meng Yao had frowned, scolding, ‘I have work now, A-Yu. We can play later.’

But Mo Yu had simply continued trailing after, waiting with surprising degrees of patience for Meng Yao to be done. He was used to waiting to get things he wanted. Of course he was; Meng Yao was, too.

Yet Wei Wuxian had offered them both a place in his world so easily.

By contrast-

'Seriously, what has the Jiang Sect come to? To think it's considered one of the Five Great Sects when the sons of servants and prostitutes are littering its halls.'

Logically speaking, it was an easy decision to make. Emotionally speaking, it was the simplest choice in the world. However, those choices directly countered each other no matter how Meng Yao looked at it. He had to choose.

Jin Zixun raised the bamboo cane above Mo Yu's head. When wielded by a cultivator, that cane could leave gashes on an adult. Jin Zixun would control his strength — surely he would! — but Mo Yu was so small, so tiny, so malnourished from the people who brought him up…

Jin Zixun wouldn't kill him.

He wouldn't *intend* to.

(Jin Zixun's father was the acting head of the Jin Sect until Jin Guangshan returned. Logically speaking, if Meng Yao could improve Jin Zixun's opinion on him, he should.)

(He really, really should.)

'*Stupid,*' Meng Yao thought. '*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*'

He should have known better. He should have thought it through more carefully. He *did* think it through carefully, he just made the wrong choice. And now here he was: lying alone, thoroughly beaten, on the ground.

Jin Zixun, at least, would never allow him to enter the Jin Sect now.

(And, with his involvement, any criticism the public might have levied Jin Zixun's way went up in smoke.)

Suddenly, the doors to the hall slammed out against the wall. Wei Wuxian had thrown them open. He then looked down, his eyes flashing red when he took in Meng Yao's form.

'*Resentful energy?*' Meng Yao realized. He had heard of Wei Wuxian's work on the Great Sleep, but had never seen the other command it before. A shudder went down his spine.

Wei Wuxian had admitted he didn't trust Meng Yao fully. When they met, one of the first things he said was that other people had told him disparaging things about Meng Yao's character. And now…

“Wei Wuxian!” Jin Zixun shouted from behind, catching up to the Jiang from where they had been meeting. “Wei Wuxian, how dare you run from me?”

Wei Wuxian didn’t glance back, moving forward to kneel beside Meng Yao.

(A cane had been suitable, in Jin Zixun’s mind, for children. For a bastard like Meng Yao, a whip had made more sense.)

“...What did you do?” Wei Wuxian asked, taking off Meng Yao’s upper robe to view the injuries in full.

Jin Zixun laughed, responding, “It’s nothing you need to worry about, Wei Wuxian. Just a bit of family discipline. He *is* my cousin, after all.”

Meng Yao gritted his teeth together, holding back a mocking laugh.

‘*I’m only family at times like this, huh?*’ he thought.

“It’s not something concerning the Jiang Sect,” Jin Zixun continued. “I’ll take my cousin off your hands. You won’t need to worry about him anymore.”

(Meng Yao should have known. No matter how perfect an offer seemed, his family history would always be enough to drag him back down. Wei Wuxian had tempted him into a world of enemies and he had fallen for it, hook, line, and sinker.)

(What would happen to him, once Jin Zixun took him back?)

“What is he being punished for?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“He raised a hand against me. Look at this! I’ve got a cut all along my arm! That’s reason enough, isn’t it?”

It was. It really, truly was. Meng Yao had just been so stupid as to-

“Meng Yao.” Wei Wuxian spoke softly. “Tell me what happened.”

“Huh?” he asked.

Jin Zixun scowled, raising himself up and stomping forward to say, “Wei Wuxian, I told you already, this is a family matter. You know what he did — or are you really going to believe the son of a *prostitute* over me?”

Why would he? ‘Young Master Jin’ was Sect Leader Jin’s nephew; Wei Wuxian might not like Jin Zixun, but he had already said he didn’t trust Meng Yao. He had brought Meng Yao here partly to watch him. Now that Meng Yao had gone up against and *injured* Jin Zixun-

“I’ll give your words the same credence I would give anyone else’s, Young Master Jin,” Wei Wuxian said. “If he really did what you said, he’ll get the punishment he deserves.”

“Then-”

“Meng Yao,” Wei Wuxian repeated. “Tell me what you think happened.”

At those words, Meng Yao’s brain scrambled wildly for the story that would help him the most. ‘They came out of nowhere to attack the kids and me! I never had the chance to fight back!’ and ‘he found out who my father was and decided I deserved to be punished for just that!’ Maybe ‘I never attacked him; he’s just making it up as an excuse to get me!’ It would be partly true, anyways; so long as he didn’t admit to having attacked first ~~like an absolute fool.~~ He had been just a victim. Saying that would make everything fine.

It would be fine if Wei Wuxian believed him.

But Wei Wuxian already said he *didn’t trust him.*

If Meng Yao lied now, would he lose his place in both the Jin and the Jiang? But wouldn’t the same thing happen if he told the truth? Because he *had* attacked first. Jin Zixun had been keeping it on a level that could be excused as disciplining. However, when he raised a cane towards Mo Yu, Meng Yao had acted. ‘Young Master Jin’ now had a cut along his arm thanks to the small knife Meng Yao kept on him at all times. Meng Yao could claim that was an injury he’d had before he arrived, but…

Even while observing Meng Yao’s wounds, there was a certain chill in Wei Wuxian’s eyes. He was angry at Jin Zixun, but his personal feelings on the matter weren’t enough to make him respond. He would get all the information he could and then judge. If Meng Yao tried to lie… would he really be able to fool him?

“Meng Yao,” Wei Wuxian said once more. “What happened?”

Clear, silver eyes gazed down upon him.

And, in a brief stint of what Meng Yao could only view as temporary insanity, he spoke the truth:

“I did attack first,” he admitted, his voice at barely a whisper. “Jin Zixun… he was trying to discipline A-Lu, A-Yue, and A-Yu. I… wanted him to stop.”

Wei Wuxian nodded once at those words. His eyes seemed to burn scarlet red.

The investigation Wei Wuxian conducted was as thorough as it was merciless. Following it, the Jin were kicked out rather quickly. No, ‘kicked out’ wasn’t quite the right phrase. Wei Wuxian brought them back to the Jin Sect himself, throwing them down and informing the acting head that they would not be welcome in Yunmeng again.

That was a rule even a sect heir wouldn’t be able to make. It was one that would affect the relations between the Jin and Jiang. It was one that might even complicate Jiang Yanli’s engagement after she woke up. But Jiang Fengmian had told Wei Wuxian to protect the Jiang. If he didn’t agree with what Wei Wuxian had done, Wei Wuxian would accept punishment later.

(Madam Yu was going to be furious, wasn't she?)

(With good reason.)

'Are you trying to declare war on the Jin Sect? My son was attacked!' the acting head screamed.

'We acknowledge that fact,' Wei Wuxian said. 'I will be administering Meng Yao's punishment myself. You may watch, if you wish.'

The acting head had agreed. Thus, before both of them, Meng Yao was given 20 blows with a beating stick.

(An astonishingly light punishment, given what he had done.)

(Despite Jin Zixun's own feelings on the matter, the acting head of the Jin could acknowledge that Wei Wuxian was too important of a connection to simply give up. With his position as the head disciple of the Jiang, the favor the Wens were directing his way, and the accomplishments he had recently obtained….)

(Maintaining that relationship was worth a bit of anger from his son.)

As for Meng Yao, after the punishment was carried out, he noticed Wei Wuxian offering him a bit more information than he had been before. Nothing extreme, but the things he would say would not normally be told to someone outside the Jiang. Concerns he had; disciples who needed help; details about the finances. His trust in Meng Yao had increased.

(Thus, despite the punishment he'd received, Meng Yao had trouble regretting the choice he had made.)

Meanwhile, over two days' journey away, Jiang Fengmian and Wen Ning were within the Nightless City. Wei Wuxian had sent a letter explaining the situation to Jiang Fengmian. Jin Zixun, similarly, had sent a letter to Wen Chao. After the last meeting he had shared with Wen-er-gongzi, Jin Zixun was certain the other would demonstrate his support.

Those letters would take a fair bit longer to arrive, however. For now, Jiang Fengmian, Wen Ning, and Wen Xu stood facing each other, stuck in the middle of a rather awkward turn of events.

"What is that?" Wen Xu asked again, his eyes glued to Jiang Fengmian and Wen Ning's chests. The other Wens frowned, directing their gazes the same way but not finding anything of note.

(Of course not. The only people that sensitive to resentful energy were Wei Wuxian and those who had been under the Great Sleep.)

Jiang Fengmian hadn't expected Wen Xu to notice so fast, but didn't view it as a problem, either. The future Wei Wuxian had brought up and planned for the possibility before they left. Thus:

“I believe your father would disapprove if we discussed the Yiling Patriarch so publicly,” Jiang Fengmian said. After considering that for a moment, Wen Xu nodded and gestured for the other Wens to leave. Hesitant and confused, they nonetheless filed out. The door clicked closed, leaving just the three of them behind.

“So?” Wen Xu asked.

Rather than answer, Jiang Fengmian waited for a few moments longer. There was a crackle in the air. Both Jiang Fengmian and Wen Xu tensed moments before the space between them cracked open, a glowing red talisman appearing out of nowhere.

(Wen Ning, who, unlike them, hadn’t gotten that forewarning, eeped a little.)

“Mo Xuanyu would like to talk to you,” Jiang Fengmian said. “A-Xian noticed something a little off about the lingering resentment on you, even compared to the rest of us.”

That was true. The few times Wei Wuxian and Wen Xu met in person, something about the other had stood out to the Jiang disciple. It wasn’t the main reason they were there — that was helping the Yiling Patriarch investigate what Wen Ning heard from Wen Chao — but it was a good secondary excuse. After hesitating for just a moment longer, Wen Xu reached forward and touched the talisman. Jiang Fengmian and Wen Ning copied him a moment later.

One by one, their bodies fell to the floor.

When they opened their eyes again, they were in a field of the Cloud Recesses. ‘Mo Xuanyu’ — or, rather, the Yiling Patriarch — stood before them.

After having watched the simulation, there was no way for Wen Xu to not recognize him on sight. He saluted at once, bowing his head respectfully.

After a moment of hesitation, Wei Wuxian saluted back.

(It was a good thing he had never actually interacted with Wen Xu. If this was Wen Chao, things wouldn’t be nearly so cordial.)

“Senior Mo,” Wen Ning spoke up. “Does… does Young Master Wen really feel strange to you? Is something wrong?”

“I wouldn’t jump to conclusions quite yet,” Wei Wuxian responded. “I’m not 100% sure how good the transmitters are at sending information on resentful energy. That said, he does feel a little different from Unc — from Sect Leader Jiang.”

Wei Wuxian walked forward, doing a circle around Wen Xu. He then did one around Jiang Fengmian, then one more around Wen Ning. He looked back at Wen Xu shortly after.

Wen Ning was what people unaffected by the Píngxíng Gateway should feel like. Jiang Fengmian was how people who were affected should feel. As for Wen Xu… there appeared to be an additional layer of resentment resting on top. Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure what that was.

“Does Wen Chao feel like… Sect Leader Jiang?” he asked.

Both Jiang Fengmian and Wen Xu nodded. The younger Wei Wuxian had implied as much earlier as well.

Wei Wuxian hummed.

“I definitely feel the remnants of the Píngxíng Gateway. It’s nothing major; just a bit of lingering energy still hovering around you. But, on Wen-gongzi… there’s something else too.”

Something clingier. It wasn’t just connected to Wen Xu, it was actively working to stay attached to him. What it gripped onto was not his body, but, rather, his soul.

“Strange…” Wei Wuxian muttered.

Was he cursed? But the energy mainly appeared to have an attractive effect. It wasn’t doing anything; just holding on tight. Was someone spying on him? But Wei Wuxian couldn’t see any information being sent back. Was it just that Wei Wuxian’s resentful energy-sensing was thrown completely off when it was across universes? Maybe, but then why would his other-self have decided the same thing?

Wei Wuxian stared and stared and stared.

Assuming, for a moment, that the Píngxíng Gateway *was* the cause of this attachment, was there any reason for a result like this? It probably wasn’t a function of the time spent inside — this energy had a completely different goal than the rest. Was it a matter of location? No, then Wen Chao would be undergoing the same effect.

Something from the Píngxíng Gateway that would attach a clump of energy to a person….

The only thing Wei Wuxian could think of that even resembled that was the souls of the future’s juniors, which got attached to their parents as soon as information was sent back.

The souls of the future’s…

Wait.

Slowly, stepping back, Wei Wuxian felt his eyes widen. If, supposing for a moment, this was true…

“A-Yuan?” he gaped.

"Pardon?" Wen Xu asked back.

Chapter End Notes

Is Wen Xu canonically A-Yuan's father? Absolutely not! Do I want to create new OCs to be A-Yuan's parents? Also no. Do I want to use this to progress Wen Xu's character? You bet! Thus, I guess we're stuck with this. Also, in regards to Meng Yao, do keep in mind that he's a lot younger than we ever see him in canon. Bit softer around the edges. XD

That vegetables scene was MDZS Q episode 18! The Xuanli part was episode 19 :)

The Storm

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Please thank my beta reader Tintin as well!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"A-Yuan?" Jiang Fengmian repeated. "Who is that?"

Mo Xuanyu — Wei Wuxian — paused, hesitating to answer. However, after several seconds went by, he seemed to realize the outburst he made deserved an explanation.

"..Ah." He cleared his throat. "A-Yuan is a child I… took in, after some time. I believe he's the reason for the energy that has been left on Wen-gongzi. It's not dangerous, so there's no reason to be concerned. You can tell Young Master Wei that it's not an issue, Sect Leader Jiang."

"I see. I'll do that, then," Jiang Fengmian promised, nodding once. Unfortunately, Wen Xu was far from satisfied with that explanation. He paused for a bit, staring at the ground.

'*A child left traces on me? I never made contact with them by myself; why would they target me specifically?*' he wondered. '*Is it revenge of some sort? If it's a child Wei Wuxian took in, then perhaps the war — the Sunshot Campaign — resulted in me taking the lives of that child's parents.*'

But, even then, what good would adding a mark do? Was Wei Wuxian wrong, and it actually was harmful in some way?

(To suggest that was to doubt Wei Wuxian's skill; to suggest he was lying was to doubt Wei Wuxian's character. Even with the small amount of the simulation Wen Xu had watched, it was difficult to do either.)

But, if not that, then why would a mark of resentful energy have been left on him? And, for 'Mo Xuanyu' to have been able to tell right away, wouldn't the mark have to be something that indicated the identity of the caster? Could Wei Wuxian always identify the source of resentful energy? Did he just get a feeling as to the style of the caster — the specialty of the caster — the soul of the caster?

The soul?

Come to think of it, hadn't that been mentioned before?

'Any questions before I go, I guess?' Wei Wuxian had asked. This Wei Wuxian had been the one from their timeline — the fifteen year old, rather than the one within Mo Xuanyu.

Jin Zixuan, still inside the simulation, had spoken up, asking, 'Do you know if… sending this message back to us affected the people over there in any way? Like, is there anything tying them here?'

He had been worried for his not-yet-born son, and for the juniors who had done this for them.

'Tying them here?' Wei Wuxian had repeated. 'Well, I guess there was this one bit of data I couldn't figure out. It seemed like it tied the five souls that I presume used this to contact us — counting Mo Xuanyu — to other souls like the reincarnation cycle. Maybe.'

'Can you explain more?'

'Um… Mo Xuanyu's signature just fused with me for some reason, and then one connected to Shijie and Jin Zixuan, one went over to an engaged couple of Lans, one headed to Nightless City, and one went to Sect Leader Ouyang and his wife. I'm not sure what it means though.'

'It means my son will still be born,' Jin Zixuan had thought, lighting up.

Yes, they already knew about souls from the future fusing with them.

'*One headed to Nightless City?*' Wen Xu thought. '*Then… it fused with me?*'

But that would mean-

"Patriarch," Wen Xu began. "The trace you're seeing on me… is it the same as what was on Jin-gongzi and Jiang-gunaing?"

Jiang Fengmian did a double take.

And Wei Wuxian's eyes widened slightly, the question catching him off guard.

"...I don't know," he said. "I haven't seen Jin-gongzi and Jiang-guniang."

But Wen Xu seemed to take that as confirmation, narrowing his eyes at that response.

Wei Wuxian gave an internal sigh.

'*Ah. Maybe I should have expected this,*' he thought to himself. '*I guess that's a reasonable conclusion to come to, given what I already told him.*'

He continued to stare, watching Wen Xu with an intensity that was hard to match. For a moment, Nie Huaisang's words rang in his head.

'*They're not complete idiots, Wei-xiong. Sometimes it helps to be a bit more honest.'*

And sure, the new Sect Leader Nie wasn't exactly the picture of honesty himself, but that didn't mean he didn't have a point.

But…

‘*If I tell him that A-Yuan can’t be born without him, what will he do? He’s the heir of the Wen Sect. An heir who’s now newly-aware that, in my world, the Wen Sect is gone. Leaving him aside, if Wen Ruohan finds out about this, I have no doubt he’d use A-Yuan as a tool against us.*’

Wen Xu had burned down the Cloud Recesses. Wen Ruohan had called the other sect heirs in as hostages and then started a war. Would they really hesitate to use A-Yuan just because he was of their own blood?

Then what? Keep it a secret from Wen Xu? Hope he just winds up with the appropriate person by sheer chance?

(Was it really such a big deal if A-Yuan wasn’t born? The one in the future would be fine regardless. The boy’s soul in this world would simply rejoin the cycle of reincarnation once his possible parents passed. It would be a little weird, but Wei Wuxian might be able to accept that.)

(But, if A-Yuan was born and used against them — if he was put through pain because of this — *tortured* because of this — then Wei Wuxian would never be able to forgive himself.)

The Yiling Patriarch breathed out slowly.

(Wei Wuxian just needed a bit more time. If he was given a few months — a few weeks — he was sure he could figure out a solution. There would surely be a way for A-Yuan to be born safely. However, if A-Yuan was conceived now, then his soul would be attached to that body. Death would be the only way to separate it; he would be under Wen Ruohan's control from the moment he was born. Wei Wuxian needed time.)

However-

“Who… is the mother?” Jiang Fengmian asked, not quite able to stop himself. To the side, Wen Ning’s eyes widened as well. Although he didn’t have the full context, that last question was enough to clue him in.

There was no denying it now.

“...I don’t know who A-Yuan’s mother is. I took him in after she passed,” Wei Wuxian said.

And, just as the Yiling Patriarch feared, Wen Xu’s mind began to turn in a very specific direction.

‘*If the trace left is made from resentful energy, then I’ll probably be able to identify her on first sight,*’ Wen Xu thought. ‘*Father… expressed interest in the four juniors who caused this. All the sect leaders did. I should find her and-*’

“Wait…” Jiang Fengmian said. “We saw the four who sent everything back to us. None of them were… they weren’t Wen.”

‘Wen Clan ran amok, and people suffered. Righteous clans launched the Sunshot Campaign to oppose the Wen.’

The Wen Clan had been annihilated.

Jiang Fengmian paused and lowered his hand, pulling back awkwardly.

None of the children from the far-future had worn the robes of the Wen Clan, but that didn’t mean they weren’t blood related to them. After all, if they were, there would be no one they could tell.

(When the watchers had first heard of one soul going to Nightless City, they had assumed the Lan parents were visiting there for a time. The idea that one of the children they had seen was actually a Wen had never even crossed their minds. Of course it wouldn’t; the Wens were all supposed to be dead.)

“Who… is it?” Wen Xu asked. “Which of those four? I… no, I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

It was one of the two Lans, given where the other souls had gone. Either way, the child would be taken note of by everyone involved.

“I… Wen-gongzi, where are you going?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Wen Xu, who had been walking toward the exit sigil inscribed on the ground, glanced back.

“We’ve confirmed the reason my energy felt different, haven’t we? It seems like it’s time to act on that.”

“Act on it?” Wei Wuxian repeated. “You want to find A-Yuan’s mother? Now?”

The Wen heir nodded once.

Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes.

In the future’s world, Wen Xu burned the Cloud Recesses, killing Lan Wangji’s father. Then, Nie Mingjue cut off his head.

(Hanguang-jun had unknowingly raised the son of his father’s killer. A-Yuan bore no responsibility for what Wen Xu did, but that was still… hard to process.)

“Is… now really the time for this?” Wei Wuxian asked. “I would think it would be better to wait for stability to return to the sects before you start courting.”

“Is courting necessary?” Wen Xu asked back. “I only need the child; I don’t need the mother to love me. If she’s given a reasonable enough incentive, I’m sure I can make her agree to work with me.”

Wei Wuxian tensed just slightly, his mind racing wildly. If he was able to intervene directly there would be quite a number of things he could do. However, right now, he

was a full dimension away. He couldn't even *touch* the people there, much less stop them.

Jiang Fengmian similarly frowned, pointing out, “If she bears you a son… you’ll probably be expected to marry her, Wen-gongzi.”

Jin Guangshan had bastard sons aplenty, but none of them were heirs. If Wen Xu wanted to do this to keep the politically-significant child close, wouldn’t he have to marry the mother? As a concubine, if nothing else.

“It depends on what Father decides,” was Wen Xu’s only response.

At that answer, Jiang Fengmian couldn’t help but shudder momentarily.

‘We have found an excellent candidate for your marriage,’ the family elders had told him. ‘Her family background, cultivation, and wealth are all factors that make her the perfect partner for you.’

Their comparative personalities were, of course, never mentioned.

And Jiang Fengmian, having just lost the support of his best friend to marriage, had eventually given in.

But-

“I… don’t think that’s-” Jiang Fengmian paused, trying to consider his words once more. “Shouldn’t you… meet her before deciding on that? What if she’s not interested?”

“I’ll increase her reward until she is.”

Worst come to worst, keeping her as a barely-noticed but highly pampered concubine should be fine.

(Once an actual wife was selected for Wen Xu, the two of them could just adopt his bastard child if need-be. The most important thing now was securing the Wen Sect’s position. With the foretold result of the Sunshot Campaign, the Wen Sect’s influence and reputation would become a fraction of what it had been before. Reclaiming that power was Wen Xu’s *job* as sect heir.)

(He had to act quickly. If this information was made public, the to-be mother could be assassinated or otherwise convinced to not comply. If all the gold in the world wasn’t enough to make her want a child, this likely wouldn’t work. There would be drugs she could take and various other choices she could make that would vastly lower the chances of her having a healthy baby. Given the soul situation, it was likely that their first child would be their only chance. If that one wasn’t born healthily, the next would probably house a different soul within them. Thus, if Wen Xu wanted this to work, the mother would have to comply.)

“You care for that child, don’t you?” Wen Xu asked, looking directly at Wei Wuxian. “Shouldn’t you want him to live?”

Wei Wuxian faltered just slightly. Did he want A-Yuan to be born? Yes — into a loving family that would allow him a childhood completely different from his time in the Jin Sect's camps and the Burial Mounds.

Did he want A-Yuan to be born as Wen Xu's son?

(But preventing the birth of A-Yuan felt a little too much like murder to easily accept.)

Wei Wuxian pursed his lips, unsure of how to answer.

"Our goals are aligned here, Patriarch," Wen Xu continued. "Once I find the mother, I'll use either financial compensation or political safety to make her agree. I have the full power of the Wen Sect at my disposal; I'm sure I can find some way to make this work. We conceived a child in your world; there's no reason this would fail now. It will be fine."

And he said it so straightforwardly — so earnestly — that, for a moment, that almost seemed like a reasonable thing to say.

And yet, at that moment, all Jiang Fengmian could see were the family elders surrounding him, telling him over and over again how ideal of a partner Yu Ziyuan would be.

(Hadn't that concession of his — his willingness to look for a logical match rather than a meaningful one — been exactly what caused Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli to have to grow up as they did? He wouldn't give his children up for the world but… didn't that say *something* about all this?)

"Young Master Wen, please… think about this a little more," Jiang Fengmian requested. "Perhaps… perhaps you could talk to her for a while first. See how you feel about-"

"No need," Wen Xu interjected. "There's no reason for us to waste time here. Once I find her, I'll convince her to help me."

And he seemed to think he really could.

By *bribing her*.

"Wen-gongzi, I-"

"This isn't a matter that involves you, Sect Leader Jiang," Wen Xu said.

The Jiang weren't entirely unrelated, but Wen Xu saw no reason to give Jiang Fengmian's opinion much thought. Someone who couldn't control his own sect — someone who might have left the simulation just to get away from the complicated mess that was his own family — wasn't worth any consideration. The relationship between him and Madam Yu was almost certainly coloring his view. That naive, soft, pathetic perspective didn't matter here.

~~Truth be told, Wen Xu didn't have any particular problems with Jiang Fengmian. However, Wen Ruohan didn't respect him, so Wen Xu didn't either.~~

"...We don't know the full details of what happened in my world," Wei Wuxian pointed out. "You're in a different time and a diverging dimension. We can't be making these plans about a woman we've never met. She's a *person* who can change. She might be willing. Or, for all you know, she'd rather die than help you."

"We'll find out when I try," was all Wen Xu said.

"But… Young Master Wen…" Wen Ning trailed off. "I-I mean, sorry, I don't mean any trouble! I just — it's just…"

He swallowed once. His heart felt like it was beating rapidly enough to jump out of his chest.

But Wei Wuxian had asked Wen Ning to help Jiang Fengmian out, if there seemed to be a need. Mo Xuanyu might not be entirely forthcoming, but the things he'd freely admitted to them in recent times — combined with the careful thought he put into everything he did — showed how much he was trying to help them. He'd already done a lot for them. Wen Ning trusted him, now.

And, as a side note…

'*Wen-gongzi wants to-to have a kid?! I get, I mean, it makes some sense if it's someone known in the future, but… but he's not like Wen-er-gongzi. Wen-gongzi's never shown interest in something like that.*'

To Wen Ning, it didn't make much sense. Thus, right now, it felt right to speak:

"Um," he paused, clearing his throat nervously. "Just… maybe Senior Mo is right and it would be best to wait a little longer. You've-you've never even seen the mother before, right? Do you… really even *want* to have a child?"

Wen Xu stared at him, his icy gaze making Wen Ning shiver a little. Then:

"...It doesn't matter. Serving the sect's interests is our *job*, Wen Ning."

Those words were enough to make Wen Ning flinch, but the boy did not move away. Rather, he moved closer, seemingly cutting Wen Xu's access to the exit portal off.

(Sure, they could phase through each other while in this realm, but the intent was still clear.)

Wen Xu sighed. What a mess.

(Wen Qing had shielded her brother from so much. That brat didn't understand what it meant to have true loyalty to the Wen.)

It didn't matter. The only one here whose opinion really mattered was Wei Wuxian. Wen Xu glanced back. As soon as he managed to get the Yiling Patriarch's approval (or, at the very least, a promise to not interfere) he could get to work. He would track down all the most likely candidates and scan them for traces of resentful energy. He would find the necessary woman and then-

And then-

And then, after he convinced her to help, that stranger would *touch him* and *put her hands all over him* and he would be *inside her* and they would be so close and he would feel her heat and fluids getting all over his body and neither of them would enjoy it but they had a *duty* to the Wen and just imagining that made Wen Xu want to throw up but they had to do it so they would.

"You were fine with the boy being a Wen. Is the issue just that he's now my child?" Wen Xu asked.

"It's not a problem in itself," 'Mo Xuanyu' responded. "I am, however, concerned for him. Is there a specific reason you want a child now, when the stability of the sects is so tenuous and uncertain?"

Wen Xu didn't bother to answer. They both knew what his reason was. Wen Ruohan had been quite clear before Wen Xu left the simulation. The heir's job was to maintain the Wen Sect's control over the Great Sects and ensure that Wei Wuxian was not being turned against them. From the reports Wen Xu had been given, Wei Wuxian was very attentive toward the children in his sect, spending a significant portion of time every day taking care of them with Wen Ning. Given what the future version had just said, there was a personal connection between Wei Wuxian and 'A-Yuan.' In addition, the watchers had been gradually growing fond of the future's juniors as the simulation progressed. They would care about that child too. A situation like that would inevitably impact politics down the line.

Thus, Wen Xu's job right now was to create that child.

(His own feelings on the matter weren't a factor.)

(Wen Ruohan had also never cared much about making children. He had done so because it was his job to. Wen Xu could surely do the same.)

(But, to make that work, he would have to leave right now. Leaving aside whatever the Wen Sect's enemies might do, Wen Xu's biggest obstacle was his own weak will. The longer he spent thinking about it — the longer he spent trying to imagine how a stranger might *touch him* — the more nauseous he became. Wen Ning thought him seeing her would change his mind? The woman in question could be the most beautiful person in the world. The idea of a *stranger* coming close and doing anything like *that* was revolting regardless of how she looked.)

The mother of A-Yuan would cooperate with him. She had to; it was her *duty* to the Wen Sect.

If Wen Xu could suppress his own feelings on the matter, she should be able to as well.

"Young Master Wen?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Wen Xu looked up again.

And, seeing that, Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but frown.

On Wen Ruohan’s orders, Wen Xu had burned the Cloud Recesses and killed Lan Wangji’s father.

(Not yet though. This version hadn’t done that yet.)

As far as A-Yuan’s safety was concerned, Wei Wuxian was completely unwilling to offer Wen Xu any trust.

(But A-Yuan wouldn’t be born without him. Was there a way for Wei Wuxian to wait for A-Yuan to be born and then steal him away? Was it even justifiable to do so? Putting that aside, was it *possible?* Even if Wen Xu did turn out to be a monster, the Wei Wuxian of the future couldn’t physically be there.)

Wei Wuxian wanted A-Yuan to be born. He wanted A-Yuan to be born and live happily. If Wen Xu was going to use him as a pawn, Wei Wuxian would have to do everything in his power to convince the heir to stop.

But...

'Do you... really even want to have a child?'

'*It doesn't matter,' was Wen Xu's only response*.

Wei Wuxian frowned, stepping back a bit.

(Did that really make sense? Wen Xu had died a few months into the war. Therefore, within the next few years, A-Yuan was probably conceived. Wen Xu was the heir of the Wen Sect. How could that have happened if Wen Xu didn't want it to?)

(But there was a grimace on the Wen heir’s face that he couldn’t quite hide, and that made Wei Wuxian hesitate to accept it as just that.)

“...Sect Leader Jiang, Wen Ning, can you… let me speak with Wen-gongzi alone for a bit?”

Both addressed parties jolted a little at the request, their brows furrowing in concern. However, after looking back and forth between the other two, they couldn’t help but falter. Wei Wuxian’s determination was clear.

“If you… need something — anything at all — you’ll call for us, right?” Jiang Fengmian asked.

Wei Wuxian nodded once.

“...Okay. Good luck.”

They vanished in a flash of red.

But Wei Wuxian's eyes didn't leave Wen Xu's even once.

(Wen Xu had led the attack that killed Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen's father.)

(Wei Wuxian had killed his brother.)

(Still-)

Wei Wuxian swallowed once. Throughout this whole conversation, Wen Xu had been oddly cordial toward 'the Yiling Patriarch.' Due to a limited number of interactions with the man during his life, Wei Wuxian had no idea how unusual that was.

(Then again, some people were like Jin Guangyao. People like that would appear polite no matter whether or not they felt any genuine respect.)

(Regardless…)

"Young Master Wen, what would you say to a deal?"

"A deal?"

"Yes. A-Yuan is important to me," Wei Wuxian admitted freely. "I want him to be happy."

Those who had seen more of the simulation would be able to confirm that in an instant. There was no point in lying.

"Young Master Wen, now that your relationship with him is clear, the situation changes a bit. If it interests you, I would like to provide some support to the Wen Sect."

Wen Xu's eyes widened.

'*Wasn't he part of the Sunshot Campaign?*' he thought, mentally backtracking over everything Wei Wuxian had said. '*Lotus Pier was destroyed by the Wen, wasn't it? He turned Wen Ning into a fierce corpse.*'

Except, as was now becoming clear, the situation was a bit more complicated than that.

"...What help would you have in mind?"

"You've seen some of my inventions in the simulation, isn't that right? To begin with… would you be interested in learning how to assemble a compass of evil for your sect?"

And, well…

No one in their right mind could refuse an offer like that.

Wen Xu opened his mouth then closed it again, furrowing his brows in thought.

'*A compass of evil? Even the Jiang haven't started working on making one of those yet. That would be more than enough to-*'

“However,” Wei Wuxian continued, “There’s one thing I want in exchange.”

“And what… would that be?” Wen Xu asked.

“I don’t know what the other sect leaders will do once they leave the simulation. That uncertainty…. it worries me. I would rather A-Yuan not be born until I have a better idea of what the future in your world will be.”

Until he could be sure there wouldn’t be an extermination of the Wen.

Until he could be sure someone would be around to help A-Yuan if the boy’s own clan put him at risk.

Wei Wuxian’s motives were clear.

Wen Xu swallowed once, breathing in slowly.

‘*What I need right now, more than anything, is power.*’

A hostage like Wen Yuan would always be a risky gamble. Many would doubt that Wen Xu could kill his own son and, as far as use went, the only people he could potentially be used on were the watchers of the simulation. A far more promising application of Wen Yuan would be using him as an intermediary between the sects — he was someone many sect leaders would feel they could trust, regardless of his stance as a Wen. However, something like that would take many years to bear fruit. The compass of evil could be put to use right away. If the efficiency of the Wen Sect were to double from what it currently was, the respect of the populace would rise in kind.

Recently, Jin Zixun had been acting out of control more and more frequently. Wen Xu knew Wen Chao had been exchanging letters with him. In trying to stop that, Wen Xu had just made it so that Jin Zixun came over more often — and it wasn’t like Wen Xu could refuse to welcome someone of his rank. The downright terror Wen Chao had shown toward Wei Wuxian was impacting both their actions; all attempts on Wen Xu’s part to change his brother’s mind had proven useless.

If Wen Ruohan was here, he would have managed to put a stop to them. If Wen Ruohan was here, the other sects wouldn’t be moving so far out of line to see what they could get away with. If Wen Ruohan was here, the Wen Sect would be untouchable.

Wen Ruohan wasn’t here. Wen Ruohan had ordered Wen Xu to keep the sect strong. Therefore, Wen Xu had to have a kid.

But, now, a new option showed itself.

(In all honesty, this probably wasn’t a good deal to take. The future’s Wei Wuxian could give those instructions to everyone if he wanted to. The past’s Wei Wuxian could probably reverse engineer it in a day. It wasn’t as sure of a method as Wen Yuan.)

(But, if it meant Wen Xu wouldn’t have to let someone touch him-)

“I agree,” he said at once, the words rushing out before he could really think them through. “I agree. If that’s your only demand… the Wen Sect will accept that offer, Patriarch.”

(The acidic taste that had been forming in his mouth vanished. When the bile disappeared, the worst of his nausea did too.)

“Thank you,” Wen Xu said, bowing slightly.

Wei Wuxian sent a small smile his way.

Within the in-between zone, there was light chatter all around. This was not the tense silence that had occurred in earlier breaks, nor the accusatory hisses and shouts that had previously echoed in the room. Despite that, the current conversations were short and stilted. Every discussion could end at a moment’s notice. Everyone was on edge, waiting for the simulation to begin again.

During this time, Jiang Yanli, sitting next to Wen Qing, tried to smile.

“Your Uncle… seems quite skilled at making wine. From what I understand, A-Xian is very decisive when it comes to alcohol,” she began. “Does he… make any now? I thought our A-Xian might like to try some.”

A small smile formed on Wen Qing’s face as well and she, nodding once, explained, “He does. There’s a grape orchard he maintains near where he and his wife live. I don’t think he’s ever sold any but I’ll… reach out to him. I’m sure we can get some for your… brother.”

Wei Wuxian wasn’t Jiang Yanli’s brother. Not really. But, since the simulation began, Jiang Yanli had used that word to describe him time and time again. Her simulated version had, as well:

‘A-Xian is a disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect. He grew up with my brother and I. Calling him ‘the son of a servant,’ I’m sorry but… I won’t accept this.’

Her other-self had meant it when she said that. Both Jiang Yanlis thought of Wei Wuxian as a brother to them.

Thus, at Wen Qing’s words, Jiang Yanli found herself relaxing a little.

“Thank you for welcoming him,” she said. “I understand how much he did for you, but… the extent you and your family went through to make him feel welcome… thank you. I… appreciate it.”

(Some ways away, out of sight but just close enough to hear them, Madam Yu flinched.)

“Of course.” Wen Qing nodded once. “I’m hoping we’ll never end up in a situation like that in our world, but… my family would welcome him in at any time.”

At those words, Jiang Yanli’s smile faltered just a little.

“Ah,” Wen Qing cleared her throat, having noticed Jiang Yanli’s reaction before even Jiang Yanli did. “I mean… my family would be honored to get to know him. We would welcome him as a friend.”

Wen Qing wouldn’t mind having Wei Wuxian as family. However, if the watchers learned from the simulation and managed to fix their other-selves’ mistakes, such a world would never come to be.

(They were trying to stop the suffering of the future. Inevitably, they would have to stop some of the joy, too.)

“Oh, did I… ah,” Jiang Yanli shook her head. “No. I’m sorry. I’m happy — truly — over what you’ve all done for him. I think it would be wonderful for you all to get to know each other after we leave the simulation. I’m sure you would-”

She cut off, unable to bring herself to say the words “welcome him as one of your own” as things currently were.

(Wei Wuxian had never officially become part of the Jiang family. He wasn’t ‘officially’ part of the Wen remnants either, but they had accepted him in a way the Jiang never did. No matter how much Jiang Yanli had wanted to change things, she was never able to accomplish much, was she?)

As Wen Qing watched Jiang Yanli deflate a little, she felt her own heart sink in turn. They were different in many, many ways, but, at times like this, Jiang Yanli reminded her a bit of Wen Ning.

“I’m not trying to separate your brother from you,” Wen Qing promised (taking extra care to not look at her sect leader, who was almost certainly not included in that). “Jiang-guniang, the situation depicted in the simulation is hardly an inevitability. In fact, that’s exactly what we’re all trying to change. I’m not asking you to give up your brother to us, I just would like to… ah…”

To meet him, get to know him, thank him, and, potentially, provide him with a bit more support than he had with just the Jiang.

(Though it probably wouldn’t help to say that last part out loud.)

“He’s willing to do things few others are for what’s right,” Wen Qing said instead. “Providing him with a few more people he can turn to if he needs help couldn’t hurt.”

“You’re right,” Jiang Yanli agreed. “You’re right.”

Even emotionally, she couldn’t disagree.

(How could she, after watching her side — her to-be in-laws — her *brother* — leave Wei Wuxian with nowhere else to go?)

Picking up on those thoughts, Wen Qing took a slow breath in, pointing out, “...As Madam Jin said, there’s likely nothing you would be able to do about what happened. I wasn’t able to

stop Wen Ruohan from going to war; it makes sense that you couldn't stop this. Even as Jiang Wanyin's sister, there's a limit to what you can do."

"Somehow, that always seems to be true."

Wen Qing paused, not knowing how to respond to that. Jiang Yanli sent her a grateful smile for the attempt but looked away a moment later. Their situations couldn't really be compared. Jiang Yanli was a boring, plain girl without her mother's cultivation, Wen Qing's medical knowledge, or Madam Jin's political influence. She had never wanted to change the world — never needed to be anything more than she was — but, now, she could see first-hand how little that allowed her to do.

If she had been just a bit stronger, maybe she could have fought by Wei Wuxian's side.

If she had been just a bit smarter, maybe she could have convinced the sect leaders to *see* Wei Wuxian's side.

If she had been just a bit braver, maybe she could have given everything in the Jiang and Jin sects up in order to stand by her brother and do what was right.

(What did it matter? If Jiang Yanli had gone with him, she would have simply been another mouth to feed. How would she have managed to join him anyways? There was no way her guards would just let her walk all the way to Yiling and getting a carriage ride there was just as unlikely. Realistically speaking, everything her other self had tried to do to help probably just hadn't reached him.)

(Because, as the weak, boring, plain Jiang Yanli, she could never do anything to help.)

Jiang Yanli's gaze drifted just a little to the side.

'Zixuan-xiong, who do you think looks the best?'

'Do you even need to ask? He would have to pick his fiancée.'

Jin Zixuan had frowned.

'His fiancée?' another boy asked. 'What sect is she from? She must be extremely talented.'

'Drop it.'

Her fiance hadn't wanted to speak of her. Because, the second people knew who she was:

'Huh? Oh, so it's that plain Jiang Yanli.'

'I suppose she's a bit unsuitable.'

And then-

'Wouldn't it be better to ask what about her I could *be satisfied with?!*'

Because Wei Wuxian was stuck in the Burial Mounds again. Things were better this time. He was now accompanied by friends. Not just friends, in fact. That whole exchange with A-Yuan on calling him "grandfather," while clearly playful, didn't ring completely false. This time, Wei Wuxian was with people he considered family.

A family *not* including her.

(Even if she had wanted to go, she wouldn't have had any way of getting there. She couldn't ride on her sword; she simply would have been brought back home before she managed to exit the town. She was never, ever able to do anything to help.)

'Oh, so it's that plain Jiang Yanli.'

Because what else could people view her as?

(*Lan Wangji* was the only reason Wei Wuxian knew of her marriage.)

"Jiang-guniang," Wen Qing spoke again. "You're not… viewing the situation objectively right now. You don't shoulder most of the blame here — barely any of it can fall to you. There's only so much we can do."

But, though Jiang Yanli smiled at her words, her mood didn't even remotely shift.

Wen Qing had saved Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian right when the war began. She had the influence and power to do so. She had then done everything she could to save her brother from the Jin. In comparison, Jiang Yanli….

Well, there wasn't much to be gained by losing herself in those thoughts right now. Thus:

"Thank you," Jiang Yanli said, trying to make her smile look confident. "I'll keep that in mind. Either way… I'm grateful to you and the rest of your family for so fully accepting him."

"Our brothers…"

"Hm?"

After thinking it over for a moment, Wen Qing continued, "Our brothers are getting to know each other outside the simulation. Your father is there too. As A-Ning gets to know Sect Leader Jiang more and more, he'll feel more comfortable there. I don't know if this will help, but… rather than losing a brother, I hope you can view what's happening in the simulation as *gaining* another one instead. If not in that world, then in ours."

Jiang Yanli stared back, her eyes going a little wide. Then, when she laughed, her smile was a touch more genuine than it had been before.

"I've never had a sister," she said. "That sounds… fun."

Wen Qing smiled back at her, relaxing as well.

While this was happening, Jiang Yanli's fiance was engaged in a rather different sort of discussion:

"No."

"I bet fifty bronze coins it's a yes."

"I can't believe you're betting on this!"

"Oh, Da-ge, throw in two of my fans into your bet. In exchange, if we're right, Jin-xiong has to give us a new carriage."

"What?! I didn't agree to that!"

"You might as well just give in, Young Master Jin," Lan Xichen advised. "When the two of them are in agreement like this, it's rather hard to convince them of the reverse."

"No need to convince them of the reverse; they're right," Jiang Cheng said, moving away from Jin Zixuan to stand with the Nies. Jin Zixuan gaped.

"We are *not* betting on whether Wei Wuxian will sneak almond tofu into my wedding for the express purpose of throwing it at me during the ceremony! How would he even do that?!"

"I'm sure he'd find a way," Jiang Cheng asserted.

"Maybe Wangji-xiong would help him sneak it in!" Nie Huaisang suggested.

Everyone swerved toward Lan Wangji who, after a moment's consideration, decided not to deny that possibility.

(Future-him had already fought off Sect Leaders for Wei Wuxian's sake. If it was a favor as minor as sneaking in almond tofu… yes, he definitely would.)

"Okay, let's suppose, hypothetically, that he did manage to get the tofu inside," Jin Zixuan allowed. "Would he really ruin A-Li's special day?! You all might've turned traitor, but surely *she'd* protect me!"

"I think A-Jie'd be willing to accept it so long as it meant Wei Wuxian could attend her wedding," Jiang Cheng said. Jin Zixuan deflated, unable to deny that.

(What they were discussing was not the wedding within the simulation, which Wei Wuxian had found out about only a few days before. Their debate was instead regarding a marriage in their world, without all the complications of that time. Initially, their focus had been on, generally, things they would do differently than their other selves had. Somehow, they had ended up here.)

(Because the fact that Wei Wuxian wasn't even *invited* still felt far, far too wrong. In this time before the simulation started again, it was nice to imagine things going right, instead. That said, even with the laughter being spread around, the sect-heirs-plus-Nie-Mingjue still stood rather tense and tightly-wound.)

(Their current feelings would probably not be able to last for long.)

And, as if in proof of that, the world darkened around them a moment later.

Jiang Yanli let out a slow, calming breath.

Jin Ling did the same before, moments later, declaring, "In the following days, with Wen Ning's current state now publicly known, ambitious young cultivators swarmed the Burial Mounds, hoping to be taken in as disciples by the 'patriarch.'"

Said disciple-hopefuls were displayed, kept out of the main part of the mounds by the wall of corpses surrounding it. Nonetheless, they made sure their desires were known. They shouted loudly, held up signs, and even set up paintings of large, hunch-backed, hairy monsters to somehow win the Patriarch's favor.

'*No,*' Lan Wangji corrected himself. '*Given that description above them…*'

The words 'Yiling Patriarch' were written atop most of the paintings. In fact, almost all of them were inscribed with that. One even had 'All Hail the Supreme Lord of Evil, the Patriarch of Yiling.' Somehow or another, these people had gotten the idea that *that* signified Wei Wuxian.

The room's temperature seemed to drop by ten degrees as Lan Wangji sent them an ice-cold glare. Shivering a little, Jin Zixuan moved away carefully. Lan Qiren gave a short scoff.

"These people… they haven't even *seen* Wei Wuxian before?"

"Most of these kids are probably people who didn't make it into the big sects," Nie Mingjue pointed out. "All they have to go off are rumors and such."

"Poor A-Xian," Jiang Yanli said, hiding a smile. "He'll be so upset when he finds out."

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, adding, "Still, you'd think they'd have at least seen him walking around. The people in Yiling certainly laid eyes on him."

Humming thoughtfully, Wen Qing countered, "The war probably built Wei Wuxian's reputation up in the eyes of the public. With what he did to save my family on top of that… even if they do see him, would they recognize him?"

Many of the watchers pursed their lips at that.

(How many of them could truly say they were uninvolved?)

One fierce corpse let out a terrifying roar, sending an interloper flying back. However, being a cultivator, they landed softly and got up again shortly after. The corpse did not follow. Their orders were to keep people out; they weren't trying to hurt them.

Thus, as time went on, more and more people appeared at the base of the Burial Mounds, hoping to be let in.

And wasn't that a sentence that, pre-simulation, the watchers would never have even dreamed of. The Wen Clan, despite all its might, had failed to purify the Burial Mounds. In just a few months, Wei Wuxian had managed to soothe it instead.

'Spiritual energy is energy, but resentment and wrath can become types of energy too. Why can't we make good use of them?' Wei Wuxian had asked, all the way back in the Cloud Recesses. 'When Yu the Great tamed the flood, obstruction was the inferior method and redirection was superior. Suppression is the same as obstruction, so isn't it inferior?'

Wei Wuxian had been actively trying to anger Lan Qiren at that time. Looking back on it now, that fact seemed obvious to the famed instructor. However, that didn't mean Wei Wuxian had said that thoughtlessly.

'*Wei Wuxian had no choice but to make demonic cultivation,*' Lan Qiren recalled. '*But… even if he'd had other options, what makes this one so wrong?*'

(Of course it was wrong. It was disturbing the dead and utilizing negative energy instead of spiritual power. Something like this should only be used if there was no other option. Even the Nie had to hide the kind of cultivation they were doing. It was 'ignoring ethics and morality,' as Lan Qiren's other self had said.)

('....*Was it really?*' the real one wondered, not daring to answer that himself.)

The Yiling Patriarch himself was shown by the simulation next. He looked left and right, trying to figure out a way to get through his own corpse wall without letting the uninvited guests in. He glared at the sea of visitors, thought for a bit, then frowned.

"Wei Wuxian began to use another path from that point on," Jin Ling explained.

Xue Yang wasn't old enough to have been there, but Nie Huaisang could almost imagine a preteen version standing at the base of the Mounds with the largest 'ALL HAIL THE DARK LORD' sign of all.

When Wei Wuxian appeared next, he was in the streets of Yiling, accompanied by Wen Ning. He ventured through the stalls, gleefully observing the different options and haggling down prices as he saw fit. Every once and a while, he would lean towards Wen Ning and ask the fierce corpse what he thought about one option or another.

Because, no matter what the world said about him, he'd brought Wen Ning back to life to have *Wen Ning* back, not to create a powerful fierce corpse. Wen Qing smiled lightly.

Wen Ning was carrying enough supplies to nearly be buried under it. There were quite a few people to feed back on the Burial Mounds so the crates of rice and spices piled high.

Despite being a cultivator, Wen Ning had never been able to carry all that much, before. Now, despite the stiffness of his face as an undead corpse…

'*He looks happy.*' Wen Qing thought, relaxing a little more. '*I'm… glad.*'

Strange as it might seem, Wen Ning appeared more relaxed now than he had whenever they had to visit the Nightless City. The Wen Remnants had been isolated to Yiling, but, in many ways, they really had created a home.

Jiang Yanli entwined her fingers together, tensing slightly.

However, at that moment, a flash of purple went by. Wei Wuxian looked over just in time to see Jiang Cheng glance back at him and then go around a corner. Wei Wuxian immediately ran after.

Jiang Cheng's heart skipped a beat.

"Me?" he asked. Many people glanced back and forth between him and the simulation, tense in anticipation. Jiang Cheng sat up straight, nearly on the edge of his seat. His future self was finally there — finally back. All throughout the last segment, he had been wishing his future self was there to help ~~like Lan Wangji~~. However, now, a feeling more akin to dread came over him.

Jiang Cheng's future self had been shown many times; the real version was rarely pleased with what that version did.

Regardless of that, the simulated Jiang Cheng continued walking until he reached a small yard, out of sight of the main street. The moment after Wei Wuxian followed him inside, the gate slammed closed behind him.

"Get out," Jiang Cheng said, having shut the doors before Wen Ning could enter.

Because Wen Ning had rescued him, gotten his parent's ashes, saved Wei Wuxian, and had only come to the Jiang to offer them some help, and yet the future Jiang Cheng felt nothing but hate for anyone with his last name. Just two segments ago, he had tried to tear apart Wen Ning's corpse.

~~Wen Ning had rescued his parents' corpses, then Jiang Cheng tried to destroy his. Was there anything more dishonorable than that?~~

But Jiang Cheng's future self had not spent the last two weeks sitting in the simulation with Wen Qing, watching her grow closer and closer to his sister. Unlike the real one, the simulated one's parents were actually dead. The simulated one was also a sect leader, surrounded by colleagues who cursed the Wens daily for what Wen Ruohan had done.

So, when Wen Qing narrowed her eyes at his simulated-self's actions, all the real Jiang Cheng could do was look away.

And Wen Ning, similarly, didn't try to fight it. Upon realizing that it was Jiang Wanyin blocking him off, he immediately lowered his gaze and left.

However, there was no time to focus on that. For, at that moment, a woman wearing a black cloak and a curtained hat stepped forward. Wei Wuxian's eyes widened.

"Shijie?"

Jiang Yanli stood up, bringing her hands to her mouth to hold back a gasp.

The simulated Jiang Yanli took off her hat and cloak, revealing scarlet robes that shined in the sun. They were decorated with gold, reflecting a brilliant light every time they swayed. When she smiled, the bejeweled crown on her head tinkled with the sound of bells. The flush on her cheeks was enhanced by the makeup she wore, combining into a look that would put an empress to shame.

Jin Zixuan flushed a bright, bright pink.

Wei Wuxian walked over, gaping openly. He looked her up and down, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

"Shijie… you're-"

"What? You think she's marrying you?" Jiang Cheng asked.

"You can shut up."

The casual banter only made Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli smile brighter. The last segment had been a long, stretching length of time spent wondering where their other-selves had been. Why was Wei Wuxian alone? How could they have let Wei Wuxian become so completely cut off from the world in such a short amount of time? How could they have allowed him to be forced into the Burial Mounds again? How could *Lan Wangji* be the first to tell Wei Wuxian about her wedding?

But they were here. They were here, now. They had finally come!

Jiang Yanli spread out her arms, putting her form on full display, and gave a little spin. She flushed in embarrassment, but her desire to show Wei Wuxian remained firm.

"A-Xian, I'll… be married soon," she revealed. "I came for you to see."

She would indeed be married soon. Given what Lan Wangji said, the wedding was at most a few days away. And yet, despite that, she had still managed to make it out.

~~Wei Wuxian hadn't been forgotten, no matter how the last segment had made them feel.~~

Wei Wuxian smiled and opened his mouth but didn't speak. There seemed like nothing he could say. He stood there for a while longer, still gaping in shock.

Because he had genuinely believed he wouldn't get to see this. That felt wrong — it was wrong — but it was also untrue. He was getting to see. Jiang Yanli had managed to meet with him.

When Madam Jin glanced to the side, she saw Jiang Yanli's eyes starting to water again. The young woman was just as speechless as Wei Wuxian, watching the simulation with wide eyes. Jin Zixuan hadn't really taken his eyes off the simulated Jiang Yanli since she arrived, but even he would glance out of the corner of his eyes at Wei Wuxian every once in a while. This scene as a whole — the fact that Jiang Yanli was getting to show this to Wei Wuxian —

seemed to be worth more to him than any present he had ever received. In a different time, both he and Madam Jin had thought Wei Wuxian might be interested in Jiang Yanli in a romantic way:

'What? Am I wrong? If you like her so much, why don't you talk to her father? If you want her, I don't think he'd object. Doesn't he treat you better than his own child or something?'

He had been wrong on both accounts, there. And more so:

'A-Xian is a disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect. He grew up with my brother and I. Calling him 'the son of a servant,' I'm sorry, but… I won't accept this.'

She had faced Jin Zixun down.

'Madam, A-Xian is my younger brother. To me, him being humiliated by others isn't a small matter.'

Now, at long last, both Jin Zixuan and Madam Jin understood what Jiang Yanli had meant. As she looked over this scene, Madam Jin simply saw her to-be daughter in law speaking to her brothers. Wei Wuxian was part of Jiang Yanli's family.

"I…" Wei Wuxian trailed off. "I know. I'd heard-"

"Who did you hear about this from?"

"That's none of your business," Wei Wuxian responded, not even looking at Jiang Cheng while he spoke. His eyes remained fixated on Jiang Yanli.

The real Jiang Cheng squirmed, disliking the reminder of how isolated Wei Wuxian was — of how the future Jiang Cheng *knew* how isolated Wei Wuxian was — and how much his future self's words may have contributed to that.

(At the very least, Wei Wuxian didn't seem to be receiving communications of any kind from Jiang Cheng. If there wasn't even that, receiving supplies or resources was an even further possibility.)

(But, now that they'd finally reunited, that might change.)

"Ah, but…" Jiang Yanli flushed a little more, lowering her arms and closing in on herself in embarrassment. "I'm the only one who's here. You won't be able to see the groom."

Jin Zixuan jolted, making his seat scrape across the ground.

Did that mean that he had refused to come? Or, considering the role *his family* had played in Wei Wuxian's situation, had Jiang Yanli not been willing to ask?

After pausing for a long moment, Wei Wuxian shrugged, pointing out, "It's not like I care about looking at some groom."

‘*Well, he’s at the very least quite good at pretending not to care,*’ Wen Ruohan supposed.

Stepping closer, Wei Wuxian circled Jiang Yanli a few times, eyeing her from every angle. The jewels she wore sparkled in the sun, directing every gaze her way. As Wei Wuxian finished his last circle, he nodded in satisfaction.

“It’s good!” he confirmed.

Jin Zixuan nodded rapidly in agreement.

“It doesn’t count if you two are the ones saying that. I can’t take you seriously!” Jiang Yanli protested.

Jiang Cheng sighed: “You don’t believe me and you don’t believe him. Is it that you’ll only believe it when a certain somebody says so?”

“It’s good!” Jin Zixuan immediately shouted. Upon hearing that, the real Jiang Yanli’s face turned just as red as her counterpart’s had.

She quickly changed the subject, requesting, “A-Xian… give a courtesy name.”

“What courtesy name?”

Jiang Cheng grinned, answering, “A courtesy name for my unborn nephew.”

Both Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan flushed an even deeper red than before at that implication. Madam Yu, on the other hand, grew a little quiet. Like Madam Jin, she had felt Wei Wuxian’s status as Jiang Yanli’s ‘brother’ grow more and more obvious as the simulation went on.

‘It doesn’t count if you two are the ones saying that!’ Jiang Yanli had protested.

Because both of them were family to her, so their compliments could only mean so much.

And yet, because Wei Wuxian had never been officially adopted into the Jiang family, Jiang Cheng’s description of Jin Ling was “my” unborn nephew, not “ours.”

Madam Yu couldn’t say with absolute certainty what Jiang Fengmian would have done if she hadn’t been around, but, at the very least, the chances of things being *different* seemed high. If she had just…

Well, it was a bit late for regrets now.

However, Wei Wuxian seemed to pay no mind to the implication nor the use of “my.” He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking carefully. Then, grinning, he seemed to come to a conclusion.

“The next generation of the LanlingJin Sect will use the name “Ru,” right? How about Jin Rulan?”

Nie Huaisang snorted. Jin Zixuan coughed out a laugh. No matter what his brother might have said, Lan Wangji *did not* squeak at those words. Jiang Yanli, on the other hand, just smiled warmly.

'*Right,*' she nodded at herself. '*I can't help A-Xian much right now. I can't convince the sects or fight alongside A-Xian. If so… I'm so happy I was able to do this.*'

Jin Rulan. So that was A-Ling's courtesy name. It suited him.

"That's great!" her other-self agreed at once.

Jiang Cheng disapproved, snapping, "No. It sounds like Jin Rulan, Lan being from the Lan Sect. Why would a descendant of the LanlingJin and YunmengJiang Sect have a name like that?"

Though no one said anything out loud, everyone's eyes turned toward Lan Wangji as soon as that question was asked. His ears immediately turned pink.

"It's not like there's anything wrong with the Lan Sect, is there? The Lan flower is the gentleman of flowers; the Lan Sect is made up of the most gentlemanly of people. It's a good name."

"That's not what you said in the past," Jiang Cheng pointed out.

"I'm the one giving the name, not you! Why are you being so picky?"

"That's enough," Jiang Yanli said. "You know how A-Cheng is. He's the one who came up with the idea of having you give the courtesy name."

"I did?" Jiang Cheng asked. A moment later, Jiang Yanli turned to him with sparkling eyes.

"Good job, A-Cheng," she praised. "That was a wonderful idea!"

Jin Zixuan nodded in agreement, Nie Mingjue gave a little acknowledging tilt of his head, and even Madam Yu's shock seemed to bleed into approval for a brief moment. Jiang Cheng grinned.

(Wei Wuxian had been surviving without help for a few months now. However, if it was true that his other-self had suggested this, maybe that was going to change.)

"Both of you stop fooling around, now. I brought soup for you two. Wait a second."

Having said that, Jiang Yanli departed toward the house. Watching her, Wei Wuxian licked his lips, mouth salivating a little as he imagined the taste.

(He hadn't eaten good food in quite some time, after all.)

Jiang Cheng nudged him, silently mocking his reaction. Wei Wuxian shoved him back and, for a moment, it seemed like they were fifteen year olds in the Cloud Recesses again.

In that instant, it really seemed like nothing had changed. If the war with the Wens had never happened — if the Wen remnants had never needed help — this same conversation may have still occurred. Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian would snap back and forth to each other, praising Jiang Yanli with every other breath. It felt natural; normal.

And yet, right now, Jiang Yanli was dressed head to toe in the most splendid outfit she had ever worn. A single jewel sewn into it could probably buy a moderately-sized house. Jiang Cheng, similarly, was dressed with the splendor his position as Sect Leader deserved. The bold, deep-purple fabric and silver headpiece made it clear he was not someone who could be ignored. On the other hand, despite his even greater infamy and reputation, Wei Wuxian's robes were thin and blackened. They weren't low quality — they were the same ones he had worn while in the Jiang Sect — but the issue came from the fact that they were the *exact* same ones. Months had passed, and Wei Wuxian had continued to wear those same robes. After all, they were fairly high quality; if they had the money for new robes, it was better to use it to replace the thin prison robes the Wens wore.

Now, despite the careful, stream-based maintenance and cleaning Wei Wuxian had given them, even the red parts of his robes had become black all the way through. In the condition they were in now, he probably wouldn't even be able to sell them for cash. It was… a rather stark contrast when they all stood side by side.

Jiang Yanli returned from the kitchens soon enough, coming back to find Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng standing next to each other. She handed them each a bowl, then returned to the kitchens once more. She came back with a third bowl, walking just outside the gate to Wen Ning to hand it to him.

"I'm sorry, there are only small bowls left. Here, you can have this," she offered.

Wen Ning, who had been standing guard by the door, jumped a little, asking, "Th-there's some for me?"

Wen Qing's eyes watered momentarily. She closed them for a moment and breathed in, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. No matter the form her brother was in, that really was Wen Ning.

"Thank you," she muttered.

"Of course," Jiang Yanli nodded.

However, Jiang Cheng wasn't pleased:

"Why does he get some too?" the sect leader asked.

Jiang Cheng had been unconscious for most of the time Wen Ning was helping him. Perhaps, as a result, he couldn't let go of his feelings so easily.

'*Well, what room do I have to talk?*' Nie Mingjue wondered. '*As soon as Jiang Wanyin mentioned that he owed Wen Qionglin and Wen Qing I demanded an explanation. Their surname was Wen, so they had to be grouped in with all the others in my mind.*'

In some ways, his hatred had been the turning point of that discussion. If Nie Mingjue was in Jiang Cheng's position now, could he really be sure he wouldn't react in the same way?

Meanwhile, unbothered by her brother's question, Jiang Yanli simply answered, "I brought so much anyways. If he's here, he should get some."

"...Thank you, Maidan Jiang," Wen Ning said, hesitantly. "Thank you."

'*Rather than losing a brother, think of it as gaining one?*' Jiang Yanli repeated in her mind. '*I... would like if that could be the case.*'

'*But…*' Wen Ning continued internally, '*I… can't drink it.*'

"Huh?"

'*I'm a fierce corpse. The dead can neither eat nor drink.*' Wen Ning frowned. '*It's just a waste to give me some.*'

"Oh," Jiang Yanli said, blushing once more. "Ah, my mistake."

Best of intentions, as per usual. However, in regards to whether she actually improved situations…

But, although she didn't understand why, the simulated Jiang Yanli could tell that Wen Ning was feeling awkward. She immediately began talking to him, asking about the people in the Burial Mounds and his opinions on this and that. Little by little, the fierce corpse began to relax.

"Jiang-guniang," Wen Qing said. "...No matter what, nothing could help more than you continuing to treat him like a human. Thank you for this."

"Huh?" Jiang Yanli blinked. "Oh. I… of course, Wen-guniang. I'm… glad I could help."

It was hard to say where the point was that 'good intentions' stopped being good enough. However, for now, they didn't seem to have reached there yet.

Standing a little ways away, Jiang Cheng raised his bowl and toasted, "To the Yiling Patriarch."

"Shut up!" Wei Wuxian shouted back, immediately recalling the signs of 'All Hail the Supreme Lord of Evil, the Patriarch of Yiling.'

Jiang Cheng drank a mouthful of the broth then asked, "How's your wound from last time?"

The real Jiang Cheng's eyes went down at that, the area to Wei Wuxian's side attracting his gaze.

"It healed a long time ago," Wei Wuxian said.

“Mn,” Jiang Cheng continued. “...In how many days?”

Because it didn’t matter that, for a moment, Jiang Cheng’s hatred had been directed toward Wei Wuxian too. He still cared about his shixiong. At this point in time, there was still concern.

‘*So then,*’ Wen Ruohan wondered. ‘*When does that change?*’

“Less than seven,” Wei Wuxian responded. “I told you before. With Wen Qing, it was nothing difficult. But you really did fucking stab me!”

“You smashed my arm first!” Jiang Cheng pointed out, eating a lotus root. “You took seven days, while I had to put my arm in a sling for an entire month!”

Wei Wuxian grinned, explaining, “It wouldn’t be realistic if it wasn’t hard enough! I attacked your left hand anyways so you wouldn’t be hindered from writing. It can take a hundred days to heal a wound to the bone; you should be happy it didn’t take three months!”

Once again, Nie Huaisang lowered his gaze to Wei Wuxian’s side. The Yiling Patriarch had been stabbed in the gut. It was true that, with a powerful core and the supervision of the world’s greatest doctor, a wound like that could be healed in seven days. But…

‘*Can the same be said if that injury is sustained without a core?*’

Nie Huaisang honestly didn’t know. He rarely got injured himself and never going on night hunts meant he had little experience with other people getting injuries. Still, Wei Wuxian’s time estimate seemed worthy of suspicion, if nothing else.

(Lan Wangji, standing a little to the side, noticed how Nie Huaisang’s gaze remained focused there. He glanced over as well, thinking carefully.)

Outside, they could hear Wen Ning answering Jiang Yanli with the same stutters he had before. It seemed, when overwhelmed, his nervousness would defeat the slow rate at which a fierce corpse would talk. Both Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were quiet for a bit, listening absently. Then:

“You’re really staying like this from now on?” Jiang Cheng asked. “Do you have any plans?”

Wei Wuxian shook his head, explaining, “Not at the moment. None of the Wen Remnants dare go down the mountain right now. People don’t dare to do anything to me when I go down the mountain, though. It’ll be fine so long as I don’t stir up trouble on my own.”

“On your own?” Jiang Cheng sneered. “Wei Wuxian, do you believe that even if you don’t stir up trouble on your own, trouble won’t come and find you? It’s often impossible to save someone, but there are more than thousands of ways to harm someone.”

Wei Wuxian continued to eat, responding, "A man with strength can kill ten with skill. I don't care if they have thousands of ways. I'll kill anyone who comes."

Jiang Cheng scoffed, muttering, "You never listen to any of my opinions. One day, you'll understand who's right."

With every word spoken, Madam Yu tensed, feeling that specific phrasing generate memories she would rather ignore.

After the Xuanwu of Slaughter, when Wei Wuxian had opposed the Wens to save Jin Zixuan, Lan Wangji, and MianMian, Madam Yu had scoffed and growled, 'To uphold justice at all costs is exactly how he is, isn't it? Fooling around even though he knew it would bring trouble to the sect!'

'To uphold justice,' she had said. Like most of the sect leaders after Wei Wuxian took in the Wens, she had known he was in the right. Despite that, she had described it as 'fooling around.'

Then:

'Why? Why? Why?!' Jiang Cheng had cried, choking Wei Wuxian with all his might. 'Why did you save Lan Wangji? Why did you have to speak up?! How many times have I told you not to stir up trouble?! Not to strike?! Do you want to play the hero that badly? Well, have you seen the result of you playing hero? Are you happy now?!'

Everyone, everywhere, always and without fail seemed to be telling Wei Wuxian that it was wrong to do what was right.

'It'll be fine so long as I don't stir up trouble on my own,' Wei Wuxian said.

What, exactly, did Wei Wuxian mean by 'stir up trouble?' How did he interpret that assertion he'd made? What had Madam Yu taught him about those words over time?

'Let the self judge right and wrong; allow others to direct praise or blame; let gains and losses remain uncommented on. I don't care what others say. I know what I should do. I believe I'll be able to control it.'

How could it be a surprise that Wei Wuxian never listened to Jiang Cheng's opinions? Over the years, Madam Yu had taught him to only trust himself.

Wei Wuxian finished the soup in one gulp and stood up.

"Wow, I'm impressed. Round of applause for the Yiling Patriarch," Jiang Cheng said. The words were of the same teasing nature as before, but his tone had gone hard and cold.

"Are you done yet?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Jiang Cheng stood, adding, "We won't see you off. It wouldn't be good if someone saw us together."

Because Wei Wuxian was now an enemy of the sects.

Because *Jiang Cheng* had told the world as much.

Wei Wuxian nodded once.

More generally than the enemy issue, no one would believe that Wei Wuxian had defected from the sect if people saw them together. It was indeed wise to not let such rumors spread.

"We'll go first," he said.

Jiang Cheng nodded, watching him leave.

"...That's all?" Jiang Yanli asked, her voice shaking a little. Sure, she knew how difficult it was for her and Jiang Cheng to see him, but, still, she had thought this would last a little longer. Jiang Cheng scowled.

Now, at long last, the future Jiang Cheng had done something the real one *didn't hate.* Wei Wuxian getting to see Jiang Yanli and getting to pick Jin Ling's courtesy name was something the real Jiang Cheng wholeheartedly supported. It was just…

Was this… it?

'He's really leaving? You're just going to let Wei Wuxian leave?' Jiang Cheng wondered. '*You haven't been in contact in months. They're growing radishes on the Burial Mounds! You got him a couple bowls of soup — one of which was for someone who* can't eat *— and now you're just going to let him go?*'

The future Lan Wangji had gotten a meal for Wei Wuxian and A-Yuan and, on top of that, had gotten A-Yuan a few toys. He had gone back to the Burial Mounds, greeted the Wens, and helped save them from the Ghost General's rampage. That wasn't very much — the real Lan Wangji clearly wished his other self had done more — but that was still leagues beyond what Jiang Cheng had apparently done.

~~Was it any surprise that, after being brought back to life, Wei Wuxian would always choose Lan Wangji over him?~~

'*Why can't you give more?*' Jiang Cheng wondered. '*Food, supplies, medicine, information? Is one bowl of soup really all you can do?*'

However, even while asking that, Jiang Cheng knew it was a futile request. The future Jiang Cheng cared about Wei Wuxian. He worried about Wei Wuxian. It was to the point that, when he saw the Wens searching for remnants of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect after the fall of Lotus Pier, he had run out as a distraction to keep them from finding Wei Wuxian.

He had been caught.

And then…

'Wei Wuxian, do you know why Wen Zhuliu is called the Core Melting Hand?'

He had already lost his family and his sect. With his core gone, Jiang Cheng felt like he had lost everything.

'An average person who descended from the cultivation world is no better than a good-for-nothing.'

Helping Wei Wuxian had hurt him. Wei Wuxian helping others had hurt the Jiang Sect. Jiang Cheng had cared about Wei Wuxian — *still* cared about Wei Wuxian — but, in the end, wasn't willing to do more than this. His sect, his family… those were his priorities. Wei Wuxian fell by the wayside toward that end.

They parted ways. Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning left first, heading down an alleyway by themselves. After a bit of walking, Wei Wuxian looked back toward Wen Ning again.

"Why are you still holding that soup?"

Wen Ning jumped a little, then, reluctantly, responded, "To… take it back. I can't drink it, but I can give it to someone else."

"...That's your choice," Wei Wuxian supposed. "Be careful not to spill it."

He looked forward again.

'*It'll probably… be a long time before I can see people I'm familiar with again,*' he thought. '*But then again… aren't I on the way to see people I'm familiar with as well?*'

Someone sucked in a breath of air. For a moment, Jiang Yanli became unnaturally still.

Wei Wuxian looked up, his back becoming a little straighter as he continued the journey home.

Such a happy moment really shouldn't hurt so much to see.

The world turned dark.

Then, the scene changed. The dirty, damaged streets of Yiling were no more. Now, priceless treasures, books, and scrolls lined walls that stretched as far as the eye could see. The hall was well-lit, weapons and jewels sparkling in golden light as the sun shone down from above.

"Inside the largest Treasure Pavillion in Lanling," Jin Ling announced, sounding almost bored.

A stark, stark contrast to the streets of before.

It wasn't like the people gathered here were unaware of the world's inequality. It was obvious, even among cultivators. Sects that did well would, of course, have more wealth and power than ones that did poorly. They were clearly better at protecting the populace, so

giving them more resources was both logical and inevitable, given that the common folk also wanted to be protected by the best. Luck was also a factor; some places were just less fortunate than others.

But who in their right mind would describe people in the *Burial Mounds* as simply "less fortunate?"

(And who would be able to deny the very direct ways the sects had taken the wealth of the Wens before sending the people into labor camps to slave away?)

Inside the hall, many cultivators were gathered, all clamoring about and observing the treasures on display. They seemed to view it as a hall of wonders, eyeing the goods with equal parts awe and envy. As they all walked through, some began to talk:

"Chief Cultivator?" one asked. "It seems like the big sects have been arguing about whether they'll continue that position for a while. Have they come to a conclusion yet?"

"What is there to argue about? We can't be a heap of loose sand, a group without a leader, forever, right? To set a cultivator to watch over all the sects, I don't see anything wrong with that."

"It's not that good, is it? Just look at what happened with the Qishan Wen Sect."

With the previous Chief Cultivator being who he was, it was inevitable that questions about continuing the tradition would arise. It had, most recently, been Wen Ruohan. Next, it was probably Jin Guangshan. In the future, Jin Guangyao ended up with the position.

Not the most encouraging track record.

"It'll be different now. We're deciding it through an election this time. It's different; it's different."

"Hah. They say it's an election, but everyone knows the truth in their hearts. No matter what, the only options are in that same, small group of people, right? Is there any room for anyone else?"

"Chifeng-zun is also quite against it, isn't he? He's tried to stop Jin Guangshan so, so many times."

Neither Nie Mingjue nor Jin Guangshan looked at the other, but their awareness focused on the other's presence all the same. With their respective positions, it was somewhat inevitable for disagreements to pop up every now and again. However:

'Although the LanlingJin Sect was determined to protect Xue Yang, Xiao Xingchen didn't waver either. As the stalemate continued, they finally startled Nie Mingjue, Chifeng-zun. Having not intended to participate in the Discussion Conference, he was forced to hurry over from far away. Despite Nie Mingjue being a junior to Jin Guangshan, he conducted himself in a strict manner and refused to tolerate Xue Yang no matter what. After an angry lecture, Jin Guangshan was left with no words and a great deal of embarrassment.'

Because, for all that everyone felt free to ignore Wei Wuxian, no one could push Sect Leader Nie's words aside.

'Nie Mingjue, being the irritable person he was, unsheathed his saber on the spot intending to kill Xue Yang. Even when Lianfeng-zun, his sworn brother Jin Guangyao, attempted to ease the situation, he just ordered him to leave. After a harsh scolding, Jin Guangyao just hid behind Lan Xichen, not daring to say anything else.

'LanlingJin was indeed the sect with the thickest face. Although, in Koi Tower, it promised all the sects that Xue Yang would be executed, when it left Nie Mingjue's sight it immediately changed execution to life imprisonment. Hearing about Lanling's decision, Nie Mingjue was enraged and pressured them again.

'...But, shortly afterward, Nie Mingjue passed away from a qi deviation.'

And that was that.

(Sure, Jin Guangyao had been personally motivated by what Nie Mingjue had said to him. However, it was hard to say the Xue Yang issue played no part. That was one of the things that had made Nie Mingjue so mad at Jin Guangyao, after all. It was also a way LanlingJin would benefit from his death.)

Both Nie Mingjue and Jin Guangshan continued to watch each other out of the corners of their eyes, wondering how long the amicability between their sects would last once they returned to the real world.

Meanwhile, the two cultivators had continued to speak:

"Anyways, they'll probably continue mulling over it for a long time."

"Whatever. It's the worries of those who sit at the top. None of our business. Shrimps like us have no control over this regardless of how much we want to."

It was a rather strange conversation to listen to. Not in general, but rather for the specific group of people who had been gathered here — all of whom were selected for the influence they held in the cultivation world. They had the power to make exactly the changes being discussed right now. So: what should they do?

'*There's no harm in doing this same thing, right?*' Jin Guangshan thought. '*Chief Cultivators are useful to have around. Makes the meetings much more organized. If Wen Ruohan steps down from his position, there's no reason to not continue it. If I was Chief Cultivator…*'

Though, to make that happen, Jin Guangshan would have to convince the other sect leaders first. After a brief pause, he sighed.

Within the simulation, having demoralized themselves at the reminder of their own insignificance, the gathered cultivators then changed the subject, one asking, "Did any of you attend the completion ceremony of the Cloud Recesses' Library Pavillion? Well, I

went. I stood there and looked; it was identical to how it was before. A difficult undertaking, indeed."

Lan Xichen, Lan Qiren, and Lan Wangji had to resist the urge to object. Certainly, to people who had only ever briefly seen the Library Pavillion, the end result would be a close enough match. However, to people who had grown up in the Cloud Recesses their whole lives…

They could still remember how confused they had been when the simulation had first shown the future one. Everything had been shifted just a little, clearly trying to resemble how it used to be, but being minutely different nonetheless. The Wens, as they later learned, had burned their version down.

They glanced back, their eyes landing on Wen Ruohan once more.

Meanwhile, the other cultivators had pounced on the conversation change, agreeing, "Yeah, very difficult. It was such a huge cultivational residence, an ethereal realm that was a hundred years old — how could it be rebuilt in such a short amount of time?"

"Speaking of which, there have been a lot of joyous occasions these days, haven't there?"

Like Jiang Yanli's wedding, which Wei Wuxian hadn't even known about — much less been invited to — until a few days before?

'*I'm glad… I got to show A-Xian my dress,*' Jiang Yanli thought. '*I just wish…*'

Wei Wuxian had been one of the main reasons their side won the war. If anyone should get to participate in these 'joyous occasions,' it should be him.

An idea only made more prominent when another cultivator asked, "Ah, you mean like the one-month celebration for Jin Zixuan's son?"

"A-Ling?" Jiang Yanli asked, her eyes going wide.

"You know, that kid… there was a whole pile of colorful things, but he didn't like any of them. Cried so hard that the roof of the Glamor Hall was almost screamed off!"

The two parents blushed, not sure how to respond to the gossip being spread around.

"But then, as soon as he saw his dad's Suihua, he started giggling instead. His parents were so happy. They all agreed he's going to be a wonderful swordsman when he grows up."

The pair's embarrassment quickly turned into pride, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan turning toward each other with sparkling eyes.

At that moment, someone in white robes passed by. Their features were hidden in the shadows, but the jade pendant in their hand shined in the sunlight. Hearing the conversation between the cultivators, he smiled. Then:

“Ah, Madam Jin is so lucky,” a female cultivator said. “She must have given up on immortality in her last life to have such good fortune in this one.”

“Yeah, looks like it’s true that it doesn’t matter how talented you are. You’ll be fine so long as you have a good background. She’s clearly average at best.”

It took Jiang Yanli a long moment to realize that ‘Madam Jin’ now referred to her. However, even then, her smile didn’t falter. She had heard things like this many times before ~~and couldn’t disagree.~~

To her sides, her brother, mother, and fiance all growled.

And the person in white frowned as well.

By contrast, Nie Mingjue furrowed his brows thoughtfully.

Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan, despite their initial arranged marriage, had eventually gotten married for love. Leaving that aside, Jiang Yanli had many admirable traits that were not cultivation. The womans’ words were not fair.

But, as Nie Mingjue couldn’t help but recall, the statement ‘you’ll be fine so long as you have a good background’ wasn’t entirely false.

Then, another ways away:

“The Lanling Jin Sect really does deserve its reputation! Even a baby that’s only been born a little while ago gets such a grand display!”

“Of course. Don’t you know who that baby’s parents are? It’s not that the young Madam Jin refuses to let it be simple. Her mother in law and her younger brother… if it was a humble celebration, would either of those two accept that?”

Jiang Cheng shook his head fiercely.

“Speaking of which, have you heard? In regards to the child’s one-month celebration… a certain someone has been invited?”

“Hm?” Nie Huaisang tilted his head.

“Who?” the cultivator asked.

“Wei Wuxian!”

“Eh?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

“A-Xian?!”

There was a momentary silence within the Treasure Pavillion.

“Really?” someone said at last. “I… thought that was only a rumor. Was he really invited?!”

Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng leaned forward in their seats, wondering the same.

“He was! It’s been confirmed in the past few days. Wei Wuxian is invited!”

Something that, most certainly, couldn’t have been easy. Jiang Yanli hadn’t managed to invite him to her wedding, but she had managed this. Overwhelmed, Jiang Yanli gasped a little, bringing her hands to her mouth and choking back a sob that wanted to come out.

She had done it. Wei Wuxian hadn’t been forgotten at all. Sure, the wedding dress had indicated that a little but it had been… lacking, in some ways. Not as much help as Jiang Yanli would have liked to give.

But, if everyone in the Great Sects saw Wei Wuxian now — if they could all recall who, exactly, he was — then maybe things could be fixed! To have something like this be official, someone else’s approval would have been needed.

Jiang Yanli looked over to her fiance, her eyes sparkling with joy.

“Thank you, A-Xuan,” she said.

“I… uh, yeah! Of course! He’s your brother; it only makes sense for him to be able to come.”

Despite that confident assertion, the people within the simulation reacted with significantly less joy:

“Just what is the LanlingJin Sect thinking?” one asked. “Have they forgotten about the number of innocent people Wei Wuxian murdered on Qiongqi path?”

“All zero of them, you mean?” Wen Qing snapped.

“Who would dare go to Jin Ling’s celebration knowing that someone like him has been invited? Anyways, I definitely won’t go no matter what!”

The person in white hesitated a little longer. Then, at last, he walked away, slipping into an alley. A black cloaked figure appeared.

“Are you done with your purchase, Young Master?” the fierce corpse asked.

The now-revealed Wei Wuxian threw the box in his hands over in response.

Lan Wangji frowned minutely, the motion so slight that even Lan Xichen couldn’t see.

‘*Wei Ying hears those things about himself all the time, doesn’t he?*’ the second jade thought. ‘*He can’t argue against it or protest. He can’t say anything in response. No one would believe him if he did.*’

Truly, Lan Wangji hated politics.

However, both Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning had long-since accepted this fact. They were focused on the box, instead. Wen Ning opened it, the delicate sandalwood giving way to display a piece of jade attached to a tassel. Light flowed through the translucent pendant, almost coming alive inside the stone.

"It's so pretty," Wen Ning said.

"This pretty little thing wasn't cheap at all. Your sister's money almost wasn't enough after we went and bought this new outfit," Wei Wuxian declared. "I don't have a single coin left. I'm in for the scolding of a lifetime when we get back."

Jin Zixuan shifted, the golden headpiece he wore feeling strangely heavy, now.

"No, no. Young Master is buying a gift for Jiang-guniang's child. Jiejie won't scold you!" Wen Ning insisted.

"Mark your words. When Wen Qing does scold me, remember to help me out a bit."

A small smile formed on Wen Qing's face. She wanted to roll her eyes at Wei Wuxian's ridiculous words, but, at that moment, couldn't quite bring herself to do it.

Meanwhile, unable to resist, Jiang Yanli walked closer, observing the pendant directly.

"That pendant…" she began. "It's for A-Ling?"

"Good." Jiang Cheng nodded in approval. "If he showed up to the one-month celebration without anything to offer, I would've kicked him right out!"

"Interesting choice in present," Nie Mingjue commented. Despite his even tone, he was sitting rather stiff, tapping his finger against the armrest of his chair. A mix of tentative hope and nervous anticipation filled him.

(This was good. Wei Wuxian was going to see all of them. He had been invited, brought a present, and was there with good intentions. If he wanted any hope of turning his reputation around, something like this would be a good start.)

(Of course, if this had succeeded, the far-future would have never come to be. As Wei Wuxian walked down the road to the LanlingJin Sect, several watchers couldn't help but recall how things had turned out for him the last time he was there.)

(Hopefully *this* visit wouldn't end with Suihua sticking through his gut.)

Uncaring of the worries of humans, several birds flew by overhead. Wei Wuxian glanced up at them, observing their pure white feathers with a soft look of nostalgia. In the Burial Mounds, the only other living creatures were the pitch-black crows.

Although Wen Ning's body couldn't smile quite like it used to, happiness did seem apparent in his expression as he declared, "Young Master Jin Ling will definitely like

this a lot."

"Huh? No, no, this, in itself, isn't the present. It's only a small accessory. Just look at those gifts in the Treasure Pavillion — do they have anything but how they look?"

"Then, Young Master, what will your gift be?"

A somber look crossed Wei Wuxian's face and he declared, "The will of the Heavens shall not be grasped by mere mortals."

"Oh," Wen Ning said, his questions coming to a stop.

A few seconds passed without conversation between them. Finally:

"Wen Ning, shouldn't you keep on asking? How could you stop after just an 'Oh?' Don't you want to know what the present is?!" Wei Wuxian protested.

There was a near-collective wave of facepalms and eyerolls at those words. Wen Qing huffed a short laugh, but felt her smile only widen.

And, at last, Wen Ning registered what Wei Wuxian was actually trying to say: "I do! I do, Young Master. What gift did you prepare?"

Wei Wuxian took out a small wooden box from his sleeve, handing it over. Wen Ning took off the lid.

A shining, silver bell laid in the center.

Wen Ning's hands trembled a little.

The design of the bell was certainly intricate. It was clear that an expert craftsman had spent a long time working on it, the nine-petaled lotus inside both delicate and grand. However, more than that…

"It feels tingly," Nie Huaisang observed, leaning in close.

Not how most of the watchers would have described the experience, but not inaccurate.

"There's… quite a lot of power resting in there," Jin Guangshan muttered. Wen Ruohan walked around Wei Wuxian, leaning in to observe the bell more closely.

It seemed to give off an immense power.

"Young Master, is this what you've been working on for the past month or so?" Wen Ning asked. "When you'd shut yourself into the cave for days on end?"

"That's right," Wei Wuxian confirmed. "As long as that nephew of mine carries this bell around, not a single low-level creature will be able to even think about getting close to him! Don't touch it. It'll probably leave you affected for some time if you do."

Wen Ning nodded, commenting, "I can feel it."

Even the Ghost General, the strongest fierce corpse in existence, could be affected. If true, this single bell could be considered a treasure more valuable than a thousand priceless jewels.

"...Wow," Jin Zixuan muttered. "That's…"

He didn't even have the words.

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli gasped.

However-

"Wow, I wonder if the future's Jin Ling was ever told about this," Nie Huaisang commented. Many of the watchers winced.

Jin Ling stabbed Suihua through Wei Wuxian's gut. The look of complete surprise the dreaded Yiling Patriarch had in that moment was impossible to forget.

"...No," Lan Wangji said at last. "That seems unlikely."

No one in the future would ever consider saying something positive about Wei Wuxian. It would be no surprise, then, if Jin Ling didn't know where this present of his came from. Even if he asked, who would tell?

Wei Wuxian then took the tassel, slipping it through the hook on the top of the silver bell. Assembled together, it was quite a pleasant sight. A wonderful present, even without considering the power it held.

Jiang Yanli smiled once more.

'*A-Xian and Wen Ning-gongzi get along quite well,*' she thought. '*I'm glad. I should make something for both of them, sometime. It seems likely that Wen-gongzi will be coming around often, with how the real versions are getting along outside.*'

Wen Ning then continued, "But… since you'll be attending Jin Ling-gongzi's one-month celebration… Young Master, you have to hold yourself back when you see Maiden Jiang's husband. Don't clash with him-"

"Relax, relax," Wei Wuxian said. "I know what I should and shouldn't do. Since Jin Zixuan invited me, I won't badmouth him for a whole year!"

A sentiment which, to all the watchers there, felt genuine. Despite the numerous conflicts they'd had before, Wei Wuxian was willing to put all that aside for today. Jin Zixuan, similarly, seemed to be extending an olive branch by allowing Wei Wuxian to come. A mutual extension of good will was in place.

'*This is… going too well, isn't it?*' Wen Ruohan thought.

Shifting awkwardly, Wen Ning scratched his head and admitted, "When Young Master Jin's people presented you with an invitation at the bottom of the Burial Mounds, I thought it had to be a trap. I'd misunderstood. I wasn't being fair to him. I couldn't tell before but, in reality, Young Master Jin is a nice person."

The two of them continued walking, turning onto Qiongqi path.

Jin Zixuan was lightly flushed, a bit overwhelmed by the compliments (and caught off guard by the revelation that the invitation had been given by *him*). Jiang Yanli smiled at his reaction and, to the side, Madam Yu gave an unusually fond huff.

'*It's about time Wei Wuxian came around to that,*' she thought. '*Really, I thought that boy would never learn to tolerate A-Xuan. Wen Ning seems to be helping him adjust to that, too.*'

Wei Wuxian hadn't been able to come to Jiang Yanli's wedding, but at least he was here for this.

Wen Ning and Wei Wuxian walked and walked and walked. The sun was high in the sky; there were birds fluttering this way and that; the air was crisp and clear. And yet, despite the animals moving about in the nearby forest…

'*It's… strangely quiet,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Where are all the people?*'

At those words, both Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen felt their nerves freeze up. Sect Leader Nie began bouncing his leg up and down while Lan Xichen's fingers entwined and re-entwined like mad.

Wei Wuxian came to a stop.

"Has something happened near here?" he wondered. Wen Ning straightened up, his eyes going completely white. The resentful energy within him shifted, becoming far more aggressive than before.

"It's so quiet," the Ghost General observed.

"It really is a bit too quiet," Wei Wuxian agreed.

Nie Huaisang gulped.

'*I can't even hear the cries of resentful spirits anymore,*' Wei Wuxian observed.

Something he should be able to hear all the time.

Although she tried to keep a hopeful smile on her lips, Jiang Yanli quickly began to pale.

"Let's go!" Wei Wuxian said, turning around.

THUNK

The sound came from directly behind him. Wen Ning had snapped his hand out just in time to catch an arrow that had been poised to reach Wei Wuxian's chest.

All the blood left Jiang Yanli's face.

"...Huh?" someone asked.

Dozens of people emerged from behind boulders and crannies in the valley. No, upon second thought, 'dozens' didn't cover it. The number of people gathered was well over three hundred. Most wore robes of Sparks Amidst Snow, but the robes of other sects were here as well.

There were other sects in support of this, but the Jin were clearly the main force.

'When Young Master Jin's people presented you with an invitation at the bottom of the Burial Mounds, I thought it had to be a trap,' Wen Ning had explained.

"Wait," Jin Zixuan muttered, slowly standing up. "Wait-"

All the people gathered were fully armed, wielding swords and bows and carrying arrows strapped to their backs. They were clad in armor and full of vigilance. Some bloodlust leaked out toward Wei Wuxian.

The watchers all stood tense, feeling the threats surrounding them on all sides. Nie Mingjue unconsciously reached for his saber; Wen Ruohan raised his hand as if preparing to take them out.

Standing at the center of the armed forces, there was the person who had fired the first shot: Jin Zixuan's own cousin.

'I thought it had to be a trap,' Wen Ning had said.

"It… wasn't though. Right?"

"Huh?" Jiang Cheng asked, glancing back. Jin Zixuan's eyes didn't turn toward him though. They were wide and haunted, staring directly at the space between Wei Wuxian and Jin Zixun.

"Wei Wuxian kills me, doesn't he?" Jin Zixuan muttered.

Frowning at the reminder, Lan Xichen slowly admitted, "Allegedly, yes."

Jin Zixuan continued to stare.

Jin Zixun, meanwhile, walked forward, smirking down at Wei Wuxian in an expression that looked nearly identical to one they'd seen on Wen Chao.

(In fact, that very same smile had been on his face when Wei Wuxian was thrown into the Burial Mounds. As Jin Zixuan looked up at his cousin now, he couldn't help but let a shiver run down his spine.)

Wei Wuxian had been invited to Jin Ling's one month celebration.

Before he even got there, an alliance of sects *three hundred strong* had surrounded them.

Jin Zixuan was the one that invited him.

'*But… I wouldn't,*' he thought. '*I wouldn't, I wouldn't, I wouldn't. Not to A-Li's shidi. I… I invited him! To attack someone you've invited is the height of dishonor. And Wei Wuxian was just… he was coming in peace. I wouldn't!*'

But the weapons remained pointed Wei Wuxian's way just the same.

Finally:

"Who are you?" Wei Wuxian asked, looking directly at Jin Zixun as he did. This question made the young master of the Jins immediately lose the smirk he'd had. He instantly forgot about whatever he'd been about to say and began to fume.

"You dare ask who I am?" he demanded. "I'm Jin Zixun!"

Jin Guangshan was suddenly growing increasingly concerned about how the Jin Sect was doing without him.

Wei Wuxian looked over the crowd once more, frowning a bit as he recalled, '*Jin Zixun? He's Jin Zixuan's cousin, isn't he?*'

Jin Zixuan flinched.

'*What is he doing here?*'

Wei Wuxian's frown deepened. The resentful energy within him seemed to tremble, only held down by Wei Wuxian's sheer force of will.

For a moment, the watchers said nothing.

Because they didn't know *for sure* that Jin Zixuan's invitation was actually an attempt to kill Wei Wuxian — which, if Wen Ning hadn't blocked that arrow, was exactly what would have occurred — and Wei Wuxian didn't want to draw any hasty conclusions, even if he and Jin Zixuan had never gotten along.

And sure, the Jin sect was the group that would gain the most from his death considering what Jin Zixun's subordinates had been caught doing to the Wens, but Jin Zixuan might not even know about all that! He could be completely uninvolved! And yeah, Jin Zixuan's brother might end up killing Nie Mingjue, chopping his body parts up, killing his own wife, killing his own son, and trying to kill Wei Wuxian once his actions were discovered, but that didn't mean Jin Zixuan would do anything even remotely similar!

It was *possible* Jin Zixuan hadn't planned Wei Wuxian's death.

It was equally possible that Jin Zixuan was as deserving of what would happen to him as Wen Chao had been.

And now, as a gust of wind brushed by, the tension both within and outside the simulation was palpable. The smile that had been on Wei Wuxian's face the whole journey over was gone. He looked over the gathered crowd with narrowed eyes, holding Chenqing in a vice-like grip.

Losing patience, Jin Zixun stepped forward and shouted, "Wei Wuxian, I'm warning you, lift the evil curse you put on me right now! I'm willing to overlook this matter if you do!"

Wei Wuxian blinked at that, furrowing his brows and asking, "What curse?"

"You're still pretending like you don't know anything? Fine!" He pulled open his robes. "I'll let you see what an evil curse this is!"

All along Jin Zixun's body, there were small holes that appeared to be carved into the skin. Some were as small as sesame seeds; others, as large as soybeans. They would only grow as time went on.

"A-Xun?" Madam Jin gasped and, simultaneously, Jin Zixuan paled. He was furious with his cousin, but the Hundred Holes curse was not something to take lightly. He didn't want Jin Zixun *dead*.

The Hundred Holes curse would become worse and worse over time, eventually reaching and rotting through the internal organs.

"Hundred Holes?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"That's right!"

Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes.

'*I read up a bit on the curse back in the Cloud Recesses, when I was supposed to be writing out lines,*' he recalled. '*It's painful and difficult to remove.*'

That said-

"I see that you were cursed with the Hundred Holes, but why come block my path?" he asked. "What's it got to do with me?"

Jin Zixun scoffed, pulling his robes tight again as he pointed out, "Other than a criminal using wicked means like you, who could have put such a detestable thing on me?!"

"Who else? *Anyone* could have! That curse is public knowledge!" Nie Mingjue snapped. "Is that really all the evidence he has?!"

"It better not be," Madam Jin hissed, her eyes narrowing into slits.

Sure, there might be more to why Wei Wuxian was suspected. For one, Jin Zixun had been in charge of the Wen camp, treating people Wei Wuxian had come to care for as little better than livestock. He might not have been as directly involved in Wen Ning's death as the camp supervisors, but he was still the one who had allowed all that. Everyone had heard Wei Wuxian speak about how much he owed Wen Ning.

Wei Wuxian might, hypothetically, have a motive.

But, in all likelihood…

Lan Wangji breathed out slowly, his gaze colder than the mountains of the far north. Everyone in this world seemed to delight in accusing Wei Wuxian of every horrible thing they could fathom. It didn't matter how likely or even possible it was; if Wei Wuxian was someone they could blame, they would be happy to blame away.

And, on a separate note:

'*There are plenty of people who would want to do that to him,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Does he… actually think lots of people like him? Saying that would probably make the situation worse, though.*'

So instead:

"Jin Zixun, I don't handle situations in underhanded ways like that," Wei Wuxian declared. "If I want to kill someone, I'll let everyone know that person died by my hands. If I really wanted you to die, it would be a thousand times worse than what you're going through right now."

One had to look no further than what happened to Wen Chao to confirm those words as true. The cruelty he was capable of — as well as the sense of justice he had — both contributed to that. Wei Wuxian would only kill someone if their actions had been unjust. If so, like with the camp supervisors, he wouldn't try to hide it. He would want people to know what had happened and why, in the hopes that others would understand that they couldn't act the same.

However, lacking the knowledge they had, Jin Zixun's reaction was rather different:

"You've always been quite arrogant, huh?" he muttered. "To think you're bold enough to not admit to what you did!"

"I'm not the one who cursed you; why would I admit to that?"

Killing intent flashed in Jin Zixun's gaze as he hissed, "Courtesy before force. If you don't take this chance to repent, I won't let you off easily!"

"Oh, really?" Wei Wuxian grinned.

Wen Ruohan could barely resist letting out a scoff. Jin Guangshan's nephew and Wen Ruohan's second son were similar in the most annoying ways. Accusations like this could be solved simply. The Hundred Hole's Curse left traces on the caster as well, as they saw on the

dark-robed figure who had been trying to stop them from finding Nie Mingjue's body parts. If Wei Wuxian simply showed his chest, there would be no denying his innocence.

(Under normal circumstances, at least. Considering this was the Yiling Patriarch, Jin Zixun would surely just say Wei Wuxian had somehow found a way to not receive those traces. He would have no proof and no justification for that claim, but everyone would believe it nonetheless. It was ridiculous. Jin Zixun wasn't trying to frame Wei Wuxian. He needed to figure out who had actually cursed him to cure himself. It was in his best interests to be rational about this.)

(Despite that, Wen Ruohan had no doubt things wouldn't be solved so easily.)

'*There are two ways to break the curse,*' Wei Wuxian recalled. '*The first is to convince the one who cast it to undo the curse, rescinding their cultivation. The second is, of course, to kill the one who placed the curse.*'

Jiang Yanli let out a short, shallow gasp. She took in a slow breath, trying to calm herself down. As bad as the situation looked, this wasn't what would kill Wei Wuxian. Besides, Jin Zixun was wrong. If they could convince him of that, it would all be fine. Her shidi was here to attend her son's one-month celebration. Yes, they knew things were bound to turn wrong eventually, but couldn't they at least have this first? Thanks to what Jin Zixuan had done, the other Jiang Yanli would finally have a chance to convince the sect leaders of her shidi's innocence. If Jin Zixun had just waited for *one more day* then-

Well…

~~Perhaps, if he had just waited one more day, Wei Wuxian wouldn't have died at all.~~

And, as if in proof of that, hundreds of weapons were still pointed toward the Yiling Patriarch, murderous intent flashing in the eyes of everyone involved.

"...You won't let me off easily?" Wei Wuxian repeated, then laughed. "You? With just a few hundred people?"

Jin Zixun waved his arm and the surrounding cultivators nocked their arrows, aiming toward the center with steely eyes. They were certain they wouldn't miss.

"Zixun," Jin Zixuan said. "Zixun, make them stop."

It was an order.

However, inevitably, such a command would go unheard.

Spiritual energy began to pick up.

"Seriously! *Stop!*" Jin Zixuan commanded. "Just talk about this for a moment! You don't even have any proof!"

"Are they insane?" Nie Mingjue growled.

Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren glared fiercely, their hands clenched tight.

Jin Zixun unsheathed his blade.

"Zixun, I'm serious!" Jin Zixuan shouted. "Don't you dare attack him! My other self won't let you get away with this!"

And he wouldn't. If the simulated Jin Zixuan knew about this, he would make sure his cousin was punished appropriately.

(So long as he hadn't invited Wei Wuxian with the express purpose of entrapping him.)

(But that *couldn't* be true.)

Jin Zixuan clenched his hands together tightly enough to draw blood.

"*Zixun!*"

♪

The single note was sharp and piercing, echoing throughout the entirety of the valley. It wasn't an unpleasant sound (Chenqing being much more finely crafted than the makeshift bamboo), but, to anyone who could sense resentful energy, it was near painful in its intensity.

However, right now, that appeared to be only them.

Wei Wuxian paused, looking around. Upon seeing that, Jin Zixun laughed.

"You think we don't know what you can do? We cleared out the entire valley before you arrived! You won't get any help no matter how much you play. This is a burial ground we've prepared just for you!"

"Dishonorable coward!" Nie Mingjue shouted. It would be one thing if they were truly enemies in a war, but they had *invited Wei Wuxian* to get him here. Now-

"You're seeking your own death," Wei Wuxian laughed.

Wen Ning reached up and, in a single, smooth motion, snapped off the red string that had been hanging around his neck. As soon as the talisman attached to that cord left his skin, his entire body seemed to transform. The muscles on his face began to twist, his veins becoming blackened as cracks covered his skin. With that, he let out an inhuman roar.

"Release!" Jin Zixun commanded.

The arrows flew.

"*Zixun!*" Jin Zixuan screamed.

A cloud of darkness spread out at once, knocking the arrows back. The corpses in the area may have been removed, but there was still plenty of resentful energy in Wei Wuxian's body he could make use of.

The so-called righteous cultivators mounted their swords and flew down toward him. Not wasting a second, Wei Wuxian brought Chenqing to his mouth and began to play.

♪♫♫♪♪♪♫

The notes were fast-paced and frantic, containing an urgency that Wei Wuxian's playing had never seemed to have before.

The watchers reacted at once, feeling tension fill their bodies with every note that played. Quite a few of them felt the call to help so strongly that they stood up, knocking down their chairs in the process.

(And they *wanted* to help. They would give anything to actually be there — to actually be able to help. However, even as they were called upon to protect Wei Wuxian, there was nothing they could do.)

Similarly, no matter how many notes played, Wen Ning was the only being in the simulation that could react to them.

(Luckily, if you were going to be stuck with just one, Wen Ning was a pretty damn good option.)

His irises were gone now, the veins on his neck bulging with power and the muscles in his body ready to react. He stepped forward, cracking stone under his heel, then launched himself into the sky. In the next second, the cultivators who had been trying to fly down to them were knocked off their swords and thrown into a nearby plateau. In less than a second, three had been taken down.

Three. Of *three hundred.*

Unable to stop himself, Lan Wangji ran over to Wei Wuxian. He stood by the Patriarch's side, watching an ever-continuing storm of arrows rain down upon Wei Wuxian.

He didn't necessarily think that Jin Zixuan had invited Wei Wuxian with this in mind. However, if that happened to be true…

The second jade's gaze hardened into an uncompromising steel.

Wen Ning continued on, tearing the Jins and other cultivators to shreds. He worked with ruthless efficiency, making blood fly into the air. Below, Wei Wuxian stepped to the side. One swordsman had snuck past Wen Ning, reaching close enough to attempt to take Wei Wuxian's head. The Yiling Patriarch dodged and remained on defense, using Wen Ning (who was now throwing carriage-sized boulders at the attackers) to take people down. The Ghost General was quite effective. However, hundreds of ambushers still surrounded them on all sides. They were beginning to close in.

'*It's fine,*' Jiang Yanli told herself. '*It's fine. A-Xian is strong. He'll be fine.*'

She wrung her hands together, somewhat wishing, now, that Wei Wuxian had just stayed in the Burial Mounds with the Wens. At least then he wouldn't be walking into a carefully planned trap!

She had reached her hands out toward him, hoping to catch him as he fell. However, when Wei Wuxian put his trust in her, her weak body could never measure up. He let go of the tree and promptly crashed into the ground, spraining his ankle instead.

'*No. It'll be fine. It'll be fine.*' Jiang Yanli's hands started to shake. '*It's fine. They said he killed three thousand cultivators overnight. It won't be that hard to kill just three hundred. It'll be fine.*'

But enemies were still all around Wei Wuxian, attacking as fiercely as they could. Most could be thrown back by Wen Ning. However, as the close range attacks continued, Wei Wuxian sent a blast of resentful energy forth that cleared away the dust. Thanks to that, it was soon revealed that the blade that had snuck past Wen Ning belonged to Jin Zixun.

There hadn't exactly been any doubt Jin Zixun wanted Wei Wuxian dead, but, upon seeing that, Jin Zixuan still felt his heart sink even more.

Jin Zixun charged forward again, forcing Wei Wuxian to dodge his every attack. He didn't come close to landing a hit, but, equally, wasn't in any danger himself. Wen Ning was dealing with the ones flying down and Wei Wuxian was using most of his energy to keep other attacks away from him.

The Jin laughed, shouting, "This is the price you'll pay for your arrogance! Let's see how long you can last without your sword!"

As it seemed to every time Wei Wuxian's missing sword was mentioned, Wen Ruohan's cultivation weighed down oppressively on everyone in the room.

With a flick of his hand, Wei Wuxian sent out a dozen talismans to knock back Jin Zixun's sword, cutting out the energy on it. A sword was still a sword, however. Jin Zixun continued on, his cultivation returning to his blade shortly after. More and more people came down. Wen Ning was able to deal with five out of every six. However, the number of blades Wei Wuxian had to dodge was going up bit by bit.

Attackers on all sides. No sword; no help; no rest. Wei Wuxian was outnumbered a hundred times over and was mainly just trying to run. Hands were reaching toward him no matter where he looked. It was… a familiar sight.

'*It's like he's stuck in the Burial Mounds all over again,*' Lan Wangji thought. Thousands of corpses coming at Wei Wuxian shouldn't look so similar to a few hundred trained cultivators, but they did nonetheless.

(Wei Wuxian might be making the connection too.)

For, with every attack that came, Wei Wuxian's resentful energy would come out a little bit harsher — a little bit fiercer — and little less interested in keeping track of who it was he killed. He fought and fought and fought and, regardless of whether he was remembering the Burial Mounds or the Sunshot Campaign right now, he seemed to be fighting with the practiced, merciless efficiency he'd needed to survive both those times.

Dodge, get out of the way, use corpses or talismans to kill.

Dodge, get out of the way, use corpses or talismans to kill.

Dodge. Kill. Dodge. Kill.

His eyes were now glowing red.

However, when Jin Zixun's sword swung down again, Wei Wuxian's jump to the side caused something to slip out of his sleeve. His eyes widened.

Seeing that reaction, Jin Zixun reached down and caught the box at once.

It was the present for Jin Ling.

Because Wei Wuxian had foolishly, naively, illogically thought Jin Zixuan was someone whose invitation he could trust. As the Jin heir watched his cousin look down at the box, he felt his stomach twist.

And that feeling only intensified when, after realizing what the box was for, Jin Zixun began to laugh.

"Give. It. Back," Wei Wuxian growled, throwing up a wall of resentful energy to block the barrage of arrows coming his way. "*Give it back!*"

Jin Zixun shook the box before Wei Wuxian's face, mocking, "What's this? A present for A-Ling?"

A blade speared toward Wei Wuxian's back, dodged only at the last second before the Yiling Patriarch knocked the attacker down. Simultaneously, a saber-wielding cultivator jumped down from above, forcing Wei Wuxian to send a blast of resentful energy up. It threw that cultivator to the side just long enough for Wei Wuxian to regain his footing. By that time, however, there were already three more people trying to attack. Arrows still rained down from above. No matter where he turned, there were always new figures coming in for the kill.

~~Like the Burial Mounds all over again.~~

~~In such a situation, how could he spare the thought to verbally respond to Jin Zixun?~~

Nonetheless, as if unable to resist, the Jin then continued, asking, "You didn't really think you could attend a-Ling's one-month celebration, did you?"

A simple question.

And yet one that made Wei Wuxian freeze for a moment, his hands trembling.

Wei Wuxian hadn't been able to attend his Shijie's wedding. He hadn't even known about it until a few days before — he'd had to be told about it by *Lan Wangji*. Wei Wuxian had been invited to Jin Ling's one month celebration, but, now…

(Had *anyone* actually been intending to let him come? Or was this just the perfect trap and the perfect bait, used to lure in someone who was cut off from everyone he loved simply because he'd done what was right?!)

Several arrows shot toward Wei Wuxian from behind, only knocked away by Wei Wuxian's resentful energy at the last possible moment. His eyes, still glowing red, scanned wildly over his surroundings. Murderous intent could be felt from all sides. Panting heavily, Wei Wuxian stepped back like a cornered animal looking for a way to escape.

The box still laid in Jin Zixun's hand, the smooth, polished wood gradually becoming scratched and marred by dirt in the process.

🎵♪

With a few sharp notes, Wei Wuxian sent a stream of resentful energy surging toward Jin Zixun. However, before it could surround the man, a gleaming silver blade struck the ground and dissipated its power.

"Stop!" someone shouted in the distance.

Everyone turned to look.

"Zixuan?" Jin Zixun asked. "Why are you here?!"

Jin Zixuan re-summoned his sword, shouting back, "Why do you *think* I'm here?!"

The response was aggressive and fierce. His eyes were wide with rage, but that rage appeared solely directed at Jin Zixun right now.

The real Jin Zixuan's eyes went wide.

"Where's A-Yao?" Jin Zixun asked, the familiar manner of speaking coming off easily. "Why isn't he here?!"

'*A-Yao?*' Lan Xichen mentally repeated. '*Why would Zixun expect him-*'

"I ran into him at Koi Tower," Jin Zixuan explained. "If I hadn't seen him walking around looking a little panicked, I wouldn't have even known you two were planning something like this! Why didn't you tell me you were cursed with the Hundred Holes curse?! Why did you decide to do this without saying anything?!"

'Without saying anything.'

Those were the words used.

If true, it meant…

'*It wasn't me,*' Jin Zixuan thought, letting out the breath he'd been holding in. '*I* meant *to invite Wei Wuxian. I was being genuine. It wasn't a trap. I wanted him to come.*'

(And Jin Guangyao had apparently been acting strangely. They didn't know the full story, but if someone as good at lying as him was behaving that way, then maybe he didn't support this either.)

Further explanation came shortly after:

"The fact that Jin Zixun had the Hundred Holes Curse was something he wouldn't dare to talk about," Lan Jingyi's voice announced. "For one, he had a 'favorable appearance' and a 'good physique.' He'd always thought of himself as 'handsome' and couldn't *bear* to let others know he was the victim of such an unsightly, repulsive curse."

Although Lan Jingyi appeared to be following the script this time, the inflections he used on certain words made his narration sound rather judgemental nonetheless. Lan Qiren withheld a sigh.

Still, he couldn't be too upset. Now that Jin Zixuan's simulated self had arrived, Lan Qiren couldn't help but feel a wave of reassurance fall over him. In the Burial Mounds, Wei Wuxian had received no help. Now, Jin Zixuan was here!

However…

The fighting around them hadn't come to a halt. Arrows still flew toward Wei Wuxian, held back only by the defensive wall of resentment around him. Whenever a swordsman attacked, Wen Ning would still have to hold them off.

Lan Jingyi continued, "To be cursed meant Jin Zixun's cultivation wasn't very high; his spiritual energy was too weak to hold out against it. The only one he'd told about it was Jin Guangshan, who he'd begged to find him medics and curse specialists. In the end though, they failed."

"Zixuan, help me!" Jin Zixun cried out, his wide eyes glued to the crimson red ones glaring his way.

And Jin Zixuan, upon seeing that, felt his stomach twist in disgust.

'*How am I supposed to look at him the same way now that he's done this?*'

It didn't matter right now. Lan Jingyi's narration continued on:

"With all known cures having failed, Jin Zixun became more desperate than ever. At this time, Jin Ling's one-month celebration happened to be approaching. Taking the initiative, Jin Ling's dad had gone and genuinely invited Wei Wuxian to it. However, Jin Guangshan wasn't pleased about the invitation Senior Wei had received."

“Huh? What does that-”

“The former Sect Leader Jin spoke with Jin Zixun, suggesting to him that the banquet could be used as an opportunity to kill Wei Wuxian, meaning… meaning Jin Guangshan wouldn’t have to welcome him to Koi Tower after all.”

There was a pause.

“Huh?” Jin Zixuan asked.

“They were worried Jin Ling’s mom would find out if they told his dad, so Jin Zixuan wasn’t informed.”

And thus:

“Zixuan! Hide it from Sister-in-law! Just for now!” Zixun requested. “I’ll give you two a formal apology once the curse is gone!”

“A *formal apology?!*” Jiang Yanli cried out, her voice breaking as she did. “You — dishonorable, spiteful, *coward!*”

Her eyes burned with tears, but, this time, she refused to look away. This wasn’t like Wei Wuxian being thrown into the Burial Mounds. This was happening because of her. Now, more than ever, she couldn’t avert her eyes. Jin Zixuan swallowed once, gazing upon the scene in the same way.

It had been some time since they had last seen Jin Zixuan in the simulation. He looked more mature now, his hair longer than before and his shoulders far broader than they had been. Now, voice steady, he addressed the still-battling crowd:

“There’s still time to salvage the situation. All of you, stop now!”

An arrow nearly took out Wei Wuxian’s eye. Wen Ning took out the shooter in exchange.

“Stop it!” Jin Zixuan shouted again.

‘*If Wei Wuxian had invited one of them to the Burial Mounds and then attacked, would the situation still be considered ‘salvageable?’*’ Wen Ruohan wondered.

His thoughts weren’t necessarily a criticism of Jin Zixuan’s actions. If the boy’s goal was simply to de-escalate the situation, saying something like this was a reasonable thing to do. However, Wei Wuxian had never had an amicable relationship with the heir. The attackers, while mostly Jins, didn’t respect Jin Zixuan enough to stop on his command.

The battle continued on, Jin Zixuan’s glare sharpening as his words were ignored. He looked back at his cousin for support, but was only met with a fierce glare.

Jin Zixun growled, asking, “You still think there’s any salvaging a situation like this? Do you not see these things all over me?!”

"*Anyone* could have done that!" Jiang Cheng shouted back.

"Do not succumb to rage," Lan Qiren recited. "Do not slander others. Do not make assumptions about others."

As silly as it was to recite Lan rules to a Jin, those words, right now, were all he could manage. He needed something to ground him when faced with a sight — a predicted future — as preposterous as this.

Arrows flew down toward Wei Wuxian again and he leapt back to dodge them. Due to the minimal number of corpses in the area, the resentment here was thin. His protective wall was starting to crack.

Because Wei Wuxian was a *resentful cultivator*, someone who "ignored ethics and morality," as Lan Qiren had once said. Jin Zixun's actions and faults were his own. The possible influence of Jin Guangshan aside, the other watchers were not involved.

~~Except they *were*. As soon as demonic cultivation was decried as 'evil,' all its cultivators would seem that way too.~~

Now, no matter how many rules Lan Qiren recited in his head, nothing seemed to calm him down.

"Zixun, this is-"

"You know that I can't wait!" Jin Zixun responded, pulling open his robe to reveal the ugly gashes. "Don't tell me you'll disregard your cousin's life for the sake of Sister-in-law's shidi!"

"You know that's not it!" Jin Zixuan shouted back. "He might not even be the one who cursed you to begin with! Why can't you wait?! I was the one who invited Wei Wuxian to A-Ling's one-month celebration. When you people act like this, where does that leave me? Where does that leave my wife?!"

Wei Wuxian punched forward, sending a golden-robed cultivator flying back. He panted heavily, hands shaking just a bit. Despite that, his gaze remained fixated on the wooden box clutched in Jin Zixun's hand.

It was a brilliant, flawless, one of a kind creation.

'*Someone like him doesn't deserve to touch it,*' Wen Ruohan thought, narrowing his eyes. If, in this moment, Wei Wuxian had the protection of the Wen Sect, then it wouldn't matter whether he was responsible for Jin Zixun's curse; no one would have dared try something like this.

(But, instead of doing that, Wen Ruohan had declared war, gotten himself killed, and left Wei Wuxian to clean up his mess.)

To the side, Wen Qing watched with an unreadable, stone-cold expression. Despite that, her hands were clenched tightly by her sides, the nails digging into her skin.

And her grip only became tighter when Jin Zixun continued, "It's all for the best if he doesn't attend. Who does Wei Wuxian think he is, anyways?! Is he even worthy of attending our family's banquet?! Whoever touches him will be stained black! Zixuan, when you invited him, weren't you worried that yours, Sister-in-Law's, and A-Ling's reputations would be stained by that for the rest of your lives?!"

"*Shut your mouth!*"

But Jin Zixun wasn't backing down.

Lan Qiren threw the scroll, shouting, "You would be reversing the natural order… completely ignoring ethics and morality!'

And then the Lan Sect had gone and allowed the Wen remnants to be picked off one by one, Wei Wuxian being the only one brave enough to stop that.

'Why does Wei Ying not carry his sword?' the simulated Nie Mingjue asked.

As if Huaisang didn't do the exact same thing. As if his own cultivation wasn't equally demonic.

'You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anyone else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!'

Madam Yu looked down.

'Whoever touches him will be stained black,' Jin Zixun declared.

Because the Yiling Patriarch was evil, so nothing more needed to be said.

However, at that moment, the two Jins were in a deadlock.

"A-Li wanted him to come. You have no right to question that."

"You're never rational when it comes to her. Him being there will ruin us all!"

"I'm *ordering you* to stop!"

"*Zixuan!*"

As Jin Zixun's anger reached its peak, he clenched down tightly. Pathetic his cultivation might be, but he was still a cultivator. There was a crack, then a snap.

The precious box shattered in an instant.

The jade tassel was grinded into dust.

In that moment, everything else seemed to wash out. The tassel itself could be replaced. It was the product of weeks of Wei Wuxian's hard work, but, now that he'd done it once, he

could always make it again. However, upon seeing it get crushed before their eyes, no one could dismiss this as just a temporary setback.

'*You didn't really think you could attend a-Ling's one month celebration, did you?*'

The crumpled remains fell to the ground.

And, in the next instant, all the resentment in the air morphed into a pitch-black *hate.*

The watchers gasped, most falling to their knees. The resentment around them was almost too thick for them to breathe through. The world seemed to spin, cries of agony and vengeance pouring in from every corner of the room.

Wei Wuxian lunged-

"Wei Wuxian, haven't you done enough yet?!" Jin Zixuan demanded, cutting him off.

"He hasn't done *anything!*" the real Jin Zixuan hissed back, wishing, more than ever before, that he could punch his other self in the face.

(It was a familiar feeling, but never in a situation so dire, before. The simulated Jin Zixuan had spent 20 years living with Zixun and, for most of his life, had viewed Wei Wuxian as a pest. Someone who had punched him in the Cloud Recesses, no matter why. He didn't understand *anything.*)

And Wei Wuxian, right now, was forced to have Wen Ning handle his protection. His eyes were alight, the red glow intense enough to melt metal in an instant. He gasped, breathing in deeply but never having enough air to properly think. All around him, the sounds of battle wore on.

There were screams around him.

Hate, around him.

***Resentment*, around him.**

The cloud of energy circling Wei Wuxian clouded his vision. Now, the continuously-attacking cultivators were closer to black, shadowed figures than anything else. Then, a few moments later, an illusion seemed to cover them. This mirage seemed to have been added in by the spirits who had assembled the simulation. Because of it, for a instant, the attacking cultivators were the Wen — not the remnants Wei Wuxian had saved, but the soldiers he'd fought for years on end. A second later, it shifted once more. Now, all they saw were fierce corpses. The sight only lasted for an instant, but the fear it brought remained.

The Burial Mounds seemed to surround them again. The resentment reached its peak.

Dodge. Kill. Dodge. Kill. Dodge. Kill.

The corpses approached.

Dodge. Kill. Dodge. Kill.

***M*or*e c*or*pse*s c**am**e.

Do*dge* K***ill***

“Wei Wuxian!” someone said.

The voice was Jin Zixuan’s. It sounded distant and muddled, like they were hearing it from underwater. The resentful energy raged on.

“Wei Wuxian!” Jin Zixuan shouted again. “Tell Wen Ning to stop first! He’s aggravating the situation further!”

And yes, convincing one person to stop was easier than convincing three hundred. However, as Jin Zixuan looked upon his other self, all he could do was gape at that request.

An arrow shot down from behind Wei Wuxian, out of Jin Zixuan’s line of sight. The ever-thinning wall of resentment just barely managed to block it off, giving Wen Ning time to respond. Wei Wuxian was no longer in a state where he *could* dodge.

Slowly, the Yiling Patriarch forced out, “Why don’t you make *them* stop first?”

His voice was hoarse. His eyes, unfocused. Another attack came.

T**he c*orp*se**s** w**ere ri*g**h**t th**e*re-

Shouts and roars came from all around, the battle going on despite Zixuan’s words. Those sounds were all drowned out now, dulled under the deafening sound of roaring water echoing in Wei Wuxian’s head. His resentful energy curled around him with clear intention.

The*y* **we**re r*i**gh**t* **th**e*re-*

“Why are you being so stubborn at a time like this?!” Jin Zixuan shouted, his voice becoming more washed out with every word. “Once all of you calm down, we can go to Koi Tower to explain things and answer some questions. Once everything’s clear, if you aren’t the one who did it, you’ll be fine! Tell Wen Ning to stop!”

“Tell him to stop?” Wei Wuxian laughed. “The second I do, arrows will come flying at me and swords will pierce my heart! You think I could explain things at Koi Tower?!”

“They won’t do that!”

“Just *stop talking!*” Jin Zixuan shouted, taking a futile swing at his other self. “Just — you should just…”

Side with the person you’ve never trusted and never liked?

(Still, who looks at a battle that's *three hundred against two* and tells the two they've gone too far?)

It didn't matter either way. Wei Wuxian just laughed.

"They wouldn't?" he repeated. "How would you ensure that? Jin Zixuan, I have a question. When you invited me, did you really not know about their plans to kill me?!"

"I didn't. I didn't, I didn't, I didn't-"

But the simulated Jin Zixuan did not look at Wei Wuxian as the only victim here. They were not friends nor allies. All Jin Zixuan knew was that his cousin didn't have proof; Wei Wuxian might indeed have cursed Jin Zixun. Thus, when accused like that, the simulated Jin Zixuan didn't experience the soul-crushing guilt his real-self felt. Instead, the feeling that filled him was anger.

"*You?!* Are you mad?! Wei Wuxian, you're out of your mind!"

"*Shut up!*" Jin Zixuan screamed, moving to stand by Wei Wuxian's side.

The two of them had never been friends. Zixuan's family had abused the Wens and coveted Wei Wuxian's seal and ambushed him. In all honesty, who *wouldn't* suspect Jin Zixuan under circumstances like those?

(Even Jin Zixuan himself had started to. It wouldn't be the first time the simulation had shown their future selves to be willing to do something despicable.)

"Please say you didn't," he muttered.

But the simulated Jin Zixuan couldn't hear. He continued to glare at Wei Wuxian, the tension in his stance presenting a confrontational view rather than a pacifying one. Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes, the resentment curling around him protectively. Right now, the feeling carried in that energy was hatred.

At *Jin Zixuan.*

Madam Jin swallowed nervously.

When Wei Wuxian looked up, his crimson glare relayed his rage. He was still panting heavily, using Wen Ning to keep an eye on any attack that might come his way, but his gaze remained locked on Jin Zixuan alone. The darkness of the resentment around him continued to cloud his view.

"Jin Zixuan, move away right now," Wei Wuxian ordered. "I won't touch you, but you better not provoke me."

That was a warning.

It sounded like a threat.

Thus, upon hearing it, Zixuan's face clouded in rage.

"Why can't you just back off for once?!" he demanded, lunging forward toward Wei Wuxian. He raised an arm, trying to grab onto Wei Wuxian's shoulder.

The hatred — the anger — the viciousness that approached… far from being strange, it was, again, all far too familiar. In Yiling, countless creatures tried to do just the same. After being stuck in the Burial Mounds for a month, Wei Wuxian had learned how to deal with them. Such a reaction had become habitual — instinctual. And thus, at that moment, Wen Ning did exactly what Wei Wuxian wanted him to do. He protected his master from the untrustworthy, hateable foe. He stopped the enraged figure approaching them. He, in his mindless state, identified someone with the same blood as those that were attacking them — the same blood as the people who had imprisoned him somewhere that *killed him* a mere year ago.

A wet, squelching sound filled the air.

Not a single person could move.

The figure approaching Wei Wuxian came to a stop. Slowly, they both looked down.

A hand had pierced through Jin Zixuan's chest.

"...A-Xuan?" Madam Jin asked.

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened once more.

"A-Li…" Jin Zixuan gasped out. "A-Li… is still waiting for you… at the Golden Tower… for A-Ling's… one month banquet."

Because he had *meant* to invite Wei Wuxian. As far as he had known, there were no traps; no scheme. Neither he nor Wei Wuxian had trusted each other, but they had both gotten into this situation hoping to, one day, get along.

So this scene right here, with Wen Ning's hand piercing through his chest, *couldn't* be right.

And yet, at that moment, Jin Zixuan fell to the ground nonetheless.

Jiang Yanli was pale. Jiang Cheng seemed faint. Lan Xichen was trembling. Nie Mingjue looked sick. Not a single one of them knew what to say.

'Wei Wuxian is a monster! Yanli treated him like her own brother!'

To the people in the future, the fact that Wei Wuxian had killed Jin Ling's parents went without saying. The watchers had been divided on this at first. Then, for some time, they had thought it was a lie or a trick. Later, though they didn't say it out loud, the situation with the Wen remnants had brought a different question into their minds. Had Jin Zixuan, somehow, deserved it?

But now…

Now, they could see…

“It was… an accident?” Madam Jin muttered, barely seeming to understand the words she spoke.

Jin Zixuan’s body laid unmoving on the ground below.

“Oh.” Jiang Yanli opened her mouth then closed it again, staring blankly at the scene. “Oh. Oh.”

Her eyes began to water once more.

“*Oh.*”

It had been so sudden, so unplanned, that even Wei Wuxian didn’t seem to realize what was going on. He stared down as well, his eyes finally losing that devastating shade of red. The crimson spreading across Jin Zixuan’s chest more than made up for that, though.

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian asked.

But the world still didn’t change.

‘*What happened?*’ the Yiling Patriarch wondered, the question sounding like it was coming out of a lost child. ‘*What? What? How did things go wrong so fast? That’s not right. It can’t be like this. Something must have gone wrong somewhere.*’

As though this was a simple matter of perspective, and not a death that would never be undone.

Then, from all around, the ambushers began to cry out:

“The… the Ghost General has gone mad!”

“He killed him! He killed him!”

They had been in a stalemate as Jin Zixuan approached Wei Wuxian. No more attacks were happening. And yet, at that moment, the mediator was killed. Someone who wasn’t trying to fight — who had only been trying to stop them.

Looking at the raw, bare facts of the situation, the people in the far-future had been right. Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning had killed Jin Zixuan. Jin Zixuan hadn’t deserved it. He shouldn’t be dead. That had been told to them in the very beginning of the simulation. Now, they had finally seen it happen.

And yet, in this moment, there was only one thing on Jin Zixuan’s mind:

‘*Why on earth did you* lunge *at him?!*’

His dead other self, lying on the ground in the distant future, had nothing to say.

'*You… couldn't you see what was going on? Three hundred people were surrounding him — three hundred people including* our cousin *and you thought you should* jump at him?! *He literally told you he thought you had invited him with the intention of taking his life and you tried to* grab on?! *That's… that's*-'

It wasn't entirely fair for Jin Zixuan to blame himself. For one, his simulated self had vastly incomplete information. As much as Wei Wuxian didn't trust him, he equally didn't trust Wei Wuxian. He was trying to help. It was just-

It was just that, much like with the soup incident from so long ago, his righteous anger was directed in the wrong way, at the wrong person, and all he managed to do was make the situation worse. If he couldn't stop his *own family* from attacking his guest, he had no right to invite them in the first place.

And, moreso-

'*Jin Guangshan wasn't pleased about the invitation Senior Wei had received. The former Sect Leader Jin spoke with Jin Zixun, suggesting to him that the banquet could be used as an opportunity to kill Wei Wuxian, meaning… meaning Jin Guangshan wouldn't have to welcome him to Koi Tower after all.*'

Forget Jin Zixun's faulty assumptions and rash judgment. If that narration was true, then didn't the attack on Wei Wuxian have more to do with the politics of who Jin Zixuan was 'allowed' to invite than the curse itself? Even Jin Zixun had said the same!

'*Zixuan, when you invited him, weren't you worried that your, Sister-in-Law's, and A-Ling's reputations would be stained by that for the rest of your lives?!*'

It had been Meng Yao's 'obvious panic' that had made him run over.

'*Would someone like him, someone as perfect at lying as him, really make a mistake like that?*'

Wei Wuxian had killed him.

Wen Ning had torn his heart out before anyone could react.

But Jin Zixuan's own family might have been the only ones who *wanted* anything like this to happen.

"W-what are you doing?!" Jin Zixun shouted, getting over his panic before anyone else. "Release! Release the arrow-!"

He cut off abruptly, the hulking, undefeatable Ghost General grabbing hold of his neck. The corpse's grip tightened, making the Jin cry out in pain.

No one could react to that. No one could even try to.

Wei Wuxian still stood there helplessly, unmoving.

'*No,*' he thought.

He continued staring blankly at Jin Zixuan's form.

'*I was… clearly controlling Wen Ning properly,*' he told himself. '*I'd ordered Wen Ning to go berserk, but I still should've been able to control him. I've always been able to control him perfectly. I didn't want Jin Zixuan dead! I've never wanted him dead! It was just… it was just, in that moment I suddenly couldn't stop it. I lost control. I never wanted him dead!*'

"Not consciously, at least," Wen Ruohan muttered under his breath.

But survival instincts weren't something that could just be ignored.

'***I never… I never-***'

But Jin Zixuan was still there, the Ghost General's footprints engraved onto the ground behind him.

The sight was enough to make anyone feel sick. And now, as Wen Qing looked between her brother and Wei Wuxian, she found herself gritting her teeth together in rage.

(Was it her fault? Had this all happened because of the help she'd asked Wei Wuxian to give? He hadn't been able to see his shijie's wedding because of her. Now, his reputation was the reason Jin Guangshan didn't want him to come. The Stygian Tiger Seal was obviously a factor and the distrust of demonic cultivation ~~and Wei Wuxian's missing core~~ but, if Wen Qing hadn't given them such a clear excuse to isolate Wei Wuxian…)

(But, if she hadn't approached him, her brother would have remained just a mindless corpse forever.)

(Then what should she have done?)

That same question appeared to be consuming Wei Wuxian, who watched the puddle of blood spreading from Jin Zixuan grow larger and larger with each second that passed. The red approached the ends of his white robes, coloring them in a vibrant hue. Arrows were shooting down from all around and screams filled the air, but, right now, everything was distant. Wei Wuxian seemed to have a general awareness that there was sound around him, but identifying it would be impossible right now. Static filled the watcher's ears, drowning out all other noise in the world.

'***Didn't you say you knew what you should and shouldn't do?***'

Those words were from Wei Wuxian's thoughts, but the man himself had no response, now.

'Didn't you say that you could control it?! That there couldn't possibly be a problem and that nothing would ever happen?!'

Lan Wangji tensed, hearing his own questions swing back toward Wei Wuxian at full force.

‘*But… but-*’

The resentment got thicker and thicker around them, darkening the sky into a cloudy black. Little by little, all light was cut off from Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang fell to the ground, no longer able to resist the resentment pouring down from all sides.

’But-!’

The resentment spiked.

Suddenly, everything went black.

The watchers straightened up at once, feeling the pressure that had been weighing down on them finally ease. They looked up toward the simulation once more, waiting for an explanation, but there was nothing to be found but darkness there. Several seconds passed, no light coming their way.

“Wei Ying?” Lan Wangji asked.

The darkness remained. Two dozen seconds passed without change. There was nothing in sight, no resentful energy to be found, and the only sound they could hear was the lingering soft static in the background.

Everything was gone.

“Wei Ying?!” Lan Wangji asked again, his heart rate picking up. Wen Qing began to march forward, hoping, somehow, that a clue to what was going on could be found.

However, there was nothing left.

But then-

Wei Wuxian’s eyes opened. Light returned.

They were back in the Demon Slaughtering Cave.

Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan nearly collapsed in relief at that. The simulated Jin Zixuan was now dead and Jiang Yanli now a widow, but, after what they had seen, the idea that the Jin might have captured the unconscious Wei Wuxian had filled them with nothing but fear. It felt inherently contradictory, but the Burial Mounds truly seemed like the only place that could be considered safe for Wei Wuxian. Right now, even the Jiang Sect…

Even the Jiang Sect, ~~which had declared Wei Wuxian an enemy of all the sects,~~ might not protect him now.

Jiang Cheng clenched his hands into fists. Throughout the past scene, his nephew's face had constantly flashed in in his mind. They all knew full well what Jin Ling thought about his father's death. He had said it clearly after the incident with Xue Yang. Lan Sizhui had tried to defend 'Mo Xuanyu,' claiming that evil didn't necessarily lie in demonic cultivation.

'You know, before we came to Yi City, a lot of people also claimed that the Yueyang Chang Clan's Chang Ping was killed by Xiao Xingcheng Daozhang's hands. But was that the truth?'

'Nobody ever actually saw whether or not Chang Ping Daozhang was killed by Xiao Xingchen! All they had were guesses, so why are you calling them claims?! But just try to count how many cultivators lost their lives to Wei Ying, Wen Ning — to the Stygian Tiger Seal! These are truths that everybody accepts, that no one can deny!'

'But-'

'And what can't be forgotten is that he ordered Wen Ning to kill my mother and father!'

'Ordered,' was the word used. It wasn't technically untrue and they hadn't seen what had happened to Jiang Yanli yet, but…

Would anyone really summarize the situation like that?

The static noise was finally disappearing. Now, instead, they could hear two voices on the right. It was Wen Qing and Wen Ning, conversing in hushed tones.

Wei Wuxian sat up, trembling as he did. Wen Ning — returned to his fully conscious state — looked back.

The sight of Wen Ning's arm going through Jin Zixuan's chest flashed in Wei Wuxian's mind.

And-

BAM

"Wei Wuxian!" Wen Qing shouted, standing up again.

Wei Wuxian had punched Wen Ning in the jaw, knocking him to the ground. The simulated Wen Qing could only clench her hands into fists, looking away.

Because nothing would fix what had just occurred.

Wei Wuxian grabbed onto the lapels of Wen Ning's robes, pulling him up.

"Who did you kill?!" the Yiling Patriarch roared, shaking Wen Ning back and forth. "Do you even know who you just killed?!"

Jin Zixuan flinched.

"You could have killed anyone else. Why did you have to kill Jin Zixuan?!"

A-Yuan dropped his butterfly toy, trembling at the shouts. Granny Wen quickly swept down, pulling him away.

To the side, tears started to roll down Wen Qing's cheeks. She flinched every time Wei Wuxian shook Wen Ning, but didn't try to intervene.

Everything had gone wrong.

Wei Wuxian seemed to gasp out for a moment, barely able to speak, then asked, "With him dead, what is Shijie supposed to do?"

"A-Xian, I-"

"What is her son supposed to do?!"

"Wei Ying-"

"What am *I* supposed to do?!"

Whether within the simulation or outside, no one could respond.

That had been his one and only chance to reconnect with his family from the past. Jiang Yanli had told everyone that she viewed Wei Wuxian as her actual brother; Wei Wuxian repaid that to his 'sister' in kind. While he didn't regret protecting the Wens, he wouldn't have chosen this method if he had any other options.

A single path to gain his family back had opened up to him.

Now, he wouldn't even be able to *dream* of going back to those times. Not now — not after he'd killed Jin Zixuan.

The Jin heir clenched his hands into fists, biting down on his lip so hard that it started to bleed.

'*They didn't listen to me,*' he thought. '*I told* my sect *to stop attacking* my guest *and no one cared. I'm the sect heir and yet… I had to try and convince Wei Wuxian to stop instead.*'

He had brought the Jin to war, hadn't he? He had led them then, hadn't he? When he told them all to stop and back off, why hadn't they listened?

'*I… wasn't told about Zixun and Father's plan. More than that, I wasn't able to figure it out until last minute even though they were planning it right under my nose! I know I was probably busy preparing for A-Ling's one month celebration, but… couldn't I have done more? Something to somehow make it clear that Wei Wuxian was my guest — that he had my protection?*'

Jin Zixuan's other self had only invited Wei Wuxian for Jiang Yanli. There was no trust between them, no other reason for him to do that.

‘*Zixun was the one running the Wen camps. Even after Wei Wuxian broke them out, did I seriously never take a second look to figure out why? Not enough of one to notice the* toddlers *my family had brought there?! Was I so caught up in A-Li and my blissful new life that I let this all happen right under me?*’

His future-self had just died. However, right now, that strangely seemed like the least important part of what they’d just been shown.

Jin Zixuan was the only one who felt that way. Wei Wuxian, right now, looked willing to give almost anything up for a chance to redo today. The mix of rage, confusion, helplessness, and despair gave his shouts a raw, cutting edge.

That very edge was enough to make A-Yuan cry.

As soon as the child’s sobs echoed through the cave, Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened. He let go of Wen Ning’s collar, turning toward the source of the sound. Then, he looked down.

‘*Just why was I locking myself up in the Burial Mounds all these years? Why do I have to go through this? Why did I choose to walk this path? Why did I turn myself into this? What do others see me as? What did I have to gain from this? Have I gone mad? Have I gone mad? Have I gone mad?!*’

His breath hitched, his own thoughts threatening to consume him whole.

Neither Wen Qing nor Wen Ruohan could resist giving a slight flinch. Wei Wuxian had done this *for* the Wen. He had done this because of the two of them. If he was looking for someone to blame…

There was no one better than them, right?

(Then again, no one here was completely uninvolved.)

Jiang Cheng stared at the ground. Jiang Yanli’s sobs went on without end. Madam Yu gazed blankly, nearly uncomprehending. Nie Huaisang had returned to Nie Mingjue’s side, but neither brother had the presence of mind to pay attention to the other right now. Madam Jin and Jin Zixuan couldn’t speak. Lan Qiren was pale. Lan Xichen was silent. Lan Wangji looked over at Wei Wuxian’s form, feeling more powerless than ever before.

Jin Guangshan gave a small sigh.

‘*It really is tragic that someone so capable would make such poor choices in the end,*’ he thought.

~~However, he kept those thoughts to himself. Wen Ruohan had been behaving a little strangely recently; Jin Guangshan had a feeling saying that aloud would end rather poorly for him.~~

Then, at that moment, Wei Wuxian’s voice pierced the silence once more:

‘*If only… I hadn’t chosen this path.*’

“No,” Lan Wangji whispered. “No, Wei Ying, you chose right. You-”

He cut himself off.

Wei Wuxian had been right, for all that the world constantly told him he was wrong. Lan Wangji closed his eyes.

‘*If my other self had been willing to leave everything behind and side with you… would the Lan have investigated more deeply? Would people have taken a second look? Could we have avoided this fate?*’

He didn’t know. But, at that moment, the second jade of Lan couldn’t help but feel a bit of hatred for his other self.

Wei Wuxian’s gaze was fixated on the ground. Then, across from him:

“I’m… sorry,” Wen Ning whispered softly.

“A-Ning, no,” Wen Qing protested. “No, no-”

The corpse’s face could not move as it wished. Sobs would not echo; tears would not fall. However, at that moment, Wen Ning’s expression couldn’t be described as anything but pain.

“I’m sorry. It… it was all my fault. I’m sorry. I’m sorry-”

“It wasn’t,” Jiang Yanli whispered, too quietly to be heard. “Wen Ning, it *wasn’t*.”

Jin Zixuan couldn’t say a word.

And, as Wei Wuxian looked down at Wen Ning, he couldn’t help but laugh.

‘*No, it’s not Wen Ning’s fault,*’ he thought. ‘*It’s mine.*’

His eyes were wide.

‘*When on a rampage, Wen Ning is nothing more than a weapon. I’m the one who created that weapon. My orders were the ones he listened to.*’

And that was true. The watchers knew it to be true. In the moment Jin Zixuan approached, they had all felt Wei Wuxian’s order to attack.

(They had all felt his fear.)

‘*I was the one who lost control. I was the one who was too confident in myself. I was the one who ignored all the ominous signs up until now.*’

But, just as he’d told Lan Wangji, what other choice did he have? What more was there to do?

At present, the only truly moral choice he had was simply to remain in the Burial Mounds forever, never even trying to see Jiang Yanli. If he had done that, Jin Zixuan wouldn't be dead.

But who in their right mind would ever *expect* someone to do that? Who, of everyone here, would have managed even a fraction of what Wei Wuxian had done? Who here would have the audacity to say they would when Wei Wuxian was the only one who did?

But now-

Wei Wuxian, unable to stand any longer, took a step back and fell to the ground. He sat on the stone steps, losing all the strength he'd had. As he looked up at Wen Ning, a second image overlayed on top of the corpse. Rather than Wen Ning's pale, lifeless face, it was Jin Zixuan's staring back at him.

(Equally pale; equally dead.)

'*Shijie… finally got to marry the person she loved. She'd had to overcome so much for that, but she finally made it there. And their son — A-Ling received his courtesy name from me. He was still so young. Just seven days after he was born, he knew to laugh wherever he saw his father's sword. Both his parents had been ecstatic. And now, during his one-month celebration…*'

Suddenly, every interaction they had seen Wei Wuxian and Jin Ling have seemed to take on a new, far more painful light.

Wei Wuxian had never wanted Jin Zixuan dead.

All he'd wanted, in the end, was to see his Shijie again.

But, because he'd chosen to protect the innocent — because he was the son of a servant and not a young master from an established clan — cultivation society as a whole wouldn't allow that to occur.

It was hopeless.

He had nothing left.

Wei Wuxian shook, tears streaming down his cheeks. He buried his face in his hands, his cut-off, broken sobs echoed in the cave.

"...Can someone tell me… what I'm supposed to do now?"

No answer came. No one knew of one to give.

The last time they had seen Wei Wuxian cry was after the fall of Lotus Pier. Back then, however, Wei Wuxian had no control over the resentful energy in his midst.

Now, the weight of his grief could crash down on them full-force.

And yet, still, no one had anything they could say.

The segment came to a close.

The segment had ended. In some ways, this felt like the end of far more than that. Wei Wuxian had spent years in the Burial Mounds with the Wens. Slowly, it had started seeming like things were going to turn out all right.

Now, though….

'Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, Jin Clan of Lanling, Lan Clan of Gusu, and Nie Clan of Qinghe have all taken the lead and burned the Burial Mounds to the ground.'

"...What's going to happen now?" Jiang Cheng asked.

Madam Yu looked away, for once unable to say anything in response.

Jin Zixuan was dead.

The Jins had ambushed Wei Wuxian first!

Jin Zixuan wasn't part of that.

How, at that moment, could Wei Wuxian have known?

He'd lost control. He hadn't meant to kill Jin Zixuan. Jin Zixuan was dead regardless.

Why had he *lunged* toward Wei Wuxian? The watchers' sensitivity to resentment was higher than ever. They had *felt* the hate filling Jin Zixuan in that moment.

(He and Wei Wuxian had never trusted each other. They had never even liked each other. It felt almost inevitable for something like this to occur.)

If Jin Zixun just hadn't gotten cursed — if he hadn't suspected Wei Wuxian and *ambushed him* then-

Well…

Could they really say that things wouldn't have gone wrong at some point or another regardless?

'*Jin Guangshan wasn't pleased about the invitation Senior Wei had received. The former Sect Leader Jin spoke with Jin Zixun, suggesting to him that the banquet could be used as an opportunity to kill Wei Wuxian, meaning… meaning Jin Guangshan wouldn't have to welcome him to Koi Tower after all.*'

In a small, hesitant motion, Jin Zixuan turned to look at Jin Guangshan.

"F-father?" he asked.

Jin Guangshan looked back, momentarily caught off guard by the sudden address, and quickly said, “It’s… it’s quite tragic, what just occurred. It’s a good thing we’re seeing this now. I must say, Meng Yao behaving the way he did seems quite suspicious in hindsight. If A-Xun gets cursed in our world, we can-”

“Father, did you… did you *actually* think Wei Wuxian might be the cause? When you told Zixun to go after him?”

“Well… well, of course I did! I’m sorry to say it, but, with the world as it was, suspecting the Yiling Patriarch was a natural thing to do. The versions of us within the simulation don’t know what we know now. He’s quite powerful and-”

“And it would be *inconvenient* for you to have to welcome someone you’d made public enemy number one, huh?” Nie Mingjue couldn’t help but add. Nie Huaisang, standing just a little behind his brother, watched carefully.

Wen Ruohan gave a short laugh, adding, “If I’m remembering correctly, it was Jiang Wanyin that gave Wei Wuxian that position.”

Jiang Cheng flinched.

And, capitalizing on that, Jin Guangshan immediately added, “Of course! What was it, ‘Wei Wuxian has betrayed the sect and publicly regards all cultivation sects as his enemy?’ In a situation like that, and when his own shidi says as much, how could he not be suspected?”

“No! No, I-” Jiang Cheng cut off. “I was just… I didn’t mean for any of this-”

“Of course you didn’t,” Madam Yu agreed. “Don’t be ridiculous, Jin Guangshan. You expect us to believe you thought Wei Wuxian was responsible? The future’s juniors made your true intentions quite clear!”

“The future’s juniors are obviously misinformed on nearly everything! Why would you believe it just because they think it’s true?” Jin Guangshan countered.

“Whether the juniors say it or not, it was certainly *implied*,” Lan Qiren pointed out, a stern frown on his face. “Your own actions make it hard to believe anything else. To think the Jin would attack their own *guest*. Have you no honor?!”

“Is there honor in the Hundred Hole’s Curse?” Jin Guangshan asked back, floundering just a little. “If Wei Wuxian had truly cast this on Zixun, we would only be repaying him in kind. The spirits may be presenting their memories, but they can’t know my motivations. Given what role Meng Yao played in all this-”

“If he did play a role, wouldn’t most of that just be in an attempt to earn approval from you?!” Nie Mingjue bit out.

Lan Xichen nodded, adding, “During the conference from two segments ago, you were the one he was protecting.”

But, after receiving that accusation, Jin Guangshan just laughed.

“You two… are you really still making the same mistakes?” he asked. “Sect Leader Nie, Young Master Lan, hasn’t Meng Yao taught you better than to believe so easily? My son is dead now. Meng Yao weaping a few tears when he hears about that doesn’t mean anything more than the tears he shed at your own death, right Nie-zongzhu?”

The man paused, unable to deny it. With Jin Guangshan’s general demeanor, it was easy to want to blame him. However, a habit of adultery did not inherently mean he was responsible for this.

(And besides, throughout the simulation, Nie Mingjue had done a number of things on his own that he couldn’t be proud of.)

(Lan Xichen, always so quick to trust the poor, weak Jin, knew he had no response.)

“You think I wanted my son and heir *dead?* Be rational for a moment,” Jin Guangshan requested, the blunt words causing both his wife and son to flinch. “Meng Yao wants to become the Sect Leader of the Jin. If he has a chance to kill Zixuan by manipulating both me and Zixun against ‘the enemy of all cultivation sects,’ isn’t that exactly what he would do?”

And, well, that was true…

However-

“Anyone can use the Hundred Holes Curse,” Lan Wangji said. “No matter what Jin Guangyao told you, that would remain true. To contribute to an ambush on your sect’s guest without a proper investigation is still dishonorable no matter what he said.”

It was the first comment from Lan Wangji in quite a while. Jin Guangshan was momentarily taken aback.

Now that the Phoenix Mountain incident was common knowledge, the boy was much harder for him to control.

“...While I understand that Wei Wuxian did not intend what occurred, the fact remains that he killed my son. He was overconfident in his abilities — overconfident in his control. To say that any of us expected this outcome is preposterous." Jin Guangshan countered, then, turning to Wen Ruohan, added, “Your Excellency, isn’t this an absurd-”

“I don’t see any reason to think that.”

Jin Guangshan paused, caught off guard once more.

“Your Excellency?”

“During that conference of yours from a few segments ago, Wei Ying’s *seal* seemed to get a much bigger focus than his actions. Is the same not true now?”

Jin Guangshan froze, quickly backtracking in his head. Earlier, it had seemed like Wen Ruohan’s annoyance at Jiang Wanyin was the Chief Cultivator’s main takeaway from this whole situation. However, if that guess was wrong...

“Your… Your Excellency, I-”

“This is ridiculous,” Wen Ruohan muttered, turning away. “What A-Ying did or didn’t do isn’t a factor. We all know that.”

How could they not? Hadn’t they seen it from the very first segment? Wei Wuxian, upon waking up in Mo Xuanyu’s body, had observed the practices of the little Lans. He had been surprised to see them setting up Blackwind Flags — spirit attraction flags — flags which he had never allowed the sects to have.

‘Oh, a blackwind flag? All the clans wanted to kill me, yet they use my inventions all the same.’

Jin Guangshan wanted his weapons and inventions but hadn’t been able to get Wei Wuxian’s cooperation. Thus, instead, he cut him off from the Jiang.

That wasn’t enough though. Isolating Wei Wuxian didn’t get the Jin access to his creations. So long as he was alive, he would keep those from them. Even if they got a hold of them, he would never let them know how to use them.

(Wasn’t Xue Yang protected by the Jin precisely *because* he was willing to take a look at the Yiling Patriarch’s seal?)

Sure, Jin Guangshan probably didn’t want Jin Zixuan dead. He had nothing to gain from that specific factor. There was plenty else he could have been involved in, though.

Wen Ruohan could understand wanting to gain access to resources, but to do that by *eliminating* their *creator* — what could be a bigger waste than that?

(If Wen Ruohan hadn’t started the war, hadn’t put the Wen remnants in that situation to begin with, hadn’t gotten himself *killed* over an altogether meaningless gain, then who knew how many more things Wei Wuxian could have created during the thirteen years he was gone? Someone like that, someone as amazing — as *good* — as him, should have never been put in a situation like this.)

(They had all, in some way, contributed to this segment.)

(And Wen Ruohan, though long dead by this point, was no exception.)

Still:

“Do all guests of the Jin have to worry about being ambushed like that?” Wen Ruohan wondered. “Or is it only the sons of servants abandoned by their sects?”

Jin Guangshan flushed at those words, but Madam Yu couldn’t allow the blame being sent Jiang Cheng’s way to go unopposed. She stood up, immediately beginning to shout. Jin Guangshan shouted back and Madam Jin and Nie Mingjue chimed in as well.

Meanwhile, Lan Wangji stood still, staring where the illusion of Wei Wuxian had been just moments before. The Yiling Patriarch was just… always so strong, always so brave, always

right. He had known to defend the Wens even when no one else would, even if it cost him almost everything he had. He had invented demonic cultivation. He always had some sort of solution or plan no one else could fathom!

'...Can someone tell me… what I'm supposed to do now?'

That hopeless, lost question of his-

"Wangji-xiong," someone whispered.

If Wei Wuxian had just had a bit more help or a bit more time-

"Wangji-xiong!" that person whispered again.

Here, at last, Lan Wangji glanced over. Standing some ways out of the way of the main group, Nie Huaisang was waving at him to come. Next to him, an angry Jiang Cheng and a lost-looking Jin Zixuan stood.

"Come, come," Nie Huaisang hissed, making that beckoning motion once again.

Even an annoyed glare from Lan Wangji wasn't enough to make the Nie heir stop. Eventually, Lan Wangji gave in and walked over.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The adults seem focused on blaming each other. Which, you know, is all good and I'm fine with them doing that, but, in the meantime, let's discuss what we can do better! Not anything super specific; just general rules that will help improve our judgment, you know?"

Lan Wangji, Jiang Cheng, and Jin Zixuan all stared blankly at him. It was hard to tell with Lan Wangji, whose cold gaze looked more disapproving than anything, but the general lack of enthusiasm was more than clear.

"Right, well… I'll start us off, then. Let's aim low and go for 'if Meng Yao seems to be acting strangely and asking him about it makes us want to go somewhere, we bring someone else along!"

"Agreed," Lan Wangji said at once, still vividly recalling the sight of Suihua sticking into Wei Wuxian's gut as a result of Jin Guangyao's machinations. While Jin Ling was the one who wielded the weapon, it was Jin Guangyao who had truly spearheaded its launch.

"Ah, right… okay," Jin Zixuan agreed, nodding. "Then how about… how about, if anyone notices my cousin acting a little weird, they tell me about it right away."

"Yeah, I guess you're probably pretty blind if you didn't notice that all happening until Meng Yao wanted you to."

"I… I-" Jin Zixuan gaped. "You… don't know for sure he was pretending to look stressed."

Nie Huaisang just shrugged, not even trying to argue his point.

(It wasn't really fair of him anyways. He hadn't suspected Meng Yao at all even after Nie Mingjue's corpse was six feet under. And then torn apart, too.)

Jiang Cheng frowned deeper, wondering, "Are we really just going to let him get away with this?"

"We agreed toward the beginning to not punish for events that have yet to occur," Lan Wangji pointed out. "There's no reason to change that now."

(The only exception, in Lan Wangji's mind, being his own future-self's actions at Phoenix Mountain. It was different then. Sure, he hadn't done it himself, but, several times, part of him had *wanted to.* That temptation he had felt was more than enough to necessitate punishment.)

(Besides, after what Lan Wangji's father may or may not have done, he would take no chances.)

But Jiang Cheng wasn't satisfied yet.

"You think we shouldn't do *anything* about this? For one, if Jin Zixun's willing to do this to the Jin's guests, who knows what else he's willing to do!"

Nie Huaisang gave a little frown, agreeing, "I guess trying to assassinate an innocent *is* a lot worse than breaking the rules at the Cloud Recesses, huh? Maybe that should be punished."

"Right!"

"But, Jiang-xiong." Nie Huaisang tilted his head. "Is it really the worst thing we've seen so far?"

Worse than Wen Ruohan starting a war?

Worse than Xue Yang making Xiao Xingchen massacre a village?

Worse than the future Jiang Cheng torturing people he suspected of being Wei Wuxian?

In an instant, all the fight in Jiang Cheng seemed to drain out of him. He looked down, not saying another word.

"Anyways!" Nie Huaisang clapped his hands together. "Back to rules. Any further ideas?"

He looked over at Jiang Cheng, waiting for him to speak.

"Ah, um…" the Jiang heir trailed off, looking rather uncertain. "I think… I think we should… you know…"

The pause lengthened.

"Um…"

He cleared his throat.

(It wasn't as though he couldn't think of anything to say. Rather, he had far *too much* to say, all of which was far too specific to him. 'Don't declare someone an enemy of all the sects and then be surprised when things start to go wrong for them.' 'If your Shixiong leaves the sect to protect it, offer him a bit more support than a single glimpse at A-Jie's wedding dress.' 'If your brother-in-law dies because the person involved thought Zixuan wanted to kill them, actually *explain that* to your nephew. If you don't know about that, then at least ask!')

(All these rules were, needless to say, a bit too specific to be useful here.)

"Um… in weird situations we should… try… to remain… calm?"

"Perfect!" Nie Huaisang agreed.

Some ways away, Jiang Yanli's gaze lowered. She, standing with Wen Qing, could hear what they were all saying. Although she wasn't part of the conversation herself, she couldn't help but think on it as well.

Zixuan had probably invited Wei Wuxian for her. She had surely been ecstatic, thinking this was a way she could finally help Wei Wuxian. Showing him her dress was certainly a step, but it wouldn't truly help him. Showing that he had Jin Zixuan's support, however, would. It was a nice thought.

(Unfortunately, in the end, this had fallen into a familiar pattern.)

(Wei Wuxian's first night at Lotus Pier, he had climbed a tree, scared of Jiang Cheng's threat, and only jumped down once Jiang Yanli extended her arms to him. However, given that she was too weak to catch him properly, that had ended with Wei Wuxian hurting his leg.)

(Now, he had climbed up the Burial Mounds, scared of the Great Sects' threats, and only came down once Jiang Yanli extended her arms to him. However, given that she was too weak to protect him properly, that had ended with Zixuan's death and Wei Wuxian's near-loss.)

'*Really… every single time…*' Jiang Yanli's smile faltered. '*What good does trying to help him do if I only succeed at making everything worse in the end?*'

She didn't have an answer.

(But at least she was thinking about it. To be honest, making everyone do that was the only reason Nie Huaisang had brought up this question to begin with. Well, that and keeping everyone from getting too depressed. All in all, it seemed to be going pretty well to him.)

(Besides, now that Meng Yao was involved in all this, getting people to keep a closer eye on him would be that much simpler.)

Jin Ling had been anointed the Sect Leader of the Great Jin Sect. He had received an open invitation from Lan Sizhui several months ago to visit the Lan whenever he wished. He,

therefore, had every right to be at the Lan Sect right now.

Despite that, he crept through the sect walkways on his tiptoes, being as quiet as possible to avoid being discovered.

(Luckily, at this time of night, every Lan was bound to already be asleep. The only exceptions would be Lans by marriage like Wei Wuxian, exactly the person he was intending to meet.)

Finally, Jin Ling reached the building he was searching for. A small bit of interior light was visible through the windows, just enough to serve as a reading light for a cultivator's eyes. Every other building was completely dark; this was almost certainly the one. Jin Ling paused, straightened out his robes, and took a deep breath.

It was fine; he had every right to be here and Wei Wuxian had no reason to refuse his request. Besides, even if Wei Wuxian didn't want to answer him, Jin Ling could always try asking his other uncle instead!

(Of course, Jiang Wanyin had been holing himself up in his own sect the past few days, refusing to answer any correspondence from outside. He also wouldn't be able to answer Jin Ling anywhere near as well as Wei Wuxian could. Still, it wasn't completely impossible!)

(He hoped.)

By now, almost a full minute had passed with Jin Ling simply standing outside the door. He had been shifting awkwardly, moving his weight from one leg to the other, but, now, he pulled himself together. Jin Ling slapped his own cheeks a few times, snapping out of his thoughts. He then reached forward, throwing the door open.

"Ah! Jin Ling!" Wei Wuxian squeaked, sitting up. Despite the fact that Wei Wuxian had reassured Jin Ling repeatedly that he never fell asleep at this time of night, he was currently lying in bed with Hanguang-jun.

Without his shirt on.

In fact, despite the fact that blankets covered the lower half of his body, Jin Ling was pretty sure his mother's shidi wasn't wearing any clothes at all.

Alerted by the noise, the imposing form of Hanguang-jun stirred and then sat up, blinking back at Jin Ling as the sleep left his eyes.

His arms looked rather scratched up for a cultivator as powerful as him. Surely wounds like those would heal in less than an hour. Besides that, who would ever be able to get close enough to scratch *Hanguang-jun?!* Wasn't the Chief Cultivator was too powerful for that?

In his infinite confusion, Jin Ling didn't even notice how Wei Wuxian started turning red the longer Jin Ling stared.

"A-Ling…" Wei Wuxian called. "Is… something wrong?"

Flushing a little at the overly-affectionate address, Jin Ling admitted, “I have a question for you. I was too busy earlier in the day to come.”

“A-ah,” Wei Wuxian nodded. “Of course.”

Jin Ling frowned, feeling more and more like a child seeking out his parents after a nightmare with every second that passed by. His cheeks started to flush, his whole face heating up in shame.

“Sorry, I’ll go!” he rushed out. “Hanguang-jun’s clearly healing from some bad wounds! I’ll- I’ll try to clear my schedule for sometime next week. It’s-”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Wei Wuxian assured him. “Uh, why don’t you head to the dining room? I’ll be right there.”

Jin Ling paused, registering his words, and nearly breathed a sigh of relief. His whole body relaxed, losing tension Jin Ling hadn’t even known was there. Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian leaned over to give Lan Wangji a quick kiss on his head, pushing his husband back into bed.

Less than two minutes later, a now fully-dressed Wei Wuxian walked into the building’s dining room. He sat down across from Jin Ling. A large candle in the center of the table was lit with a quick gesture of his hand, giving the room a soft, warm glow. In direct contrast, a deep, sinking pit seemed to form in Jin Ling’s stomach as he thought about what to say.

“Well then, what can I do for you?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Despite all the thought and preparation he’d put in, Jin Ling felt wholly unprepared for that question.

“I… um-” he swallowed. “I was… I was talking with Lan Sizhui, see? We were talking about lots of things. Important things! I really was busy earlier. He came to visit me while I was working on some paperwork! He apparently had a night hunt nearby, so we weren’t messing around or anything-”

“I believe you, I believe you,” Wei Wuxian assured.

And he did. He had been the one to suggest that job to A-Yuan.

After deactivating the Pingxin Gateway, the very first thing Wei Wuxian did was track down Lan Wangji. Wen Xu — A-Yuan’s father — was something Lan Wangji needed to know. First and foremost because Wei Wuxian had no clue if he’d made the right call. However, after hearing everything Wei Wuxian had to say, Lan Wangji had merely nodded once.

‘I trust your judgment,’ he said. ‘Does Jiang Fengmian know?’

‘I explained the situation him,’ Wei Wuxian nodded. ‘He’ll be keeping us updated on anything he finds out. Wen Ning, too.’

And besides, even if Wen Xu did break their deal, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. If the to-be mother became a hostage, there were quite a few things that could be done in response to

that.

Hopefully, that wouldn't be needed.

Nonetheless, Lan Wangji nodded in approval, having no simple suggestions on how to improve the situation. Following that, they called for Lan Sizhui.

'Yes, Hanguang-jun?' the boy had asked, stepping into their room.

'A-Yuan!' Wei Wuxian called out first. 'Come sit, come sit.'

The boy sat.

'I found out something earlier today,' Wei Wuxian revealed. 'It's about your biological father.'

Sizhui sat up at that, his eyes wide.

'Your father's name was Wen Xu. He was the first son of Wen Ruohan.'

And, just like that, Lan Sizhui's spark had seemed to disappear.

'...Oh,' he said.

(He knew who Wen Xu was. Of course he did. The burning of the Cloud Recesses and the Wen heir's death at Nie Mingjue's hands was common knowledge now.)

'...Ah.'

It was a weird thought to have.

'Does that… what does that mean?' Sizhui asked. 'Does that… change anything?'

'Not at all. Not if you don't want it to,' Wei Wuxian assured, reaching across the table to wrap a hand around his. Lan Wangji reached forward as well, wrapping his hand on top of both of them. Sizhui seemed to melt in relief.

'Thank you,' he said. 'For telling me.'

Wei Wuxian nodded. Then, after thinking for a moment more, he said, 'Sizhui, Wen Ning told me he's going on a night hunting trip for a while. He offered to bring you with him.'

(Wen Ning had never known who exactly Sizhui's father was. The war had made the passing of information hard to follow and, after the war, Wen Xu's name was one no Wen could safely speak.)

'You don't have to if you don't feel up to it, but I thought talking to him for a bit might be nice. Otherwise, Lan Zhan did get me a few new gardening tools as a present recently. I've been considering seeing if I can still bury you and Jingyi now that you're all big and strong!'

Lan Sizhui had laughed at that suggestion, the color returning to his cheeks. However, after thinking for a bit more, he shook his head.

'I'd like to talk go with Wen Ning, please,' he requested. 'I haven't gone night hunting with him in a while.'

Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian both nodded in agreement, sending him off with wide smiles and more than a few secretly-packed treats.

Wei Wuxian had known the journey would take them by Lanling, but he hadn't expected Sizhui to speak with Jin Ling, then.

Taking a deep breath, the new Sect Leader continued, "Anyways, Sizhui and I… we were discussing where the simulation might be for those in the past right now. Sizhui tried calculating it out based on how much time we remembered the spirits saying each section would take and he said… he said right about now is when my parents will die."

All the light seemed to leave Wei Wuxian's eyes at once, his gaze turning unnaturally blank for a brief period of time.

"I… Wei Wuxian?"

The Yiling Patriarch glanced back at him. For a moment, instead of Jin Ling, there was someone else standing there:

'A-Li…' Jin Zixuan gasped out. 'A-Li… is still waiting for you… at the Golden Tower… for A-Ling's… one month banquet.'

Despite having no memory of what came after, that one moment was still crystal clear in Wei Wuxian's head.

Jin Ling looked so much like him, these days.

"Wei Wuxian?" the boy asked again, standing up.

"Huh? Ah. No, sit, sit," Wei Wuxian instructed, gesturing for Jin Ling to sit back down. "Sorry about that. I'm following."

However, after that elongated pause, Jin Ling looked more hesitant to speak now than ever before.

"Really, it's fine," Wei Wuxian promised. "I don't know how long the segments are meant to be, but, if he thinks that's the focus right now, I'm inclined to believe him. Is there some sort of a message you want me to try to send the watchers about that?"

"I… I was just — I mean, I was wondering if… it would be possible… for me to see."

Wei Wuxian tilted his head slightly, clarifying, "You want to see your parents?"

"I want to see their deaths."

The chill in the air was heavy. The warm light from the candle on the table was nothing in comparison to the cold air from outside. Jin Ling shivered as the silence once again dragged on.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes.

Asking a question like ‘Why do you want to do that?’ would be tactless beyond compare. Even without making Jin Ling answer, that would be cruel. Their situations were slightly different, but, if Wei Wuxian were to be given a chance to see what had happened to his parents, he couldn’t confidently say he would refuse.

Still, this was hard to say yes to.

“It’s… not a pleasant sight,” Wei Wuxian said. “Wouldn’t you rather see them together when they’re happy and alive?”

(Not that Wei Wuxian had ever really seen them interact like that. By the time they genuinely got together, he had already left the Jiang Sect. Still, from his few memories of their courting period, he was pretty sure there would be something.)

However, after thinking it over for a moment, Jin Ling shook his head.

“I would… like to see them like that, but part of the point of what we did is that we can now contact the other dimension whenever we want. I can meet them like that, can’t I?” Jin Ling asked. “I’d rather get to know them in person — or as in-person as we can be, at least — instead of just through the simulation. They’re *my* parents. I should be able to talk to them if I want to!”

Although the last sentence wasn’t asked like a question, Wei Wuxian heard the doubt in there regardless. After the juniors’ plan had been found out (and after the trouble they got in for doing it), a bit of doubt had started working its way into Jin Ling’s head. Their initial attempt had been such an unplanned, spontaneous move and weeks had passed since then without change. What if, after all this, Jin Ling wouldn’t get to meet his parents after all?

But-

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian’s hand wrapped over his own, which had clenched into a fist on the table before them. It was the same position he’d taken with Sizhui not too long ago. Jin Ling looked up, finding a soft, thoughtful smile across from him.

“I’m sure Shijie can’t wait to meet you,” he said. Jin Ling just shrugged, flushing a bit as he looked away.

“Anyways!” He cleared his throat. “I… I want to meet them myself. There’s no need to spy on things they did in the past when I’ll have the real ones soon! It’s just… for the way they died…”

He trailed off, not quite knowing what to say.

“...Do you think it’ll bring you closure?” Wei Wuxian wondered, his voice unusually blank.

“No, that’s not… that’s not what I’m after. It’s not even really about them at all! Not really!”

“It’s for yourself?”

“Yes! No — I don’t know. It’s…”

It wasn’t really about Jiang Yanli or Jin Zixuan or even really Jin Ling.

It was about Wei Wuxian, most of all.

Everyone, all his life, had told Jin Ling that Wei Wuxian was a bloodthirsty murderer — a scoundrel who had betrayed all those who held him dear. ‘Jiang Yanli had treated him like her own brother, and yet Wei Wuxian killed her and Jin Zixuan in cold blood!’ It was a rather clear picture they painted of the scene, leaving no room for any questions.

So long as you didn’t *know* Wei Wuxian, at least.

‘*Jin Guangshan wasn’t pleased about the invitation Senior Wei had received. The former Sect Leader Jin spoke with Jin Zixun, suggesting to him that the banquet could be used as an opportunity to kill Wei Wuxian, meaning… meaning Jin Guangshan wouldn’t have to welcome him to Koi Tower after all.*’

Jin Ling had been there when Jingyi read that line out loud. Even now, he didn’t like to think about what it might mean.

After the situation with Jin Guangyao, Wei Wuxian had — officially at least — been forgiven by all. Despite that, people still refused to tell Jin Ling anything that seemed likely to be the truth. They would simply avoid the question, not knowing what to say.

But these were Jin Ling’s parents!

“Shouldn’t I… shouldn’t I get to know?” he asked, turning his gaze down and clenching his hands into fists. “I’ve been hearing about it my whole life. Shouldn’t I get to see? I… did things, I-I-”

Jin Ling had stabbed Wei Wuxian in the gut as revenge.

“I’m involved already, aren’t I?”

Jin Ling had spent years watching his uncle capture countless demonic cultivators as a result of what said uncle had seen Wei Wuxian do. He had even intervened, setting ‘Mo Xuanyu’ free.

Jin Guangyao was apparently involved too, given how he considered Jin Zixuan’s murder to have been partly his doing.

(Not that Jin Ling knew what he meant by that. It was hard when no one would tell him the truth. The cultivation world really liked keeping its dirty little secrets swept under the carpet.)

(And, to people like Wei Wuxian, some memories were too painful to easily bring up.)

But even still-

“I should be able to know. I want to know and I should *get* to know. I… I… how can I just go about my day not knowing whether or not my parents deserved it?!”

“Deserved it?” Wei Wuxian repeated, snapping out of his thoughts. “What? No, no — a-Ling, no! They didn’t deserve it at all! Your parents were trying to help. Both of them were. It’s just that… I-”

“How am I supposed to know that though?! All everyone says is that you went mad one day and attacked them! Is that what happened? Did you really just go insane? I can’t understand why you would kill them if not for that!”

For a moment, Wei Wuxian was speechless. Beyond simply not knowing what to say — he wasn’t capable of uttering a single sound. Jin Ling did indeed deserve to know what happened to his parents. To not tell him — to allow him to keep some doubt, however little, that his parents were victims was beyond horrible. Wei Wuxian couldn’t do that to anyone, much less his Shijie’s son.

But…

‘A-Li…’ Jin Zixuan gasped out, blood pouring out of the gaping hole in his chest. ‘A-Li… is still waiting for you… at the Golden Tower… for A-Ling’s… one month banquet.’

And, worse than that, Jiang Yanli’s death-

Wei Wuxian shut his eyes.

To show a child something like that…

Sure, as a cultivator, Jin Ling had already seen corpses several times before. However, for years, Wei Wuxian had hoped the newer generation wouldn’t have to experience what they did, growing up in war.

And these would be Jin Ling’s *parents*-

“...A-Ling,” he said. “I… don’t want you to have to see that.”

“But-”

“*But* if you… if you really want to, I’ll show you,” Wei Wuxian promised. “In exchange, why don’t you hear what I think happened first. It’ll give you the broader perspective you’re seeking and… and, if that’s not enough, I’ll let you see.”

Jin Ling frowned, clearly dissatisfied with that offer, but, eventually, nodded in agreement.

“Right,” Wei Wuxian said, trying to collect his thoughts. “Right, well…. to start with, your father and I… even from a young age, we’d never really gotten along.”

“Eh?”

“Yeah. I didn’t like how your father… interacted with your mother when we were young.”

It felt strange to tell Jin Ling about the relationship issues Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan had had, but, even after reconsidering, that still seemed like the better option to Wei Wuxian.

Blood gushed from the open wound in Jin Zixuan’s chest, his eyes still wide.

If Jin Ling wanted to see that, he could. But, if that was avoidable…

“Your grandparents on both sides of your family got married due to arranged marriages from their families,” Wei Wuxian continued. “It didn’t fully work out for any of the involved parties. It’s hard to say anyone was happy in that situation. I think, when Jin Zixuan found out he was going to be engaged to your mother, that caused some… complicated feelings for him.”

Pursing his lips together, Jin Ling couldn’t help but wonder, “So he… didn’t love her?”

Some ‘ideal couple’ they were supposed to be-

“He loved her,” Wei Wuxian corrected at once. “Their engagement was dissolved at one point. However, once they actually got to know each other, he genuinely fell in love. I remember… I remember, once, he tried courting her through gifts he’d worked on himself.”

The Jin were known, first and foremost, for their wealth. For him to try to win Jiang Yanli’s heart with his time and effort instead showed more than anything how head over heels he was.

“What did he make?”

“Let’s see… he grew her a lotus in a pot, made a carving for her in the shape of the Jiang Sect’s bell, tried to cook her a meal… I guess, in hindsight, he did a pretty good job of picking things she could actually like.”

“Really?” Jin Ling asked, lighting up.

“Yup. It’s just that, when he gave it to her, the flower wilted, the carving snapped, and the soup only ended up poisoning *him*,” Wei Wuxian recalled, his expression turning even more fond at those words.

“...Really?” Jin Ling asked again, far less enthusiastic this time.

Wei Wuxian laughed at his reaction, continuing, “Don’t worry about it. Bumbling courtship attempts are just part of growing up. If blood holds true, I’m sure you’ll go through plenty of your own.”

Going bright red, Jin Ling hissed out, “What would you know?! You and Hanguang-jun barely even had a courtship! You two got married before anyone could react! You never got official gifts for each other!”

“Well, Lan Zhan is so obviously *perfect*. What good would hesitating do in a situation like ours?”

The far-off, dreamy look in his eyes was met with a heavy eye roll. Hanguang-jun was literally one room away; why was Wei Wuxian acting so wistful?!

Jin Ling humphed.

“...I was separated from the Jiang Clan before they officially got together,” Wei Wuxian explained. “There were signs they had interest in each other and the courtship had started, but nothing formal had been announced. A few years later and the two of them had already gotten married. I think they truly loved each other, A-Ling. I just… didn’t get to see much of that.”

The two of them had gone through a similar conversation once before, back when Wei Wuxian was still thought of as ‘Mo Xuanyu.’ Jin Ling had been left unconscious due to Nie Mingjue’s legs. Pulled in by the resentful energy, Wei Wuxian had gotten a chance to tell a younger version of the boy something similar. It felt right, now, to get to tell the current version the same thing.

“Anyways,” Wei Wuxian cleared his throat. “Your mother did everything she could to help me even after I’d separated from the Jiang. She came all the way down to Yiling to show me her wedding dress, if you can believe that. She looked amazing! I don’t know if they spoke about it or not, but your father found out about her feelings. As a result, he invited me to your one-month celebration.”

Jin Ling nodded once. That part of the story was things he already knew. Now, it was time for a split.

“...Wen Ning and I arrived the day of. I’d… wanted to attend the ceremony. However, at Qiongqi path, we were stopped.”

“Stopped? By who?”

“Your father’s cousin, Jin Zixun.”

That name caused a scowl to form on Jin Ling’s face. He knew fairly little about the man, but what he did know wasn’t overly good. The man’s reputation was along the lines of Jin Guangshan's, even if never quite to the same extreme.

“...Why did he stop you?”

“He had received the Hundred Holes Curse. He thought I was the cause.”

Yes, that sounded familiar. In fact, Jin Ling was pretty sure his father’s cousin had died from the Hundred Hole’s Curse. People had told the Jin heir that Wei Wuxian was the cause. People had also told him Wei Wuxian was responsible for days that were too cold and nights that were too long. Besides, if Jin Ling was remembering correctly…

“He died… after you.”

Wei Wuxian nodded.

“You didn’t cause the curse then.”

Wei Wuxian nodded once more.

And it seemed stupid for someone to ambush their sect’s guest just because of that guest’s reputation but, well, could Jin Ling really say that wasn’t possible? He had *personally* stabbed Wei Wuxian, after all. If that wasn’t a testament to the power of reputation, nothing would be. Before meeting ‘Mo Xuanyu,’ Jin Ling had never questioned the assertion that the Yiling Patriarch had murdered his parents. That was all anyone ever said about him, after all.

(For a moment, a memory of the second siege of the Burial Mounds flashed in Jin Ling’s mind. Thousands of people had gathered together for the sole purpose of taking Wei Wuxian down. Jin Ling’s uncle and Ouyang Zizhen’s father had been among them. If given the chance, they might have also done an ambush.)

But then:

“How many people… were there?”

Wei Wuxian hummed momentarily, thinking back before uncertainly responding, “Two hundred, I think? Maybe three?”

“And it was… just you?”

“And Wen Ning,” Wei Wuxian added.

Jin Ling nodded once.

“Didn’t you summon corpses from the surrounding area? You must have had Chenqing on you, right?”

“They’d cleared out the corpses in the area beforehand. They knew I’d be walking through there.”

Because, as he’d said, it had been an ambush meant to kill. The only reason Wei Wuxian hadn’t died then was that Jin Zixun was too weak to finish the job. If it had been someone else attacking or if Wei Wuxian had been any less capable…

“You were my father’s guest, weren’t you? How could they do that then?!”

Wei Wuxian gave a tired smile, explaining, “Jin Guangshan, Jin Guangyao, and Jin Zixun all worked together to make this happen. I don’t think your father had any idea what was going on. Not until the very end.”

“And… what happened at the end?”

There were a few more seconds of silence.

‘*An ambush,*’ Jin Ling repeated in his head. ‘*Wei Wuxian was ambushed.*’

How funny that not a single text Jin Ling had read on the Yiling Patriarch mentioned that side of the equation.

(Guilt started to eat away at him more fiercely than ever before.)

“I wasn’t there myself, but, from what I understand, Jin Guangyao started acting strangely during your ceremony. Your father pried into it and, as a result, came rushing over to us. He tried to tell both sides to stop.”

As Wei Wuxian spoke, memories from that day played clearly in his mind.

“I didn’t trust him. I didn’t think he could make the others stop even if I did and I… thought there was a chance he had invited me there to do this very thing.”

“But he hadn’t, right?!” Jin Ling asked at once. “Did he do that? He couldn’t have!”

“He didn’t,” Wei Wuxian confirmed. “I just… didn’t believe him. Not fully, at least. So, when he marched over to me… I don’t know if I was being careless or tired or overconfident or stupid, but I lost control. Wen Ning served as the weapon, but I was the one who delivered the killing blow. Jin Ling… A-Ling, I…”

He paused, swallowed once, then bowed his head.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It was my mistake. I never meant for that to occur. Your father did nothing wrong.”

And that, right there, was exactly what Jin Ling had wanted to hear. He didn’t want his father to be evil. He didn’t want his parents to deserve what had happened to them. He, for years, had wanted their killer to be someone he could easily hate.

And yet, after hearing this truth, what could he say? ‘I’m sorry for what Jin Zixun did?’ ‘If the fourteen year old version of me who hadn’t met you yet had the chance to, I probably would have been there to ambush you too?’

For years, there had been no one who hated demonic cultivators as much as Jin Ling. The only true exception was Jiang Cheng, but even he wouldn’t be able to manage the single-minded, naive hate of a literal child. Jin Ling had hated every single one of them for their connection to Wei Wuxian.

“You were… ambushed,” he muttered again.

(As much as he hated to say it, when taking into account everything that had happened since Wei Wuxian’s return, an answer like that made far too much sense.)

“Wait, but then… what about my mom?” he asked. “What happened with her?”

Wei Wuxian’s expression faltered once more, his eyes watering in grief. Despite that, the smile he sent Jin Ling was nothing but genuine.

“Right…” he muttered. “Right, I should tell you about her too.”

Every word seemed to cause him a near-physical pain but he pushed through. Jin Ling clenched his teeth together, wishing the experience was over already and yet determined to see it to the end. He had to find out why that had happened to his parents.

And, in the process, maybe he could come to understand his uncles a little more.

Chapter End Notes

Terribly painful chapter. By far the most painful part was trying to write a scene in which Jin Zixuan and Jin Zixun talk to each other without losing track of whose name belongs to whom XD

Also, in case it wasn’t clear, I’m following the novel’s canon for Wei Wuxian’s responsibility in this scene, not the donghua’s or live action’s. I love both those adaptations, but I felt like deviating from the novel was implying that MXTX’s justification for the scene wasn’t enough, which I don’t think is at all true. Thus, ‘it was an accident’ is what we’re going with.
:)

The End

Chapter Notes

Not the actual last chapter, btw! Just seemed like a fitting title!

Thanks again, Tintin!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chicken. Salt. A crunch of greens.

A mouthwatering smell wafted through the air.

“Seriously? For free?” someone asked.

“Uh huh. Apparently they’re with the YunmengJiang Sect, looking for people who have the potential to be cultivators. In exchange for letting them test you, they’re giving out dumplings for free!”

News like that could travel quickly in small towns. Among beggars, it traveled even faster.

A young boy, whose hands had a total of nine fingers rather than ten, looked up. His stomach growled.

“Let’s go!” someone said. The crowd rushed over.

Rumors of this had been spreading for the past few days. 重试, the Chong Shi Union, was a new organization established by the head disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect. Their first buildings had been set up just a few days ago. Word spread quickly after that.

‘It makes sense,’ people had said. ‘Just look how powerful the sect has gotten since the great sleep. Even the Wen seem to be supporting them. That head disciple of theirs… despite who his father is, he’s accomplished quite a bit in recent days. I’m sure they’re simply trying to expand their influence now.’

It made sense to the general public. There were a few elements of mystery, a few sources of intrigue, and it was likely to affect the political balance in the coming years. Everyone wanted to see what would occur.

“Alright! Line up here!”

The purple uniform the speaker was wearing was more than enough to ensure compliance. When the silver bell by their side was added to the equation, it would be hard to find any civilians willing to disobey. As such, despite A-Luo’s youth, he could be tasked with

directing people to the back of the line just fine. His sister, on the other hand, was tasked with walking along the line with A-Yu, making sure no scuffles or cheating occurred. One by one, every youth in the town fell into place. The dumplings were being handed out in front of an easily identifiable one story wooden structure. Within the structure, several voices could be heard:

“Are you *sure* I shouldn’t help out?”

“Positive, Young Master Wei. Please, feel free to keep supervising for now,” Meng Yao said. His hands moved quickly, filling and folding new dumplings at a break-neck pace. Wen Ning scurried from side to side, making more filling and checking to ensure the in-progress ones were still in need of cooking.

“I really think this would be easier with three-”

“Maybe you should go see if the evaluations are going well,” Wen Ning cut in. “I-I know you trained Young Master Wong and Young Lady Xin and-and I’m sure they can handle supervising the test, but you’re still their shixiong, right?”

“Wen Ning, too?!” Wei Wuxian gaped. “You know, I *can* make dumplings with less spice-”

“What you consider ‘less spice’ is going to kill one of those five year olds. I am not dealing with a corpse tonight,” Meng Yao declared.

(Wei Wuxian was technically his boss and most certainly his superior, but talking to him like this was what worked best. Being overly polite or humble got met with amusement and any flattery got brushed off just as easily. By now, speaking informally had just become second nature.)

“Yao-gege, don’t you think you’re being too harsh?”

“We need to maintain a good reputation for your plan, Young Master. No need to take any needless risks,” Meng Yao declared, chopping onions just a bit faster. The staff and chefs Wei Wuxian had hired would arrive in a few days. For now, Meng Yao and Wen Ning could handle this; there was no need for him to get involved.

And yet, at that moment, a hand started inching toward the ingredients for the filling.

Wack!

Meng Yao smacked it away at once.

“Young Master!” Wen Ning complained, moving to physically block Wei Wuxian off from the ingredients. “Please…please don’t!”

(Meng Yao moved rapidly, quickly moving all the spices out of Wei Wuxian’s line of sight.)

(Yes, both he and Wen Ning knew they were being a little ridiculous. However, anyone who hadn’t tasted Wei Wuxian’s cooking had no right to talk. Spice of that intensity shouldn’t be

possible, much less edible! If it weren't for Jiang Fengmian's lack of reaction, Meng Yao would have thought the demonic cultivation had killed off Wei Wuxian's taste buds!)

(Luckily, even Wei Wuxian couldn't resist Wen Ning's pleadings for long.)

"Alright, alright." Wei Wuxian gave in, rubbing dramatically at the hand Meng Yao had smacked. "Fine, I'll go check on how the tests are going. Call me if you need anything, okay? Especially if someone from the Jin sect shows up again."

Though Jin Zixun had been sent back quite dishonorably, many of his subordinates had come over in recent days. Wei Wuxian hadn't figured out yet if they were causing trouble on their own or under his orders, but it was annoying nonetheless.

"Anyways, I'll be back soon. Keep up the good work!" he said. With that last order, Wei Wuxian reached over, ruffling the hair on both their heads. Both Wen Ning and Meng Yao froze. Right as Wei Wuxian left the room, he saw blush of an identical shade of red on both their cheeks. His laughter only made the color deepen.

The walls of their new base of operations were made of a light pine, the large openings letting in plenty of light. The rooms within the compound were rotating out groups of children, teenagers, and adults, all of whom were asked to take the same test in exchange for the dumplings. Wei Wuxian had designed the test himself, ordering his shidi and shimei to state the questions orally and repeat them whenever asked. A few hypothetical situations would be described, many of which were ones Wei Wuxian had experienced himself. Test answers, on the other hand, could be in both written and drawn form — or even spoken, if that was how the participant wanted to respond. People who would give up hours of the day for a few measly dumplings were likely to be beggars. Assuming literacy was not likely to generate many results.

Wei Wuxian peaked past through an ajar door, getting a glimpse of a test in progress.

"...the merchant then turns to you. 'Brat, are you the one who stole my goods?!' he shouts. There is no time to hide or put away the jewelry by your feet. What do you do?" Wong Mifan read aloud, just as Wei Wuxian had instructed him to do. There was a frantic flurrying of hands, many children forgoing the brushes altogether and using their fingers to draw out their responses. Wei Wuxian smiled.

Technically speaking, the test was of almost no importance at all. Neither literacy nor historical knowledge could be expected of the ones being tested and knowledge of the six arts (rites, music, archery, equestrianism, calligraphy, and mathematics) were even less likely to be found. Officially, this test was just a cover-up so that a young boy of the right age with nine fingers could be found. 'They're looking for people with the potential to be cultivators' was just speculation by the public. In actuality, it would have been far more efficient to have built a traveling stall instead. Permanent structures were excessive and a needless expense.

However…

Their job, here, was to guide Xue Yang onto the right path, identifying and saving him so that the future would not come to pass. That was their only goal. The sects as a whole would

benefit from it.

(Did the crimes Xue Yang would commit in the future really mean that he was more worthy of receiving help than any other?)

Jiang Fengmian had given Wei Wuxian a substantial amount of funds for this operation. Wei Wuxian had even checked a few times, making sure that he could use everything he'd been given. It was an opportunity like no other.

The test Wei Wuxian had made took a while. It required thought and patience and rewarded creativity. If young beggars were willing to come back and do this day after day for just a few dumplings…

Maybe, eventually, Wei Wuxian could set something up that helped them learn a few things too.

(When she woke up, Jiang Yanli would surely want to make food for the kids herself. Wei Wuxian hoped she would get the chance to.)

'*Shijie will probably want to make them all soup, huh?*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*Maybe Uncle Jiang and I should pre-order a bunch of bowls for her.*'

Though, come to think of it, there was a more important conversation with Jiang Fengmian that Wei Wuxian should probably have first:

'Wait, Wen Xu has a son?!'

'W-well, not yet,' Wen Ning clarified. 'In the future! In the far-future. That son is one of the kids that initiated the Great Sleep! Remember what you were saying about the traces? About unknown souls becoming attached to some people in the past? That's them! The souls of the five who did that attached to their parents in the past! One of them was Wen-gongzi's son!'

Wei Wuxian stared a little longer, eyes wide, then asked, 'Wait, so… someone who was involved in all this… is my kid?'

Wen Ning nodded rapidly. One of the traces had landed on Jiang Yanli, one on Jin Zixuan, one on Lan Ziming, one on Wen Xu, one on Sect Leader Ouyang, one on his wife, and one on Wei Wuxian. They hadn't tracked all of them down yet, but the implications of the ones that had been found so far seemed to support Wen Ning's claim.

'But… Mo Xuanyu's signature fused with me,' Wei Wuxian pointed out.

(Mo Xuanyu was already born.)

(Wei Wuxian was just fifteen.)

'W-well… maybe it's more complicated than it seems? Maybe… maybe Mo Xuanyu was just too young or something? So it found someone close to him?'

It was hard to say.

‘Young Master Wei, please focus,’ Meng Yao requested, setting down the small mountain of scrolls he had been carrying. ‘If you want us to finish setting up this office before nightfall we’re going to have to work quickly.’

‘We can talk and work at the same time, Meng Yao. Don’t worry so much,’ Wei Wuxian had said, smiling brightly. He then reached over, picking up two large stone benches and placing them on either side of the hall.

This was the second building they had furnished today, but, even now, Meng Yao couldn’t help but gape a little whenever he saw Wei Wuxian exhibit such casual feats of strength. Hopefully he would get used to being around cultivators soon.

‘Okay, so go on, Wen Ning,’ Wei Wuxian cued, slipping outside to drag in the large central table he’d been storing in the street. ‘Wen Xu and Mo Xuanyu decided to hold off on finding the others with the trace until later, right? And Mo Xuanyu’s giving him instructions on a compass that can detect resentful energy?’

‘That’s what he said,’ Wen Ning confirmed, sweeping the floors. ‘To-to be honest, I’m still confused about most of what they were saying. It seems like it all worked out though.’

Meng Yao hummed, storing the scrolls away on shelves just above a few blank books. The more Wen Ning described the strange conversation, the more Meng Yao wished he’d gotten to hear it for himself.

‘Maybe we should go looking for her… for the to-be mother,’ Meng Yao suggested. ‘Even if not now, that seems like information that will be valued later.’

‘We can, but that might take us a little while,’ Wei Wuxian pointed out. ‘I hired the townspeople around Yunmeng, Qinghe, and Lanling to make us a bunch of these buildings. They’re not too complicated, so all the groups managed to finish faster than I’d expected them to. We’ve got a lot more furnishing to do.’

Meng Yao and Wen Ning both winced, looking around the large, dusty hall.

‘How… how many?’ Wen Ning wondered.

‘Thirteen more! Fifteen in total!’ Wei Wuxian responded with far too much cheer, ducking under the table to sweep out the dust it had brought in.

Neither Wen Ning nor Meng Yao could say anything in response.

‘Oh, don’t worry so much about it. Isn’t it more fun to be out and about than to stay behind a desk all day?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Trust me: this is good for you two!’

Wen Ning couldn’t help but feel like his sister would probably agree. Resigning himself to his fate, he picked up the broom again and got back to work. Meng Yao, meanwhile, just gave a short, disbelieving laugh. This wasn’t really what he was expecting when he agreed to work for Wei Wuxian.

Still, despite the building's large size, it was at least pretty plain for a construction project funded by a major sect. It consisted of only four rooms — the sect had merely touched up the building that had been here before. High-level strengthening and warding talismans lined the walls but, otherwise, this appeared to be a perfectly normal hall. If all went as planned, the fifteen newly-constructed testing sites would be in perfect condition to test the potential of fifteen towns worth of people.

Officially speaking, at least.

'...How would you two describe Mo Xuanyu?' Meng Yao asked, filling up a second shelf with books. 'He's a demonic cultivator, isn't he?'

'Technically, I'm probably one too.'

'I didn't mean any disrespect!' Meng Yao assured at once. 'I'm just… surprised it's as respected in the future as he implied it to be. Do you really think he was being honest about that?'

'Hm… 70-30 in his favor?' Wei Wuxian supposed. 'He knows a lot of people I know and none of them disparage demonic cultivation. He even brought the future Jiang Cheng to speak to me once! That was wild.'

'Does he know your future-self, then?'

'Oh, did I not mention?' Wei Wuxian glanced back. 'Apparently my future-self is long dead.'

The broom that had been in Wen Ning's hands fell to the floor, clattering loudly.

'Ah, sorry!' he squeaked, picking it up at once. 'Sorry. Sorry.'

He… did not love being reminded of the future Wei Wuxian's fate.

'...I'm sorry for bringing it up,' Meng Yao said, turning to face Wei Wuxian at once. 'I swear I-'

'Oh, it's fine, it's fine. It's not painful or anything; that's essentially all I know about it,' Wei Wuxian revealed. 'To be honest, I'd almost completely forgotten until now. I should probably ask for more details, huh?'

'...Probably,' Meng Yao supposed as Wen Ning nodded rapidly in the background. The person in question gave a lackadaisical shrug, getting back to work. Meng Yao sighed. He had experience working for all sorts of different people. None of them had ever managed to catch him off guard as consistently as Wei Wuxian.

Sweeping hurriedly, Wen Ning wondered aloud, 'Do you think the Sect Leaders will know? They're seeing a lot of the future, right? Maybe you'll come up.'

'Maybe. Uncle Jiang has *been acting a little strange around me recently,' Wei Wuxian supposed. 'Hehe. Shijie was probably pretty excited to see my future self. She'll definitely tell me about it if I ask her to!'*

Wei Wuxian shook himself out of the memory then smiled to himself, content. He would ask Jiang Fengmian about his future self if he had a chance to and, if neither of them had time for that, he would just wait for Jiang Yanli to wake up. She could tell him everything she learned, then.

He hoped his death hadn't upset her too much.

Well, in any case, Jiang Cheng could surely tell him-

Clink!

Wei Wuxian paused.

The sound had been faint enough that a non-cultivator would have had no chance of hearing it. Wei Wuxian turned in the direction of the noise. It was behind the wall he had just passed, sounding as though it had come from above the one-story hall.

'*The roof?*' Wei Wuxian wondered. He silently stepped out of the building and jumped up. On the roof, Wei Wuxian spotted a small, black-clothed bundle trying futilely to sneak across the roof's clinking tiles. Wei Wuxian watched for several seconds, unnoticed, as the boy's antics continued. He was small and thin, and Wei Wuxian estimated his age as seven or eight, taking into account the lack of nutrition he'd probably grown up with. Size wise, he was no larger than your average five-year-old, allowing him to pull himself up to a higher level on the delicate tiles without breaking them under his weight. However-

Slip-

Polished smooth as they were, the roof's tiles offered very little traction. The boy's hands slipped off them, sending him falling back to the ground far below. For a moment, the boy seemed stunned.

Then, he registered what was going on and let out a scream!

Yank!

His fall stopped abruptly, a mere second after it began. The boy blinked once, realizing he was being held up by a hand holding the back of his shirt. He glanced back.

"Hi there," Wei Wuxian greeted. "You know, if you wanna climb our roof, I recommend you do it later in the day. It gets misty at night, so the tiles are all going to be too slippery if you try it now."

The boy paled instantly, realizing he'd been caught. That hesitation didn't last for long however. He started kicking and flailing at once, trying to get out of Wei Wuxian's grip.

"Now, now," the head disciple laughed, blocking all the incoming attacks. "If you flail around too much, you might slip out of my grip and start falling again. Give me a sec."

With that, he wrapped his arm around the boy's back and pulled him over his shoulder, jumping off to reach the ground in one easy hop. Once he landed, he held the child out again,

wondering if the flailing would resume. Instead, a fearful look was sent his way.

“You’re a cultivator,” the boy observed.

Wei Wuxian nodded once.

“You… are you from the Jiang Sect?”

“I am,” Wei Wuxian confirmed.

“What do you want from me?”

Grinning, Wei Wuxian responded, “I guess, first and foremost, I’d like to know why you were sneaking around up there. Aren’t you a bit young for a career in espionage?”

“I’m eight!” the child protested, swinging at Wei Wuxian. “I don’t need your help! Go away!”

His arms were thin. Far thinner than they should be.

“Have you had a chance to get some of our dumplings yet?”

The boy paused for a moment, desire filling his eyes. Even now, the smell of Wen Ning and Meng Yao’s work inside spread out throughout the compound. If the boy had successfully continued in the direction he had been going, he would have ended up at the kitchens soon enough. The child’s breaths came out shakily. He swallowed once.

But-

“Let me go.”

“Hm?”

“Let me go!” the boy shouted again. His arms were trembling as he raised them. Not much time had passed, but the swinging he’d done had already left him too exhausted to move.

“Did the line seem too long?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Put me down!”

“Did you know about the service we’re offering?”

Another swing, even weaker than the ones before, was sent Wei Wuxian’s way.

“Did something push you out of the line? Or did you leave by yourself? We’re not requiring payment, you know.”

“Ha! Like I’d believe that!”

“Oh?”

The boy huffed a few times, already out of breath, but glared just as fiercely as before.

“Adults always lie,” he growled. “And you cultivators always think you’re better than us! Food for free as long as we do a ‘test’ for you? I don’t know what you’re planning, but I’m not as stupid as all of them! I’m not helping you with anything!”

“Alright then.”

“Eh?”

Wei Wuxian set the child down. In his confusion, he didn’t try to run. He simply stared, wide-eyed, as Wei Wuxian reached into his robes and pulled out a bamboo leaf wrapping. As soon as it was unfolded, a sharp smell emanated out.

Spice. Salt. Meat.

“...Dumplings?” the child asked.

Wei Wuxian set the bundle down on the floor, taking one of them and munching away at it happily. The boy stared and stared and stared. Then, Wei Wuxian took another one. Then another.

The child’s mouth watered at the sight.

Finally, keeping his weight back so he could run at a moment’s notice, the child reached forward and snatched one of the dumplings. He brought it close, stared at it skeptically, then bit into it.

He spit it out immediately and threw the dumpling on the ground, coughing heavily.

Silently, Wei Wuxian handed over a small container of water. The boy pushed it away, quickly backing up.

“Did… *did you poison this?!*”

“Of course not. It’s just a bit of spice; you’re fine,” Wei Wuxian assured him, picking the remainder of the bun off the ground and biting into it himself. “My companions told me we couldn’t give these out to anyone and made me take them all with me. They’re being completely ridiculous, don’t you agree?”

In a few more bites, he finished the bun the boy had just rejected, licking his lips once he was done.

For several more seconds, the child simply stared. There was some chance that whatever had been put into the dumplings just didn’t affect the cultivator across from him. There was some chance, on top of that, that eating the buns would put him into the other’s debt — that this man would demand something in exchange for the food being given.

But…

With every one Wei Wuxian ate, more drool pooled in the child's mouth. Moving silently, he reached forward to grab another one.

'*If he tries to make me do something in exchange, I'll kick him in the crotch and run away,*' he assured himself. Then, at least, he bit in. The spice burned, but the taste of *actual food* after so long was enough to make the child scramble for more.

Wei Wuxian smiled at the sight. His eyes, however, zeroed in on the child's outstretched hand.

'*A crushed pinky finger,*' he thought. '*Not as uncommon as it should be. We've had a few false positives thus far.*'

But the future's Mo Xuanyu was pretty sure their target had been living in this district at around this time.

The gender matched. So did the age.

"What's your name, kid?" Wei Wuxian asked.

The boy, cheeks stuffed full with dumplings despite the tears the spice was bringing to his eyes, looked up.

"...Xue Yang," he admitted once the food had been swallowed.

"It's nice to meet you, Xue Yang. My name's Wei Ying, courtesy name Wei Wuxian."

Twenty years into the future, long after Xue Yang's death, a pair stepped onto a flat ledge. Under the afternoon sun, the rocks of Qishan seemed to glow.

(If Lan Jingyi was here, he would have complained endlessly about the heat.)

The dark stone reflected light to a near-blinding degree, completely at ends with the fog-filled lands of Gusu. Lan Sizhui's heavy robes were unsuited for the current climate but, in the name of Lan Qiren, Sizhui refrained from removing the outer layer.

Luckily, as the cliff got steeper and steeper, Wen Ning began handling the most difficult parts of their journey. As a fierce corpse, Sizhui's uncle remained mostly unaffected by the raging sun, able to reach the top without any obvious exertion.

"Thank you, Uncle," Lan Sizhui said as he was set down. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed in, tasting the air.

Unlike the Cloud Recesses, high in the isolated, lush forests of Gusu, the land that was once known as 'The Nightless City' was surrounded by steep, rocky cliffs and barren plains. The cliffs, as Sizhui had learned once, were originally viewed as a strong defense against enemy attacks, leading many people to gather to start their lives here. The height wouldn't do much to stop cultivators, of course, but, at the start of Qishan's creation, the ability to fly on swords had not been discovered yet.

(Even demonic cultivation, something that seemed as basic a part of the world as the Cloud Recesses itself, was only created toward the end of Wen Ruohan's reign.)

Inhaling the warm air, Lan Sizhui looked up.

'*A cloudless sky.*'

(The opposite of Gusu. It was warm. Too warm, in many ways.)

The sun burned bright, practically searing Lan Sizhui's face. He raised an arm to cover his head.

(Hanguang-jun had the symbol of the Wen Sect branded onto his skin. From what Sizhui had heard, Wei Wuxian used to, too.)

A breeze swept by but only brought more heat, nearly scalded Sizhui's skin. Meanwhile, Wen Ning stood to Sizhui's side, looking down on what seemed to be the leftovers of a wooden shack. Sizhui looked down as well, taking note of the faded paint from years past. The sight didn't seem to match the expression on Wen Ning's face. Even subdued as the corpse's facial movements had to be, the small smile on his face was easy to see. Upon noticing Sizhui's inquisitive gaze, Wen Ning looked toward him and his smile widened even more.

"There used to be a stall here," he explained. "It was right at the outskirts of the main road, so everyone coming to and leaving the Nightless City would pass by. I don't remember it all that well, but, according to my sister, I got separated from her one day when I was three. I'd gotten distracted by something or taken the wrong turn. The stall owner noticed me wandering around and gave me some food until A-Jie managed to find me. I'd loved the buns here ever since."

Wen Ning couldn't eat *anything* now, much less this. As Lan Sizhui looked down on the few remaining boards and twigs, he felt a strange feeling come over him.

'*The stall owner surely fled Qishan before the war reached here. Leaving that aside, Sect Leader Lan and the former Sect Leader Nie were always against taking non-Wen civilians as prisoners. If the owner is dead now, it probably isn't a direct result of the war.*'

And yet…

'*There were people here. People who lived here, selling buns day by day.*'

The thought was obvious. Laughably so.

'*There were people here whom Uncle Wen loved — people Xian-gege lived with for years.*'

Slowly, Sizhui turned his gaze toward the large, towering pile of stone in the distance. Once, it had been the palace at the center of Qishan. Sect Leader Wen had lived there. The Sect Leader's sons had lived there. Lan Sizhui's father had lived there.

Wen Ruohan's actions had turned it into this.

‘*Father,*’ Lan Sizhui thought, internally wincing at how that word sounded in his head. ‘*Wen Xu… Young Master Wen…. What were you thinking when Wen Ruohan did all this? Would you have changed your actions knowing how this ends?*’

(And what about the other version — the one in the alternate timeline Sizhui had created? What would that Wen Xu do now that he knew?)

The heat of the sun weighed heavily on them.

The pair walked forward, journeying past the charred remains of what was once the greatest city in the world. Some might have looked at this and felt saddened by the loss. Others, having grown up with stories of the Sunshot Campaign, might cheer. Though Sizhui could understand that on a conceptual level, he, despite standing here now, just felt distant from it all.

“Uncle?” Sizhui called out. “Did you… know anything around this section? Did you know anyone on this street?”

As if having expected the question, Wen Ning nodded once, pointing a little behind them at a small clearing without any traces of the buildings that might have been there once.

“A small garden was put together by some of the children around here,” Wen Ning explained. “Aunt Qian let them use her yard. They were even growing some medicinal herbs. I went to pick some up for A-Jie every once in a while.”

“Really?” Lan Sizhui asked, giving the patch a closer look. “And what about that area?”

“There used to be a library over there.”

“What about there?”

“A weaponsmith,” Wen Ning said. “I actually got my bow made by that shop owner’s son.”

Lan Sizhui’s eyes seemed to sparkle a little as he took everything in.

However, the further up they went — the closer to the main buildings of the Wen Sect they got — the less Wen Ning had to say.

“What about here?”

“There was… well, I suppose there was a restaurant over there,” Wen Ning admitted, pointing a few charred buildings down the block.

“Did you go there often?” Sizhui wondered.

“No, no. Young Master Wen — Wen-er-gongzi, Wen Chao, not your father — liked to go there often. I… tried to stay away.”

“...Ah.”

Further questions went much the same way:

“A brothel Wen-er-gongzi liked to visit was near here.”

“Wen-er-gonzi was in charge of the divisions that went this way-”

“This is fairly close to his favorite bar, so-”

All the way through to the palace.

“The sect did its training here, right?” Sizhui asked. “You must have come here often.”

“No, I actually did most of my training in one of the branches with A-Jie,” Wen Ning said. “We’re distantly related to Wen Ruohan, so it wasn’t that hard for A-Jie to keep me away.”

(Wen Chao knew him by reputation, but, at the archery competition, had to ask someone for his name. That was one of the few interactions they’d had; Wen Qing had done a truly impeccable job of keeping him safe.)

(Until the war, at least.)

(Wen Ning wished he’d been able to do the same for her.)

“We only came here when we were summoned,” he continued. “Wen-er-gongzi aside, she desperately wanted me to avoid Wen Ruohan’s gaze.”

Because Wen Ruohan had started a war, massacred thousands of cultivators, and destroyed countless sects in a mad bid to gain more power than he already had. He was evil.

(They said that about the Yiling Patriarch, too.)

Lan Sizhui paused for a bit, staring blankly at the once-towering sect walls which now laid directly in front of him, and asked, “I know you… tried to avoid him, but… what did you think of Wen Ruohan? Before the war started; back when he was just your sect leader.”

Wen Ning paused for a few seconds, not hesitant — mostly just unsure of how to answer. So many of his thoughts on the man were based on things that happened after the war began.

But from the beginning-

“He scared me,” Wen Ning admitted. “I mostly knew him by reputation, but A-Jie had met with him a few times. She always seemed so tired when she came home.”

They walked up the palace steps, taking care to not step where the stone had caved in. Weather had worn it down over decades and bandits and thieves had long since looted the palace for everything that was left. Anything that had been in the treasury belonged to the remaining Great Sects now.

(The experience had when walking through the city was completely different from trying to fly overtop. Hanguang-jun had been right when he’d suggested they travel by foot.)

“Oh, look! Over there. On the rocks!” Wen Ning called out abruptly. “The clan’s symbol is still engraved there.”

And indeed, there it was: a large carving of the sun etched into the stone. It had faded somewhat over the years, but the shape was still easy to recognize.

“I once saw the Sect Leader there, I think,” Wen Ning recalled. “A conference was held. Wen Ruohan wasn’t pleased that day, though, so A-Jie took me away pretty quickly.”

Lan Sizhui took the sight in, trying to envision what his grandfather might have looked like standing there, that day.

“...Was he often mad?”

That seemed to fit his reputation, at least.

“Maybe?” Wen Ning supposed. “Or… frustrated might be a better way to describe him. Whenever I saw him, he always seemed annoyed at what the people around him had done.”

Wen Chao had been a frequent source of frustration. The rest of the sect, too. At that time, the Wen Sect had been a force roughly equivalent to the other four great sects *combined*. The Nightless City’s population had been equivalently gargantuan. Life there was very different from life in Gusu.

Reaching a flatter area of the trek up, Wen Ning and Lan Sizhui passed by a pile of rubble containing a much lighter wood than the rest of the city. Beech, as Wen Ning recalled.

“There used to be a medical office here,” the fierce corpse explained. “The few times I saw him… Sect Leader Wen was only ever happy when A-Jie had accomplished something new.”

“Huh?” Lan Sizhui turned toward him, gaping just slightly. “Oh. I…”

He paused for a moment longer.

“...Really?”

“Yes,” Wen Ning nodded once more. “I didn’t see him much, but he often came personally to see what she had done. That was always stressful for A-Jie.”

Wen Ruohan had never cared about whether he was making her uncomfortable. Her research, on the other hand, was of the highest priority.

Even now, Wen Ning still didn’t really understand why Wen Ruohan had started the war. The supervisory offices the sect had tried to set up were essentially a declaration of conquest. Broken pride as the result of previous incidents could be a cause, but even that felt too short-sighted. The incident with the Xuanwu of Slaughter was inevitable, given who Wen Ruohan had left in charge. The sect’s embarrassment during the archery competition was more of the start, but that wasn’t fully right either.

Wen Ning stepped up the last step, reaching an area with the shattered remains of what had once been Wen Ruohan's throne. The Sect Leader's seat was barren now, the barely-identifiable structure left shattered and useless. All the paintings that had lined the walls were taken or burnt to ash decades ago.

Wen Ning had never once been able to look up and meet his Sect Leader's eyes.

As he looked down now, the throne he had feared so strongly appeared brittle and frail.

(If someone else had been sect leader, would the Wen Sect still be around? Or would they have met their end even sooner, the great power falling to the foolishness of someone like Wen Chao instead?)

(Though, come to think of it, he wasn't Wen Ruohan's only son.)

"Your father-"

He cut off.

Lan Sizhui glanced over, waiting for Wen Ning to continue. The fierce corpse made a meaningless show of clearing his throat.

"Your father was…"

A pause again. If Wen Ning still possessed a living body, he would have been fidgeting like mad.

"Young Master Wen, he… isn't someone I knew very well," Wen Ning admitted. "I was scared of him, too. He always seemed a lot like Wen Ruohan."

Though Wen Ruohan himself, from what Wen Ning had heard, never seemed to agree.

"Wen Xu was the one who led the attack on the Cloud Recesses, wasn't he?" Lan Sizhui asked.

"He was," Wen Ning agreed.

"He burned the sect down, killing Zewu-jun and Hanguang-jun's father in the process, right?"

Wen Ning nodded once more.

"...Do you know why?"

After a moment of hesitation, Wen Ning was forced to confess, "No. I didn't know him personally."

(The Lan sect didn't know him that well either. Wen Xu only occasionally spoke at conferences, much better at holding his tongue than Wen Chao had ever been. He hadn't even

been at the archery competition that led to the attack. He wasn't involved in the Xuanwu of Slaughter incident either. If he was offended by the Lan, it was only indirectly.)

"...Wen Ruohan ordered him to," Wen Ning said. "He might have not needed more reason than that."

The answer was based on conjecture, speculation, rumor, and reputation. Lan Sizhui knew that what he'd been told was far from a complete answer. However, right now, it was probably the most accurate picture anyone could give.

The Wen had been powerful and great.

Some people in Qishan had been kind.

Some of the Wen were not.

The people here had been people, just like with anywhere else.

They weren't people Sizhui knew, however.

'*The remnants of the Wen Sect who helped raise me in the Burial Mounds… those people are family. Uncle Wen, Xian-gege, Uncle Wen's sister, Hanguang-jun — those people are family to me.*'

And Wen Xu, who had done things Sizhui couldn't possibly agree with — who felt like just as much of a mystery as before?

'*If I… have a chance to get to know the version of him in the other timeline, I don't see any reason to turn that down. I'd like to speak with him, at the very least.*'

However-

"Uncle Wen?" Sizhui said.

As he looked over, the unbearably hot sun of Qishan pressed down upon Sizhui, feeling completely alien when compared to the serene, fog-filled lands of Gusu.

(It was quiet here. Despite the lack of people, there were far fewer animals in Qishan than there were around the Cloud Recesses. It was quite different from home.)

Did Sizhui want to know more about the Wen? Certainly. He wanted to know more about the bun seller who took care of Wen Ning, the auntie who allowed children to use her home as a garden, the young boy who crafted Wen Ning's bow — he wanted to learn about Wen Qing, "Granny Wen," "Uncle Four," and everyone else Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning had mentioned to him.

The people who had once lived in this palace, so separated from the rest of the world, didn't hold his interest anywhere near as much.

And thus, smiling brightly, Lan Sizhui looked up at Wen Ning.

“I think I’m ready to go home,” he said.

And, at those words, the fierce corpse finally seemed to relax. He nodded once.

“I’m sure Hanguang-jun and Wei-gongzi have been missing you,” he said.

If Jiang Yanli heard the name “Wei Wuxian” spoken aloud one more time she was fairly certain she was going to cry. It would be a rather poor reaction to have considering who she was surrounded by, but, after everything they had seen together, the gathered crowd wasn’t likely to comment on that.

Either way, that didn’t stop her from sucking in a breath of air when the world darkened anew.

Black was all that could be seen. For a moment, it seemed like the simulation hadn’t yet begun. However, over time, the watchers’ eyes adjusted to the low level of light, allowing them to see Wei Wuxian’s exhausted form. He sat on the hard, cold stone of the demon slaughtering cave, barely seeming to register Wen Ning and Wen Qing. His eyes gazed emptily, unseeing and lifeless.

And to think, at the beginning of the simulation, Wei Wuxian’s lighthearted personality and jubilant mannerisms were part of what convinced the Jiang family this might be real. That had been a look at a future Wei Wuxian — one who had already lived through this time — one who remembered having *died*. No tragedy, no matter how bad, meant one should be miserable forever, but…

‘*When he first came back to life, we were able to see his thoughts…*’ Lan Wangji trailed off. ‘*Despite that… the adult version of Wei Ying was almost identical to his fifteen year-old self. Behavior-wise, they were almost exactly the same.*’

While watching that initial flashback, Lan Wangji had gotten genuinely annoyed at the simulated Wei Wuxian. The young Yiling Patriarch had seemed loud, frivolous, crude, undisciplined…

‘A-Xian, you were born with a smiling face,’ Jiang Yanli had said. ‘Always smiling, never minding sorrowful things.’

Wei Wuxian trembled silently, his cut off sobs making his shoulders shake.

‘No matter what situation you’re in, you can always be happy.’

The cave’s resentment seemed to tremble in despair.

Wei Wuxian was joy in its purest form.

How could they — how *dare they* — lower him to this?

Wen Qing and Wen Ning made eye contact once more. Then, as silently as the flap of a butterfly’s wings, Wen Qing knelt by Wei Wuxian’s side. There was a flash of silver.

Suddenly, Wei Wuxian toppled over.

"...Huh?" he asked.

"What?" Jiang Cheng asked simultaneously, straightening up.

Wen Qing looked down at Wei Wuxian softly, seeming regretful and yet resolute, too. Slowly, she combed her fingers through Wei Wuxian's hair, brushing it to the side.

"I'm sorry," Wen Qing muttered, pulling her hand back.

Under normal circumstances, Wei Wuxian would have been able to dodge her attack easily. However, just now, he had been caught completely off guard. Confusion covered his face, a mix of disbelief and blatant shock quickly beginning to take over.

That look was shared amongst most of the watchers. The doctor in question, however, merely closed her eyes, breathing out slowly.

(If her other self was doing this, then, in all likelihood…)

"What are you doing?" Wei Wuxian asked, watching Wen Qing and Wen Ning get up. The siblings exchanged a glance then turned back to Wei Wuxian to bow once.

It was a solemn salutation.

"Qing-guniang?" Jiang Yanli asked. "What are… what do you think-"

"What are you going to do? Just where are you going?" Wei Wuxian demanded, his voice growing frantic as he struggled to make his paralyzed body move. "Tell me!"

"When you woke up, we were in the middle of discussing this. I think we've come to a conclusion," Wen Qing said.

"Discussing what? Stop this nonsense! Take out the needle — let me go!"

'*The Yiling Patriarch's been paralyzed, but he's not completely powerless,*' Jin Guangshan thought. '*Unlike spiritual cultivators, most of Wei Wuxian's powers can be activated with his voice. If they plan on handing him over as a peace offering, they'll surely need to do something about that first.*'

Perhaps watching this would give Jin Guangshan a better idea of how to subdue demonic cultivators, should the need arrive.

Yet, at that moment, Wen Ning stood up, his head hanging low. And then, contrary to Jin Guangshan's expectations-

"Jiejie and I have decided… we'll be going to Koi Tower."

"Koi Tower?" Madam Jin repeated.

“We’re going to… give ourselves up.”

“Huh?” Jin Zixuan asked, gazing blankly at the segment. “Wait, but-”

He looked to the side, his eyes landing on Jiang Yanli’s pale, horrified face. Eventually, he looked back at the simulation once more.

“Huh?” he asked again.

“Give yourselves up?” Wei Wuxian repeated, giving a mocking laugh at the absurdity of the suggestion. “How do you plan on doing that? Apologizing? Surrendering?”

Swallowing once, Wen Qing quickly rubbed her eyes and responded, “Yes, more or less. While you were unconscious, LanlingJin sent a few messengers to the Burial Mounds.”

“To say what? Don’t talk one word at a time! Just tell me! Finish your explanation!”

“The LanlingJin Sect wants you to answer for what you did. They’re demanding you hand over the two remaining leaders of the Wen Sect,” Wen Qing revealed. “Especially… the Ghost General.”

A sharp, cold horror fell upon most of the watchers. This wasn’t an unexpected outcome. Jin Zixuan had died — there was no way the LanlingJin sect would allow that to go unpunished.

(The specifics of *who* was ambushed would have no effect on that.)

Still, Nie Mingjue couldn’t help but frown.

‘*Something like this… it must have attracted the attention of every sect there. I know everyone was already suspicious of Wei Wuxian because of the earlier incident, but…*’

But now Jin Zixuan was dead. Everyone would assume, without hesitation, that Wei Wuxian had probably cursed Jin Zixun too. It was only natural to demand repayment.

Yet, the more he thought about it, the more Nie Mingjue furrowed his brows.

‘*What if Huaisang had been in a situation like this?*’

Huaisang? Weak, harmless Huaisang? It was nearly impossible to imagine. Nie Mingjue’s baby brother had barely changed even twenty years in the future.

(Said baby brother was almost a year older than Wei Wuxian.)

‘*No one would think Huaisang was physically capable of using such a complex curse, but… but what if? What if someone attacked him after inviting him in as a guest? What if one of Huaisang’s bodyguards killed Jin Zixuan in the confusion? What if the Jin demanded the ‘leader of the Nie’ pay for what Huaisang had to do to defend himself? How would I respond then?*’

It was hard to imagine.

It *would never* happen.

No one would have the gall.

(Jin Zixun was encouraged to ambush Wei Wuxian; none of the great sects would ever dare ambush the Nie. If, for some reason, this had happened to Nie Mingjue or Nie Huaisang, people would have investigated further.)

Nie Mingjue began gritting his teeth together.

'*I could have called for an investigation, right? I could have questioned Zixun about his actions that day. I could have demanded to know why hundreds of people attacked two.*'

Except he hadn't.

Jin Zixuan was dead. The world wanted someone to punish. Wei Wuxian had killed him. According to the Jin, Jin Zixuan's life was worth two Wen — one of whom hadn't even *been there* during the incident. Wen Qing had given Wei Wuxian some of the meager coins they had to buy Jin Ling a birthday present. Because of that, she would die.

'*No, rather than stopping them…*' Nie Mingjue paused, a sinking feeling filling his heart. '*Wouldn't I have been a cause? Wouldn't I be willing to take any chance possible to punish Wen Ruohan's kin? Forget stopping it — it was probably my suggestion!*'

He wasn't even being blind anymore. It was far too intentional to call it that.

Meanwhile, for several seconds, Wei Wuxian had been silent, slowly coming to terms with what Wen Qing had said. He took in slow breaths, struggling to keep his eyes open. After several more seconds, a look of frustration crossed his face. Still paralyzed from the doctor's needle, he gradually looked up at the pair before him.

"...I'm warning you two. Get this needle out of me *right now.*"

It was phrased as a threat. In actuality, Wei Wuxian was all-but begging her as he said this. He had to; without help, there was nothing Wei Wuxian could do. For once, the Yiling Patriarch had no plans or solutions. His first time in the Burial Mounds had been hopeless, but this, now, was…

Jiang Yanli shut her eyes, turning away. There was nothing gruesome there for her to look away from, and yet the sight before her felt like the most unbearable thing they had been shown so far.

Wen Qing, on the other hand, kept her expression tightly controlled, only allowing brief glimpses of emotion to pass through. The doctor breathed in slowly, fully composing herself once more.

"The leaders of the Wen Remnants — that's us. According to them, if you hand us over, this situation will be considered resolved. I'll have to ask you to lay here for a little while. The effects of the needle will wear off in three days. I've talked to Uncle Four already. He'll take it out if an emergency happens-"

“You can shut the fuck up!” Wei Wuxian snapped. “This is already enough of a mess as it is! Don’t add to my problems! Give yourselves up? Did I ask you to do that?! Pull the needle out!”

Jiang Cheng flinched just a little, Wei Wuxian’s shouts catching him by surprise. No matter what happened — no matter what Madam Yu said about his parents or what punishments he was given — Wei Wuxian *never* got angry like this. Even with Wen Chao it had been a quiet, efficient vengeance. His flute music was always haunting, never raged.

And that, more than anything, cemented exactly how powerless Wei Wuxian felt right now.

Several seconds went by, neither Wen Qing nor Wen Ning moving to take the needle out. Wei Wuxian only became angrier at that, starting to struggle like mad. However, Wen Qing’s paralysis couldn’t be overcome so easily. Wei Wuxian remained where he was, only able to look up at them and scream.

“Do you think this is funny?” he asked. “I’m not in the mood, Wen Qing! Let me go! Right now!”

She gazed back calmly.

“Take it out! If you go there, I’ll just have to save you too! It’s not going to solve anything. Do you think you’ll get something by doing this?! I’m telling you to let me go!”

Neither Wen Qing nor Wen Ning moved to help him up.

And, at last, the futility of his attempts became apparent to Wei Wuxian. The anger vanished from his gaze. His breaths hitched. When he spoke next, it was agony that could be heard most clearly:

“Why… why are you going to Koi Tower?” he asked. “I wasn’t the one who cursed Jin Zixun.”

“But they’ve already decided it was you.”

Nie Mingjue flinched back. Jiang Cheng clenched his hands into fists. Nie Huaisang merely glanced to the side, his gaze landing upon Jin Guangshan’s form.

(The man’s expression had a certain kind of satisfaction layered underneath it.)

“Then — then let’s find the person who actually set the curse!” Wei Wuxian shouted, regaining energy as he finally, *finally* found a solution. “Jin Zixun’s definitely gone to experts of cursing. The usual method for dealing with curses is to reflect them back on the caster! If we do that, we can then just look for someone with the same curse mark as him!”

Wen Ruohan withheld a scoff. Jin Guangshan hadn’t cared who’d actually cursed his nephew. Jin Guangyao, who’d helped Jin Zixun, probably hadn’t cared either. Now that Jin Zixuan was dead, the only one who’d actually care about the caster’s identity was Jin Zixun himself.

(A fact which Wei Wuxian surely already knew, if he was able to think rationally right now.)

And, thus, Wen Qing shook her head.

“There’s no use,” she said.

“Why not?”

“There are so many people it could be — where would you even start looking? Should we set up a checkpoint on every street of every city and make everyone who passes by take off their clothes so we can check?”

“Why not?!”

“Who’d be willing to set up checkpoints for you?!” Wen Qing snapped back. “For how long do you intend to search?! Certainly, we might find them after eight or ten years — but how long do you think those people will wait?!”

Although no one answered that question out loud, similar thoughts sprang into everyone’s minds. Wei Wuxian would have a day, maybe. Two at best; a few hours at worst.

‘*Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, Jin Clan of Lanling, Lan Clan of Gusu, and Nie Clan of Qinghe have all taken the lead and burned the Burial Mounds to the ground.*’

Perhaps those assessments were overly pessimistic. Even if Wei Wuxian *had* intended to kill Jin Zixuan, why would that mean they’d massacre the civilians in the Burial Mounds? Something else would have to happen to cause that, right?

(Since when had they needed a *reason* to kill Wen dogs?)

The more they thought about it, the worse the situation seemed.

“But….” Wei Wuxian floundered, unable to accept that. “But there’s no rebounded curse mark on me!”

“During today’s incident, did they ask you?”

Wei Wuxian froze.

Jin Zixuan did the same.

“...No,” he admitted.

‘*The former Sect Leader Jin spoke with Jin Zixun, suggesting to him that the banquet could be used as an opportunity to kill Wei Wuxian, meaning… meaning Sect Leader Jin wouldn’t have to welcome him to Koi Tower after all.*’

“Right, they didn’t ask,” Wen Qing confirmed. “They simply prepared to kill you. Do you understand now? They don’t need any proof. They don’t care about finding the truth either. Whether you have a curse mark on your body doesn’t matter at all. You’re

the Yiling Patriarch, the King of the Demonic Path. You specialize in dark curses; it wouldn't be strange at all if you didn't have a curse mark on you. Besides, you wouldn't even have to do it yourself. You could have gotten one of the Wen dogs, one of your slaves, to do it for you. You won't be able to deny it."

No matter what evidence he showed, Wei Wuxian's guilt would never be disproven.

Jin Zixun scoffed, pointing out, 'Other than a criminal using wicked means like you, who could have put such a detestable thing on me?'

If Jin Zixun's ambush had succeeded, what would people have said? Would anyone other than the Jiang Sect have done anything?

(Would the Jiang Sect even have done anything?)

Jiang Cheng swallowed, feeling nausea well up inside of him.

'If you insist on protecting them, I won't be able to protect you!'

The expression that had been on his other-self's face at that moment still lingered in Jiang Cheng's mind, clear as day.

Hadn't Wei Wuxian been kicked out of the Jiang Sect precisely so that they wouldn't have to take the fall with him? Now that Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng's brother-in-law, was dead…

"This is the fucking worst," Jiang Cheng hissed.

(Madam Yu didn't so much as twitch at Jiang Cheng's crude language. She had been thinking the same thing, after all.)

And so had Wei Wuxian, apparently. He cursed viciously, having no response to Wen Qing's argument.

"You see? There's no use," she declared. "With things as they are, the identity of the one who placed the Hundred Holes Curse is no longer important. What's important is the fact that hundreds of people were killed at Qiongqi Path and… and that Jin Zixuan was killed by A-Ning."

Jin Zixuan breathed heavily at those words, forcefully suppressing any other reaction he could have. Of course of course *of course* he had just made the situation a million times worse. Of course he was the reason everything started going wrong.

Or, rather…

'And it would be inconvenient *for you to have to welcome someone you'd made public enemy number one, huh?' Nie Mingjue asked.*

Jin Guangshan's response left much to be desired.

“I hate this situation,” Jin Zixuan muttered. Jiang Yanli, standing to his side, gave a solemn nod of agreement.

As for Wen Qing-

Neither the real nor simulated version showed much sorrow right now. They did not cry nor weep; their lips did not tremble with fear. Resignation was clear in Wen Qing's brow but determination shone through just as strongly. In the face of that, Wei Wuxian was helpless.

“But… but-”

Wei Wuxian cut off.

“But… even then, I should be the one going. I was the one who made corpses kill people. Why would the knife go instead of the murderer?!”

Wen Ning, as a fierce corpse, had been objectified time and time again. The Jin had apparently held him captive; Xue Yang had done everything he could to break him; beyond being a “Wen-dog,” the Ghost General itself was an “it” to the masses. Wei Wuxian had restored his consciousness, but…

As Wei Wuxian had just admitted, Wen Ning had no control over what had just occurred.

‘*Not that Wei Wuxian had much choice in the matter either,*’ the real Wen Qing thought.

Either way, blame was irrelevant. Even with Wei Wuxian’s admission of guilt, the simulated Wen Qing and Wen Ning remained unphased.

“Isn’t it better this way?” she asked.

“Better as in what?!”

Because how could *anything* about this situation be considered good?

“Wei Ying, we both know how the sects see us. Wen Ning is a knife — a knife that scares them, but also a knife they use as an excuse to attack you. If we go then you, without that knife, might finally be able to settle this matter. This entire thing might finally be over.”

Wei Wuxian stared at her in shock. There were no words he could say. Thus, at that moment, he let out a wordless, agonized roar.

Lan Wangji clenched his hands into fists, practically choking on his own helplessness, now.

“At this moment…” Jin Ling read out. “Wei Wuxian finally understood why Uncle would always express extreme anger toward certain things he did, why he’d always say he had a hero complex, and why he’d always say he wanted to beat him up. Watching others take the responsibility onto their own shoulders, insisting on bearing the burden of all negative consequences — it was unbearable for Wei Wuxian.”

Despite how vague such a line must have been to him, Jin Ling spoke those words solemnly and slow. Throughout the entire simulation, the juniors had always been woefully unaware of what their narration referred to. This time, however, there was a notable lack of jovialness around them.

(Last time they had seen Jin Ling, he was stabbing Wei Wuxian in the stomach. Perhaps it was inevitable that this line would impact Jin Ling more than the others would.)

(The watchers were grateful. They weren't sure they could handle hearing him be cheerful right now.)

"Do you two understand or not?" Wei Wuxian asked. "By giving yourselves up to Koi Tower — don't you know what will happen to you two, especially Wen Ning?! Don't you love your brother more than anyone else?"

"Whatever happens to him will be what he deserves."

Jiang Yanli's mouth dropped open.

"Wen Ning doesn't deserve it at all," Wei Wuxian argued. "I'm the one who-"

"Anyways, we should have been dead long ago. These remaining days we've had have been nothing but a blessing for us," Wen Qing said.

Wen Ning nodded once.

As called upon, Jin Ling elaborated with, "Wen Ning was always like this — agreeing or nodding along to what others said, never objecting. Wei Wuxian had never abhorred his nod and docility so much."

"No. You're wrong!" Wei Wuxian protested, shaking his head. However, in response, Wen Qing merely knelt down before him.

Thwack

She flicked Wei Wuxian's forehead once, the action scolding and affectionate and unnervingly calm.

It was too calm. She was going to die. Her brother was going to die. And yet all she showed right now was acceptance.

When Jiang Yanli exhaled next, her breathing was shaky and unstable. Her own saliva felt acidic on her tongue. Initially, Wen Qing's interest in the simulation had been the result of one thing and one thing alone: Wen Ning, her brother, who had been turned into a fierce corpse by Wei Wuxian. She had been willing to do anything to keep him safe from them.

The scene taking place right now should have been so far from who she was that there was no chance of it being true.

Unfortunately, as with all things in the simulation, the plausibility of this scene was exactly what made it hurt so much.

Wei Wuxian opened up his eyes again, having shut them during the flick. His eyes were watery, shining even in the cave's dim light. Wen Qing, meanwhile, allowed her smile to turn into a business-like sternness once more.

"I've said what I had to say, explained things, and said farewell. Then, goodbye."

"No-"

"No!" Jin Zixuan shouted, unable to hold himself back anymore. "No. No, it was my… you shouldn't have to-"

"Zixuan," Madam Jin said once. Her son stopped.

The tone of his mother's voice had not been angry, telling him that he should not defend his own killer. It had not been scolding either, telling him to compose himself in front of the current crowd. The 'Zixuan' she had called out just then had been tired.

Hopeless.

Resigned.

Him protesting now wouldn't change the situation. No matter how awful it was — no matter how much they hated it — there was nothing they could do.

There was nothing Wei Wuxian could do either.

Standing up, Wen Qing continued, "I've never said anything like this before. But, now that we're here, there are indeed a few things I should say. I won't have another chance after this."

"Shut up-"

"I'm sorry. And, thank you," she said.

And, with that, she and Wen Ning left. Casually, quietly, with little to no fuss at all.

Jin Zixuan sucked in a breath of air.

Jin Ling had faced Wei Wuxian again, scoffing, 'Let me tell you — don't think I'll be grateful just because you saved me! Don't expect me to say anything cringe-worthy either!'

In response, Wei Wuxian had smiled sadly.

'Young man, there are two cringe-worthy phrases that must be said no matter what,' he revealed.

'Which two?"

"Thank you,' and 'I'm sorry."

Did Jin Ling even know Wen Qing's name? If he did, did he know her as anything other than a filthy Wen dog? Did he know she was executed for Jin Zixuan's death despite not having been even remotely involved?

"She wasn't even there," he muttered.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair.

It still *was*, however. And that was the thing that was most unfair of all.

"Wei Wuxian lied there for three days."

The simulation changed. It was brighter now, the sun having moved through the sky until it was directly facing the entrance of the cave. Without the narration, it would seem like only a few hours had passed.

Wei Wuxian had been lying there helplessly for far, far longer than that.

Lan Wangji felt sick at the mere thought.

Then, without warning, there was a twitch. Wei Wuxian's fingers had moved just the slightest bit. His eyes lowered, landing on his hand. Physically speaking, that was the most response he could give right now. It didn't remain that way for long.

His fingers moved first. Then his wrists, his arms, his legs, his neck…. Wen Qing was an unmatched doctor. Her technique had been trained to perfection. Within ten minutes of that first twitch, Wei Wuxian was able to stand up once more. He was out of the cave mere moments later.

For a brief moment, Madam Yu expected the simulation to jump forward to Wei Wuxian arriving at Lotus Pier. She wasn't consciously aware of that expectation. However, as seconds passed with Wei Wuxian frantically stumbling through trees, she found herself growing more and more impatient. She wondered why it was taking so long — why it wouldn't just *show* his arrival at the sect.

Except, the moment Wei Wuxian got to the bottom of the Burial Mounds, he paused.

'*Where… do I go now?*' he wondered, breathing heavily.

The sky was growing darker, clouds moving to cover up the sun.

'*The Burial Mounds?*' he thought. '*...No, I just came from there.*'

He blinked.

'*Lotus Pier?*' came next. '*I haven't been there… in over a year.*'

Jiang Cheng winced.

Madam Yu, standing behind him, gaped just slightly at what she had heard.

(Wei Wuxian had been kicked out of the Jiang Sect, just like she'd wanted. That was part of why, now, he had no where he could go.)

~~A strange need to smack her past-self filled Madam Yu's head. It wasn't possible — wasn't even logically consistent — but she felt the desire nonetheless.~~

Jiang Yanli clenched her hands into fists, staring resolutely at the simulation even as her eyes watered with tears.

(Right at the end of the last segment, Wei Wuxian had fallen back, buried his face in his hands, and asked for someone — anyone — to tell him what to do. No one had an answer back then. No one had an answer for him now.)

Just as Wei Wuxian had said, there was nowhere he could go.

'*Koi Tower?*' he thought next.

"No," Jin Zixuan begged. "Don't, don't, don't-"

The words 'Koi Tower' should have conjured a picture of home for him. Instead, all Jin Zixuan could see was a den of conspiracy and danger. If Wei Wuxian went…

~~The Ghost General had been chained up, locked away, and held captive by *someone*. Jin Guangshan had been one of the few people Wen Ning remembered from his capture.~~

A chill ran down Jin Zixuan's spine.

'*It's already been three days,*' Wei Wuxian acknowledged. '*Even if I go now, Wen Qing's corpse and Wen Ning's ashes will be the only things left.*'

We Wuxian stood still, staring blankly at the sky.

(If the Jin had truly been motivated by fear and suspicion, rather than greed, Wen Ning would indeed have been just ashes by then. However, as they all knew, even thirteen years later that wouldn't be true.)

As such:

"In that moment, despite how big the world was, Senior Wei suddenly felt like it had no place for him at all."

Lan Sizhui's words stabbed straight into Jiang Cheng, leaving him gasping for air. He stumbled back, not even having realized he was standing, and fell into his chair.

'If you insist on protecting them, then I won't be able to protect you!'

'Then there's no need for you to protect me! Just go!'

The air seemed suffocating for an instant. A moment later, a sharp, cutting laugh resounded throughout the room. Jiang Cheng's throat burned, letting him know that sound was coming from him.

'*At… the very least… the Wen siblings….*' He paused, swallowing once. '*I need to bring back their ashes.*'

Jin Zixuan's quiet, desperate repetition of 'no, no, no' got louder and louder.

There was a jump forward in time. Wei Wuxian was now at Koi Tower. He walked calmly, barely bothering to hide his presence. For some reason, sneaking in seemed even easier than ever right now. The outer halls were shockingly deserted, making coming in uninvited a trivial endeavor.

"No, no, no, no, no-"

People would pass by every once in a while, forcing Wei Wuxian to hide, but the high ranking cultivators Koi Tower often had roaming around were nowhere to be found. Wei Wuxian continued moving further inside.

He seemed to have no plan in mind. Madam Jin even noticed him making a few too many turns and walking the same hallways several times. It wasn't that he didn't know the layout of Koi Tower, but rather that he didn't have even the first clue where to look. He roamed uselessly, like a ghost floating through the halls.

The cries of an infant cut through the air.

"Who… A-Ling?" Jiang Yanli asked. "Is that… then that's-"

Wei Wuxian turned.

The cries were coming from a large, lightless place. Through the open door, the interior could be seen. A large, black coffin rested in the center of the room. Two women in white kneeled before it.

Jiang Yanli was one.

Nie Mingjue looked away.

Nie Huaisang glanced over, slightly surprised. Though Huaisang had looked away quite a few times, he couldn't recall many instances where his brother had. There was no gore nor mutilation in the sight before them now.

Despite that, it seemed like Nie Mingjue couldn't help but shake at this scene.

'*Do you blame yourself, Da-ge?*' Nie Huaisang wondered. '*We're hardly the most involved parties here, but… I suppose I can't blame you for feeling that way.*'

If the Nie had been people Wei Wuxian felt like he could have gone to — people the Wen felt would be righteous — the tragedy unfolding before them wouldn't have happened. It was

hard for anyone here to watch this unfold.

(Though, strangely, the person who looked least affected right now was Jin Guangshan, the victim's father.)

"A-Li, you can stop sitting here."

Madam Jin, the other woman clothed in white, had spoken. She reached toward Jiang Yanli, ready to help her up. Jiang Yanli just shook her head.

A defeated look — so different from the woman's usual form — came over Madam Jin.

At times like this, Madam Yu couldn't help but recall how loudly she had proclaimed that Wei Wuxian should have let her friend's son die. She wondered, now, what sort of face she would have made if Madam Jin had said the same thing about her son.

Nonetheless, Madam Jin attempted once more:

"I'll stay here," she offered. "A-Li, you shouldn't sit any longer. You won't be able to hold up."

"I'm fine, mother. I'd like… to sit here for a while longer."

The two of them had probably already been kneeling there for hours.

(Madam Jin wondered if it was just a coincidence that, at this time, Jin Guangshan was not here. Sect Leader or not, this was just a few days after the death of his son and heir.)

(If Jiang Yanli had died, Madam Jin was certain Jiang Fengmian would have been here.)

Then, at last:

"I'll get you something to eat," Madam Jin offered. She knew, clearly, that nothing she could say would convince Jiang Yanli to move away.

Gone were the determined stride and prideful posture that Madam Jin had become known for so many years ago. As soon as she turned away from Jiang Yanli, her mask fell and she began to tremble.

It wasn't that Jin Zixuan thought his mother would be indifferent to his death. Everything she had ever done, no matter how prideful she seemed at the time, told him that she loved him. Throughout the simulation, every time his other-self's death was mentioned only reinforced that fact.

And yet, despite that, seeing his strong, unwavering mother like this was still a surprise.

(A surprise that, strangely enough, brought him no comfort at all. Rather than being touched by her concern, all Jin Zixuan could do was wonder *why* he hadn't expected it.)

(And then, when his eyes drifted over to the real version of his father, that answer came to him like an arrow to the chest.)

Wei Wuxian, who was watching Madam Jin, frowned just a little. Though he didn't know her as well as Jin Zixuan, the change in her demeanor was clear to anyone who had met her even once. The Yiling Patriarch clenched his hands into fists.

And the slight, barely noticeable sound generated by that motion was enough to set Madam Jin alert.

"Who's there?!" she shouted, swerving toward him.

Wei Wuxian looked back at her, eyes wide.

"Everyone!" Madam Jin screamed. "Everyone! Wei Ying — he's here! He snuck into Koi Tower!"

The hate in her gaze was obvious. Understandably so. Undeniably so.

Yet, when looking at it, the real Madam Jin couldn't help but sigh.

Wei Wuxian ran. He jumped down to a lower level, hearing a torrent of footsteps bounding after him immediately after. All the while, he didn't so much as glance at Jiang Yanli.

Jiang Yanli was looking at him though. As soon as she laid eyes on Wei Wuxian, her mouth opened for some sort of call — for some sort of shout, some sort of scream.

Wei Wuxian moved too fast. They cut away before they could hear her say anything.

Jiang Yanli moved closer to Jin Zixuan, her long-standing, ongoing frustration leaking through in the form of a deep, weary exhaustion. Right at the very beginning, they had been told Wei Wuxian would kill Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli. For most of this time, Jiang Yanli had been certain that was just abjectly untrue. However, that hadn't explained the strange guilt Wei Wuxian felt every time Jin Ling or Jiang Cheng mentioned them.

She understood now, why it had happened. There were countless factors you could point to, but, above all else, Jin Zixuan had scared Wei Wuxian in that instant.

'*So what about me?*' Jiang Yanli wondered. '*They accused you of killing me too, right? I know you would never want to, but…. You haven't seen me much in the last few years. You heard about my wedding from* Lan Wangji.'

It was a point she went back to again and again. Almost more so than anything else the simulation had shown, that was one thing she could not accept.

'*A-Xian… right now… were you scared of me?*'

It felt hard to deny, seeing Wei Wuxian fleeing Koi Tower and then Lanling as a whole. Even without his sword, he was not easy to catch. The few cultivators in Lanling lost

sight of him soon enough. However, even then, Wei Wuxian didn't stop trying to run. The trees and forests he passed through all blurred together, making it near-impossible to tell where he was. Even Wei Wuxian probably didn't know. Nonetheless, at one point, he finally began to slow.

If it weren't for the fact that the simulation now showed a setting sun creeping down behind the trees, Wen Ruohan would have had no idea how long Wei Wuxian ran. The Chief Cultivator stared with narrowed eyes, watching Wei Wuxian's shaking form.

The Yiling Patriarch breathed heavily, his eyes gazing blankly at the space before him.

~~Even without a core~~ Wei Wuxian could run quite fast. However, the same issue he had before arose once more. Right now, there was nowhere Wei Wuxian could go. No one would help him now.

Wen Ruohan closed his eyes, breathing out slowly.

'*I don't want to watch this,*' he thought.

A childish, ridiculous, illogical notion.

Wei Wuxian shook, breathing heavily a few times more.

There was murmuring to the side.

At last, Wei Wuxian glanced over. Whether he was consciously aware of it or not, the large, bustling crowd outside of the city had probably been part of the reason he stopped. The people there were holding a heated, passionate discussion.

"Ghost General-!"

"The Yiling Patriarch-!"

"Those *Wen dogs!*"

Perhaps hearing those familiar words had been enough to make Wei Wuxian come to a halt. At the very least, they were enough to make him direct his attention toward the speakers now.

"The Ghost General is truly fierce. He said he was there to give himself up but then suddenly went on a rampage. He went around slaughtering again, this time in Koi Tower!"

"I'm glad I didn't attend that day."

"He's a dog trained by Wei Wuxian! No wonder he bites everyone in his path!"

"Wei Ying, though… he shouldn't have made it if he couldn't control it. Creating a mad dog without a leash — sooner or later, he's gonna go through a qi deviation. With the

way things are going, I doubt that day is far away. His creations will turn on him, of that I'm sure!"

Wen Ning was an 'it' to everyone here. They didn't use that word to refer to whether Wen Ning was conscious or not during that attack. Either way, he would still be an 'it' to them.

Wen Qing sat frighteningly still. Her hands were not clenched into fists, though they had been just moments before. Her stare was as blank as Wei Wuxian's.

'*Suddenly, he went on a rampage,*' they'd said.

Wen Ning had gone berserk?

Right. Now that she thought about that, she knew that already.

In the far future, Wei Wuxian united with Wen Ning once more. The fierce corpse had been missing for many years, presumed dead. Nails had been stuck into his head.

'The Sects agreed to force me to hand you and the Stygian Tiger Seal over to them. I tried to destroy the amulet before I died, but you… it was said you'd been turned to ashes by the LanlingJin sect.'

When that was shown, Wen Qing hadn't known how to respond.

She hadn't known that she and her brother had given themselves up willingly, all to protect Wei Wuxian. They had been willing to die for him.

(Wen Ning had not died.)

(What had they done to her brother, those thirteen years?)

Wei Wuxian had then raised two fingers, bringing them to the center of Wen Ning's head. A moment later, the world changed. *Lan, Nie, Jiang, and Jin cultivators had glared at them — at Wen Ning, whose memories they were seeing — with a cautious, wary hate. Wen Ning had then growled, his muscles tensing up.*

'The Ghost General is going crazy!' someone had screamed.

Nie Mingjue had raised his saber and leapt forward.

The next thing Wen Ning remembered was being chained up in a cave, the three figures present discussing the progress they had made on him.

And now, as Wen Qing looked on at the crowd of frenzied gossipers surrounding the city gates, she couldn't help but laugh.

And yet, at the next words spoken, her mad laughter broke off into a pained half-gasp.

"How unfortunate for the LanlingJin Sect," someone said.

Jin Zixuan had died. That was, objectively, unfortunate. When Wen Ning rampaged, more from LanlingJin had probably died.

“Things are even worse for the GusuLan Sect! Over half of the thirty-or-so victims were from that sect! They were clearly only there to help calm things down!”

Because the Lan Sect was righteous and had a *duty* to intervene when things went wrong. It was something Lan Xichen had taken pride in his entire life.

Wei Wuxian shook his head: ‘Why would the knife go instead of the murderer?!’

People had died when Wen Ning rampaged. Members of the Lan Sect had died.

~~Because Lan Xichen had decided to trust those who blatantly coveted that knife time and time again.~~

“It’s a good thing the Ghost General was finally burned to ash. If not, just the idea of that thing roaming outside, going on rampages now and again, would be enough to give me nightmares!”

Someone spat on the ground, agreeing, “That’s the end all Wen Dogs should meet!”

(The end Wen Ning had *not* met, despite these claims.)

(A fact Wei Wuxian did not know, given the expression spreading across his face.)

“The Ghost General’s been erased. Wei Wuxian should realize what’s going on by now, huh? I heard many sect leaders have already left to go to the pledge conference! How terrific!”

A chill ran up Jiang Cheng’s spine. It was a feeling he had grown used to over the past few days.

‘*Other me, you… you better put a stop to whatever’s going on. Or, or at the very least-*’

Jiang Cheng’s hands clenched into fists, desperation filling him.

‘*-Don’t make it worse.*’

Right now, as Wei Wuxian listened to the gathered crowd’s words, his face turned colder than ice. Even Lan Wangji’s usual demeanor didn’t match the frigid chill now featured on the Patriarch.

‘*Of course…*’ Wei Wuxian thought. ‘*No matter what I do, no one’s ever pleased. When I win, they fear me. When I lose, they cheer.*’

(Wei Wuxian had ‘cheated’ to get one third of the prey. Nie Mingjue had simply done as expected.)

‘*I’m a cultivator of the crooked path either way. What did those years of persistence mean? What were they for?*’

Within that chill, a slow-burning rage began to churn.

The resentful energy passed that feeling along quite clearly. It was unnecessary; Nie Mingjue was feeling like that regardless.

Wen Ruohan’s fingers twitched, the desire to tear out the speakers’ throats growing strong. As it was, he settled for committing their features to memory. If he wanted to find them again, he was certain he could.

Those faces were now smiling wide, laughter spreading across the group. Jeers and condemnations sprang forth, every insult and accusation they could manage thrust onto Wei Wuxian one by one.

“Ha! It’ll be perfect if he spends the rest of his life obediently huddling in that damn mountain of his. If he dares show his face outside from now on? Well, as soon as he’s out I’ll go and…”

“And do what?”

For a moment, there was a pause.

A deep, vengeful grin settled on the faces of more than one watcher there.

Those grins then faltered when their attention settled on Wei Wuxian once more. Now fully in the light, the paleness of his skin and the bags under his eyes became even more prominent than before. The setting sun painted the sky red, but Wei Wuxian’s eyes seemed to glow an even deeper crimson.

Wei Wuxian repeated his question:

“If ‘he’ dares to come out, you’ll do what?” he asked.

The world seemed to be operating in slow motion. Even the animals began to still.

Someone’s gaze dropped to the flute by Wei Wuxian’s side.

“Chenqing — *it’s Chenqing!*”

That shout was enough. People fled, scattering in all directions. Screams flew into the wind. Their terror was nearly tangible in the pandemonium. Then, raising his fingers to his lips, Wei Wuxian whistled once.

BAM

The three dozen people who had been crashing into each other as they fled slammed against the ground. Several people gasped, the wind knocked out of them, and trembled a little in place.

A deep, deep satisfaction filled both the watchers and the obeying resentful spirits.

“How dare they?!” Madam Yu asked. “Ha. If you’re going to speak such words, you should be prepared for something like this to happen.”

“Huh? What’s wrong?” Wei Wuxian asked, walking forward unhurriedly. “Weren’t you all quite confident when discussing me behind my back? Now that I’ve appeared before you, you can’t do anything but lie on the ground?”

Of course they couldn’t. Of course they can’t. The spirits who had been tasked with holding them down would not let go until ordered to.

Wen Ruohan smirked, gazing down at the fallen fools. Lan Qiren and Nie Mingjue didn’t share his expression, but the emotions the three men were feeling were one and the same.

(At the beginning of the simulation, if they had been shown this scene in isolation, it would have seemed to match the reputation of ‘the Yiling Patriarch’ perfectly. It would have been dishonorable, cruel, and a sign of the corruption demonic cultivation had inflicted upon Wei Wuxian. Technically speaking, these men had never attacked anyone themselves. Technically, they were innocents.

‘*That’s the end all Wen dogs should meet!*’

That phrase, which Nie Mingjue had spoken a version of no less than a thousand times, now sounded so wrong to him it was hard to fathom.

The one who had said that very same line now stared up with wide eyes, his cocksure and arrogance replaced by an overwhelming fear. Wei Wuxian walked close, sending a smile down.

“Go on. Talk,” he instructed.

The man opened his mouth to speak but no sound came out. At most, it could be said that a whimper escaped him.

Wei Wuxian stomped down on his face, grinding his boot into the other’s mouth.

“Why aren’t you talking anymore? Go on, Mister Hero. What were you going to do to me?” he asked.

Jiang Yanli felt her eyes water with tears.

‘You know, before we came to Yi City, a lot of people also claimed that the Yueyang Chang Clan’s Chang Ping was killed by Xiao Xingchen Daozhang’s hands. But was that the truth?’ Lan Sizhui asked.

Jin Ling scoffed: ‘All they had were guesses so why are you calling them claims? But just try to count how many cultivators lost their lives to Wei Ying, to Wen Ning — to the Stygian Tiger Seal! These are truths that everyone accepts, that no one can deny!’

‘The Yiling Patriarch is evil.’ That was a truth that ‘everyone accepted’ and that ‘no one could deny.’ As such, even Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but refer to those against him as ‘heroes.’ That wasn’t a phrase he would have used for Wen Chao, even if Wen Chao had said the exact same thing as this person. The Wen were ‘Wen-dogs,’ but the Yiling Patriarch was a demon. Everyone hated him. No one would stand with him.

Wei Wuxian stomped down once more. Blood fell to the ground. Screams filled the air.

Wei Wuxian had broken the man’s nose.

(Wen Qing had been executed. Wen Ning was locked up, experimented on until he became a mindless puppet once more.)

The simulation changed their position. Now, they stood on the city gate’s walls, staring down at the mayhem alongside a horrified crowd. Several reached out, moving for talismans or for their swords or toward the conflict below, but none could bring themselves to act.

‘*Good,*’ Wen Ruohan thought. ‘*You* should *fear him.*’

Jiang Yanli’s tears continued without pause.

‘*I wish they could just understand him,*’ she thought.

However, at long last, one member of the audience finally worked up the nerve to speak, shouting down, “W-Wei Ying! If you’re so strong, why don’t you go find the sect leaders at the Pledge Conference?! What can you prove by bullying us low level cultivators too powerless to fight back?!”

Normally, Wen Ruohan would have scoffed at such a suggestion. Those who would happily rally against Wei Wuxian if they were stronger now wished to get out of this mess by throwing away their pride. Just a few minutes ago, when they had been celebrating the ‘deaths’ of Wen Ning and Wen Qing, those same people didn’t care that Wen Qing had never once fought against them. Normally, Wen Ruohan would do everything he could to make this reality clear to them.

Right now, however, something else was more worthy of his attention.

“Pledge Conference?” he repeated.

All the sect leaders were taking part?

Nie Mingjue, Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli, Jin Zixuan, and the Lans all went pale.

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian was still focused on the situation at hand. With a single one of his whistles, the speaker was shoved forward, tumbling off the city wall and breaking his legs upon impact with the ground. The man’s screams and wails cut through the air.

Wei Wuxian scoffed, repeating, “‘Low level cultivators?’ What, do I have to tolerate you, just because you’re low level cultivators? If you dare to say such things you should

have the ability to shoulder the consequences! If you know you're insignificant pieces of scum as filthy as ants, why don't you think before you speak?!"

The man could only whimper once more, too terrified to say anything.

As the silence continued, no one else daring to raise their voice, Wei Wuxian nodded in satisfaction, commenting, "Yes, that's the spirit."

He kicked again, this time knocking out a handful of teeth.

Cruel actions. Arrogant, mocking, *dismissive* words. It almost reminded Wen Qing of how Wen Ruohan usually spoke. Yet, underneath all that, there was a shakiness Wei Wuxian couldn't quite hold back.

Many of the waters let out a slow breath. What Wei Wuxian was feeling right now wasn't just resentment, but *hate*.

Then again, even without any resentment, most of the watchers would probably be feeling the same thing.

(What would Nie Mingjue have done if he saw people celebrating the execution of Huaisang? What would Lan Xichen do if Lan Wangji had never hurt anyone, never done anything but heal and *protect*, and was asked to die for the sake of an incident he hadn't been involved in? Would he excuse the words of these men based on the lack of information they had? Would he criticize violence against them based on their relative lack of power? Would he try to play mediator once more and simply watch as his family was mocked?)

('He's a dog trained by Wei Wuxian! No wonder he bites everyone in his path!')

(If Lan Xichen did manage to hold himself back in such a situation, would the real version of him, right now, be able to forgive himself for that?)

Splatters of blood could be seen on the dirt-covered stones. The victim of Wei Wuxian's attack was unconscious, now. Wei Wuxian turned toward the crowd, leaving a bloody footprint in his wake.

"You scum were right about one thing," he acknowledged. "There's not much meaning in wasting time with you people. You want me to find the major clans? Fine; time to clear up a few things with them."

With that, he turned on his heel and began to march away.

Not too long ago, the watchers had laughed at the public's foolishness. Civilians spread rumors and slanderous lies about the Yiling Patriarch — lies which, when compared against the man who cursed radishes to play tag with him and A-Yuan, seemed foolish beyond compare. Everything that had been said about the Yiling Patriarch was ludicrous when you were faced with 'Xian-gege' instead.

Right now, however…

The resentment in the air sent their nerves aflame. It felt like sparks were zapping through their blood, making their hearts pound with a mad fever. In direct contrast to that, a thick, heavy cloud seemed to be weighing down on them. The hate Wei Wuxian felt right now was churning within them as well.

Jin Guangshan sucked in a deep breath, in awe of what he felt now. Wei Wuxian had shown this side of himself against Wen Chao, but it had been a long time since they last got to experience it. If Jin Guangshan were to have dominion over this beast, even Wen Ruohan would be no match for him anymore.

(Something in the Chief Cultivator had changed in the last few segments. If things continued at this rate, Jin Guangshan couldn't be sure their alliance would still hold value once the watchers all got out.)

Right before Wei Wuxian departed completely, he snuck a glance over his shoulder. His eyes fell upon a sign above the city gates. 'Pledge Conference' was written front and center on the announcement board. It stated as follows:

[The LanlingJin Sect, the QinghеNie sect, the GusuLan Sect, and the YunmengJiang Sect will now scatter the ashes of the Wen Sect's remnants above the Clan's old stronghold, the Nightless City. At the same time, we will now pledge our eternal opposition to the Yiling Patriarch, who has occupied the Burial Mounds and declared himself an enemy of the world.]

In this very same segment, Wen Qing and Wen Ning had sacrificed themselves to save their families, including Wei Wuxian:

'The leaders of the Wen Remnants — that's us. According to them, if you hand us over, this situation will be considered resolved.'

Resolved. It was resolved. She had given her life. Her brother had given his freedom. They were 'dead,' so the situation was resolved.

(The Jin had invited Wei Wuxian to an ambush in the form of Jin Ling's hundred-day ceremony. Wen Qing was supposed to be smart, wasn't she? How could she have fallen for this?)

"Eternal opposition?" Jiang Yanli repeated. "But… but-"

At that moment, Wen Qing felt something hot run down her cheek. The world became blurry, every beam of light distorting as water fell from her eyes.

(At that moment, Wen Qing had no other options. The sects had given her an ultimatum. If she hadn't gone, their eventual attack would have been her fault.)

(But of course they were still going to attack. Of course they would. Of course.)

"We… we can't do that."

"Da-ge?" Nie Huaisang asked, looking over.

“What?” Nie Mingjue gasped out, huffing something that wasn’t quite a laugh. “We can’t do that. Did… did Wen Qing misunderstand the terms of surrender? No, everyone must have known — why would the Wen have given themselves up if not for peace? But then why would we-”

Nie Mingjue cut off, feeling the answer cut straight through him.

(It was because they were Wen dogs, of course.)

(When Jin Guangyao had tricked people and taken their lives, it was dishonorable. It was evil and proved him to be a treacherous snake wearing human skin.)

(‘*Meng Yao… let me ask you something. The first time I saw you, did you purposefully put on a pitiful act so that I’d come to your rescue? If I hadn’t stepped in, would you have done what you did today and killed those people?!*’)

(Nie Mingjue himself had spoken those words.)

(This, however, was fine. They had invited Wei Wuxian and ambushed him on the way. They had told the Wen to exchange themselves for peace and gone back on their promise a matter of days later. That was all alright though. They weren’t making deals with humans, but with dogs — why would it matter whether they used honesty when dealing with them?)

Nie Mingjue brought a hand to his mouth, feeling nausea rise up in his throat.

(He had done this. He had supported this. He had allowed this — encouraged this!)

He couldn’t look at Wen Qing right now. He couldn’t look at Nie Huaisang or Lan Xichen. Despite everything, right now, Nie Mingjue couldn’t even bring himself to look at Wen Ruohan.

Some ways in front of him, Jiang Yanli fell to her knees.

“It’s not fair,” he heard the young woman say, sobs beginning to bubble up from her chest. “That’s not fair!”

Madam Yu, Jiang Cheng, and Jin Zixuan all looked away, not a single one able to even try to offer her some comfort.

Though Wei Wuxian had long-since vanished from the scene before them, the watchers’ view had not moved to follow him yet. They remained with the villagers, many of whom were still being crushed against the ground by the spirits Wei Wuxian had left behind. They were pale and wide eyed, still waiting for one of them to die any second from now.

(But, despite everything they said, Wei Wuxian hadn’t killed a single one. Injured them, traumatized them, and smashed their pride into smithereens, but not killed.)

‘*Of course not. Why would he?*’ Lan Qiren thought, watching with clouded eyes. ‘*Even now, Wei Wuxian would never do something like that. They all were simply speaking, not acting.*

The ones his vengeance should be pointed towards are the ones who went back on the offer they themselves made.'

And, considering where Wei Wuxian was now headed to, that was a confrontation that would happen very soon.

And yet, even as more time passed, they stayed here. There was a slight jump. The time of day seemed to be the same and no one had gone far, but the people not pinned down had moved a little. A few minutes, maybe an hour, had gone by.

Then, suddenly, a flash of soft blue light passed by. As soon as the sword's glare went above the cultivators, those people found they could move once more. They inhaled heavily, the sudden disappearance of the weights on their backs leaving many breathless for a moment.

"I can move!" someone shouted, their elation clear.

A moment later, the sword glare returned to the owner's sheath.

"Wangji?" Lan Xichen gasped.

Hanguang-jun looked down at the cultivators before him.

Nie Huaisang's eyes widened slightly and he walked closer, observing Hanguang-jun intently. After a few seconds, he glanced over at the real Lan Wangji before turning his attention to the simulated one once more.

A handsome face and white robes that didn't have even a speck of dirt on them. Despite the hurry Lan Wangji had just been in, he was still pristine. Hanguang-jun looked more and more like his far future self every time they saw him. However, there was still a fair bit more emotion present in his body language than his far future self had. Rapidly moving eyes that analyzed everything they looked over; a slight twitch of his hand that conveyed the anticipation within; short, quickened breaths unaccompanied by any sweat or signs of physical exhaustion. This Hanguang-jun was worried.

Nie Huaisang tilted his head just slightly.

'*What have you been thinking over the past few days, Wangji-xiong?*' he wondered. '*Wei-xiong's had the whole world turn against him. Zixuan-xiong is dead, Wen-guniang and Wen-gongzi were executed, and now our brothers are heading off to attack him. Do you wish you'd said more, back when there was still time for things to change? Do you wish you did what your future self will later do? Even now, you could tie Wei-xiong up and drag him back to the Cloud Recesses.*'

(But, after forcing a kiss on Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji had pulled back time and time again.)

'*And what about my future self?*' Nie Huaisang wondered. '*Have I… thought of anything like that?*'

(Both their brothers were at the conference. Both of them could have done something.)

(Neither did.)

“H-hanguang-jun!” someone called out. It was the man whose legs Wei Wuxian had broken not too long before. Lan Wangji walked over to him, kneeling down so that he could examine the man’s legs. He pressed lightly, sending some energy in and gaining information in a way the watchers couldn’t right now.

‘*...It was a clean break,*’ Lan Wangji observed. ‘*He will be back to normal in a few weeks so long as he lets it rest.*’

On a cultivator, something like this would heal just fine. Wei Wuxian’s techniques were hard to describe or understand, but that didn’t mean *he* didn’t know what he was doing. All in all, the only thing he’d done with permanent consequences was knocking out the man’s teeth. A harsh punishment for sure, but not the extent of what ‘the Yiling Patriarch’ should be willing to do.

‘*Have I gotten too biased?*’ Lan Qiren wondered. ‘*At the beginning of the simulation, anyone attacking non combatants like this would have appalled me. These men aren’t responsible for what’s happening to him.*’

They weren’t responsible. They weren’t *solely* responsible, but-

‘*That’s the end all Wen dogs should meet!*’

Wen Qing had given herself up so that her family wouldn’t be hurt.

The LanlingJin Sect, the QinghеNie sect, the GusuLan Sect, and the YunmengJiang Sect will now scatter the ashes of the Wen Sect’s remnants above the Clan’s old stronghold, the Nightless City. At the same time, we will now pledge our eternal opposition to the Yiling Patriarch, who has occupied the Burial Mounds and declared himself an enemy of the world.

When Wei Wuxian had been told to give up his hand to the Wen, he had gritted his teeth and accepted it in order to protect Yunmeng Jiang. He could handle sacrifice; he could give for the sake of peace.

He had just given two of his closest friends up for that very same reason.

And what now? Wen Qing and Wen Ning had just been ~~murdered~~ executed. Was he supposed to just sit back and accept them being called dogs? Lower his head and continue to play nice? Why? Everyone here would only turn on him time and time again.

In his youth, Wei Wuxian had ignored the rules laid out and followed his own judgment instead. Madam Yu would punish him no matter what he did; laws meant nothing, under that. Wei Wuxian was decreed responsible for cursing Jin Zixun just because of who he was. Why shouldn’t he curse people when in a situation like that?

(And yet he hadn’t killed them. He’d held himself back.)

(Who knew how much longer he’d be able to.)

“What have we done?” Lan Qiren whispered, horror settling in.

Meanwhile, the rescued men and women swarmed Lan Wangji in droves, some thanking him profusely, others informing him of the matter at hand:

“Hanguang-jun, you’ve come too late! Wei Wuxian just left!”

Lan Xichen winced a little, watching his brother’s expression gain a terrible kind of desperation.

“Will Hanguang-jun track him down?” someone in the crowd asked quietly.

Another turned to them at once, whispering, “You haven’t heard? They say Hanguang-jun of Gusulan has been searching everywhere for Wei Wuxian over the past few days. He probably wants to settle things — make Wei Wuxian pay for the dozens of lives Gusulan lost!”

At the same time, a third member of the crowd shouted out, “Wei Wuxian’s been gone for less than an hour. If you leave now, you’ll surely be able to find him!”

When Wei Wuxian had first been brought back to life, he had fled Lan Wangji, thinking the other wanted to bring him before the world so justice could be sought. It had surely made sense to Wei Wuxian; several members of the Gusulan sect had lost their lives to him.

Except that he had been paralyzed for the past few days.

Except that the initial battle had been an ambush *against him*.

Except that the Ghost General, who had “mysteriously” gone on a rampage, was not executed but instead *imprisoned* so he could be studied as a weapon of war.

The people within the simulation stood tense and ready for action.

“What did he do here?” Lan Wangji asked, his tone firm. “Where is he going?”

The other cultivators rushed to complain:

“He fought with us without any care for honor and nearly killed everyone here!”

“You call that a *fight?*” Wen Ruohan repeated, skeptically.

Lan Wangji’s fingers twitched slightly, the movement too subtle for the average cultivator to notice, then forcefully relaxed shortly after.

“Oh, and he said he was going to Nightless City! He’s going to settle things with the Four Great Sects!”

Hearing ‘Four’ Great Sects instead of ‘Five’ didn’t bother the watchers anymore. Even the mention of Nightless City — now alight with the torches of those who had wiped them out, rather than the Wen themselves — didn’t trigger much of a reaction out of them. Instead,

right now, their focus was centered solely on the impending disaster unfolding before their eyes.

'*Don't go to Nightless City, Wei Wuxian,*' Wen Qing mentally begged. '*There's no point in trying to confront them. Just run.*'

Run where? With that many people? For how long? The Sects had already shown they weren't content to just leave them be.

'*A-Xian, be careful!*' Jiang Yanli prayed.

Now, at last, the simulation changed scenes. There was darkness at first. Then, light.

The moon was high in the sky. It was full and bright, allowing any passing traveler to find their way. There was light coming from below as well. The Nightless City of Qishan was filled with torches and lamps, carried by cultivators from every sect and clan one could imagine.

(Every clan except, of course, the Wen.)

Wen Ruohan's face remained neutral, a stern, forceful blankness being the only thing anyone would be able to see. However, with every tap of his finger on the armrest of his chair, a bit of qi would snap out like a silent growl of rage.

Jin Guangshan swallowed nervously.

Nightless City had become a symbol for the allied sects. They had beaten the evil Wen once; they could do it again. Right now, it was the flags of *their sects* that decorated these halls, the hanging banners covering up the suns carved there.

The sight was a strange reflection of what might have one day come.

Wang Lingjiao clapped her hands together in an almost-mocking applause. The woman's gaze was smug and satisfied, not at all fearing for herself. As they would soon learn, the Wen army right outside Yunmeng Jiang's gates was the reason for that.

'Yu-furen, I admire you so much!' she sang out. 'We'll definitely get along after they set up the Supervisory Office.'

It had been a taunt, most likely. While Wen Ruohan would be perfectly happy to make Yunmeng Jiang an office of the Wen, there was no way that proclamation could go down without resulting in a fight. It wasn't the point of it all, just an excuse.

Yu Ziyuan had taken the bait.

The end result was inevitable. Sect Leader Jiang and Yu Ziyuan were killed. The sect was overrun. The heir was caught and rendered powerless.

(Would have *stayed* powerless, if not for his head disciple.)

If Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen had been a bit slower to unite the sects — if fewer of the heirs had survived to lead their sects to arms — if Wei Wuxian had not come back from a death trap, bringing with him a weapon no sect had ever come even close to before, Wen Ruohan probably would have redecorated the Jiang, Lan, and Nie Sects with flags of the burning sun.

It was only fair of them to repay that in kind. Wen Ruohan exhaled heavily, shutting his eyes.

'*Look. This is the result of the choices you made.*'

Would anything have actually changed, if Wen Ruohan had won? He would have more control over the other sects. He would get to stop them from making so many thoughtless, illogical choices when it came to the treatment of their disciples.

'*Would that really be worth losing A-Ying to the Burial Mounds?*'

Wen Ruohan had decided to risk it all.

(He'd lost it all as a result.)

And now-

The simulation brought them closer, showing the prominent sect leaders at the center of the crowd. Jin Guangshan, Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen, and Jiang Cheng gathered around a lacquered table, raising their glasses in a toast. To the side, Jin Guangyao directed servants to ideal positions. Torches brightened, making the sect leaders even more prominent than before.

"Tonight, the LanlingJin Clan-"

"-the QinghеNie Clan-"

"-the GusuLan Clan-"

"-the YunmengJiang Clan-"

"-and all other clans here stand united," Jin Guangshan declared. "No matter the sect — no matter the surname — this cup of wine is in honor of the soldiers who have died."

"May their souls live on," Nie Mingjue agreed.

"May they rest in peace," Lan Xichen added on.

Jiang Cheng didn't say anything, merely maintaining a darkened expression as he filled his cup with wine.

"To our heroes!!!" the crowd shouted as one.

Jin Zixuan had not deserved to die. His death could be treated as a tragedy. However-

‘*Hero?*’ Zixuan mentally repeated. ‘*What, the guy who lunged at the victim after inviting him into a trap?*’

And what about everyone else? They all had gone into this *knowing* they were ambushing his guest. No one even had a reason beyond ‘Wei Wuxian is the only one evil enough to do this.’

Unable to hold it back, he scoffed under his breath.

(Both Nie Huaisang and Lan Wangji glanced over at him, paused, then looked away, not having anything helpful to say.)

At that moment, Jin Guangyao returned. In his arms was an ornate black box, decorated with silver. Jin Guangshan took it without hesitation. It wasn’t a slow, ceremonial hand-over, nor was it a delicate hold. Not the sort of behavior that was typical if the box contained treasures or artifacts or gifts, especially from Jin Guangshan.

Nie Huaisang bounced over, trying to take a closer look.

And then, holding the box with only one hand, Jin Guangshan raised it into the air.

“Here lie the ashes of the Wen Sect’s remnants!”

Jiang Yanli went pale and Jin Zixuan flinched back, reaching down to clutch at his chest where his future-self had been attacked. Because yes, he had been attacked.

But-

…

All of the watchers, without exception, found themselves looking back at Wen Qing.

“Several days ago, about a hundred cultivators and… my son, Jin Zixuan… were murdered at Qiongqi path.”

“Scatter their ashes!”

“Scatter their ashes!”

“Scatter their ashes!”

The crowd was riled up, filled with hate.

Horror spread across many of the watchers’ faces. Madam Yu was among them, furrowing her brows at the shouts. However, a moment later, she righted herself, quickly calming down. Part of Yu Ziyuan was tempted to scoff at her own reaction.

(Yes, those people were celebrating the deaths of the Wen. However, wasn’t this a far more honorable send-off than what she and her husband got? Jin Zixuan was actually dead — the

Jiang had never done anything permanent to the Wen. Wang Lingjiao had tried to slap her when she was already a corpse, her and her husband's cores having been crushed.)

(So why did this feel so much worse than that?)

Golden light enveloped the box like a flame, Jin Guangshan's spiritual energy surging in. For a moment, as the golden power danced around the box, the simulation overlaid another image on top.

"Qing-guniang?"

It was her, just as Jiang Yanli had said. She was bound tightly to a post, her hair being the only part of her still able to move. Wind blew it to the side, making it flow in the same direction as the growing field of fire by her feet.

It was an execution.

***Wen Qing's* execution.**

Nie Mingjue clenched his teeth together, having to force himself to watch. Lan Xichen felt his hands begin to tremble.

The two of them couldn't see their other-selves in this image, but knew they almost certainly were there. At the very least, they would have been able to prevent it, if they so pleased.

'Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning had been at Qiongqi path.' No one had ever suggested Wen Qing was there.

'I've heard Wen Qing's name a few times before,' Lan Xichen had said once. 'I do not remember her having participated in the Sunshot Campaign's crimes.'

Nie Mingjue had been uncompromising: 'If she responded with only silence rather than opposition, that's the same as indifference. She couldn't have been so naive as to hope she could be treated with respect while the Wen Sect committed evil without suffering the consequences once the Wen Sect was wiped out.'

Jiang Cheng had remained silent, refusing to speak up.

The Sect Leaders there had all agreed: Wen Qing had never hurt anyone and had never *done anything* wrong. She was being punished for not stopping her family.

(Lan Xichen probably just hadn't wanted to argue against it. Not when Jin Zixuan had just been killed.)

(Nie Mingjue's grudge was likely still going strong. That was enough for him to encourage this.)

Both Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue were letting her burn alive for that.

(It was truly pointless.)

Wen Qing knew that, surely. The simulation moved closer to her, the heat of the fire unfelt by the watchers yet burning nonetheless. The doctor's skin was shriveling, the fire scalding her ankles and eating away at her flesh, muscles, and nails. She would die soon.

And yet, in that moment, she did not scream. On the contrary, Wen Qing simply shut her eyes, a look of acceptance coming over her.

As Jiang Yanli watched, she felt her eyes starting to water again. The immense light from the fire was unrelated to her reaction; her thoughts were the true cause. As more and more flesh melted away, Jiang Yanli felt nausea rise up within her.

How could Wen Qing's executioners just stand by and watch this?

(Was there anything Wen Qing could have done to avoid this fate?)

(There most certainly was: if she had never saved Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng, the allied sects would probably have lost the war. She might still be alive, then.)

The vision of Wen Qing's execution disappeared. The flames became Jin Guangshan's energy once more and the box, containing her ashes, became overwhelmed soon enough. In a dramatic spectacle, the box shattered into a thousand pieces!

Wen Qing's ashes were swept away by the wind.

(The crowd roared in triumph.)

Wang Lingjiao and Wen Chao would have done the same thing watching Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian's ashes get scattered. The Wen Sect as a whole would have loved that.

They *hadn't* managed to do that.

(Wen Ning had betrayed his sect and retrieved their ashes for Jiang Cheng. Wen Qing had risked her life to help him.)

And now, in the audience of this spectacle, Jiang Cheng did nothing to stop it. Wen Qing's ashes were blown into the distance.

Jiang Cheng looked down.

Neither Nie Mingjue nor Lan Xichen's expressions wavered at the sight.

The real Nie Mingjue cursed. Lan Xichen felt Lan Wangji's gaze drifting his way, but couldn't look up to meet it.

As far as everyone in that audience knew, both Wen Ning and Wen Qing's ashes had just been scattered. A deafening cheer spread throughout the hall.

Jin Zixuan felt sick. He could taste bile in his mouth. The ashes scattered terrifyingly quickly. He *could not* look at Wen Qing right now. Neither, it seemed, could Jiang Cheng or Jiang

Yanli. They all-

“Da-ge?” Nie Huaisang suddenly asked.

“...Yes, Huaisang?” Nie Mingjue asked back.

“Even for a scattering of the ashes, there’s… a lot of people here,” the Nie heir observed. “They described it as a ‘Pledge Conference,’ right? They said we would ‘Pledge our eternal opposition to the Yiling Patriarch,’ didn’t they?”

And with the usage of ‘we’ instead of ‘they,’ it was hard for anyone to immediately disregard that. Wen Ruohan’s gaze fell upon Nie Huaisang once more, waiting to see what was to come.

“Da-ge,” Nie Huaisang began again. “Everyone seems quite well-armed, don’t they.”

Not a question.

There was no need for it to be a question. The implication was obvious.

(But this wasn’t a hypothetical. These weren’t strangers. This was *them*. Yes, Jin Guangshan was in the lead, but they had no obligation to follow along. This was the pure Lan Xichen, the righteous Nie Mingjue, and Wei Wuxian’s own ~~former~~ shidi Jiang Cheng.)

(They had brought the best combatants in their sects here.)

Before he had even consciously registered the implications, Jiang Cheng whispered a quiet, desperate, “*Please no.*”

Jin Guangshan raised his hand, silencing the crazed crowd.

“Tonight, we scattered the ashes of the two leaders of the Wen Sect’s remnants.”

Every chair in the room trembled, Wen Ruohan’s annoyance taking physical form.

“And tomorrow-” Jin Guangshan continued.

Jin Zixuan looked away, unable to watch what his father would say next.

“Tomorrow it will be the rest of the Wen dogs and the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Ying!”

If the cheer before had been deafening, this one that occurred at those words was indescribable.

(Wen Qing’s ashes could no longer be seen.)

Nie Mingjue looked down, again feeling as though he was going to throw up. Lan Xichen was pale enough to be truly mistaken for a statue made of jade. Madam Yu and Wen Ruohan looked ready to kill the next person that made a sound. Madam Jin looked hopeless — Jiang Yanli and Lan Wangji were consumed by rage.

And Lan Qiren?

Well-

'The leaders of the Wen Remnants — that's us,' Wen Qing pointed out, explaining the sect's demands. 'According to them, if you hand us over, this situation will be considered resolved.'

'Considered resolved.' So long as the unwilling knife and an innocent bystander accepted death, the rest of their family would not be punished for what had gone on. It was not fair. It had happened regardless.

When the near-future flashbacks had first begun — when the Wen had attacked the Jiang and the Lan — there was someone clearly responsible for the evil that had occurred. Wen Ruohan was rallied against and fought in the name of justice.

Wen Ruohan was dead now.

And yet evil remained.

(The past Lan Qiren, who had let go of all decorum to shout at Wei Wuxian over the inherent immorality of demonic cultivation, suddenly flashed into the present Lan Qiren's mind.)

Torches, bows, and blades were raised high. A mob several thousand people large shook the ruined courtyard with its deranged cheer.

"Kill the demon! Make sure he's dead!"

It didn't take long for those words to become a chant shouted by every cultivator gathered in the foreground there.

How funny. Jiang Yanli was not a violent girl. In fact, she had often been criticized for the exact opposite. Her plainness, lack of presence, and weakness were faults everyone knew about.

'So it's that plain Jiang Yanli,' a boy in the Cloud Recesses muttered.

"Kill the demon! Make sure he's dead!"

Yet, right now, a small, barely-acknowledged part of her couldn't help but imagine what it would feel like to bring this army down — to *crush* each and every cultivator here and slam them into the ground just like Wei Wuxian had done to a crowd just a few minutes before. They would be pressed against the stone tiles underneath them. Gradually, she could add more and more pressure. Eventually, they'd probably pop.

If she squashed them like bugs — if Jiang Yanli taught them *true fear* — would they still dare to try and hurt her kind, sweet, selfless brother?

(No. She'd make them unable to do that.)

"Kill the demon! Make sure he's dead!"

Her future-self's husband was dead.

(Her current fiance seemed to be thinking the exact same thing as her.)

(Of course he was. It wasn't really their fault. They were used to resentful energy being a controlled power used and manipulated by demonic cultivators. It was a natural force too, however. In the destroyed ruins of Qishan, which now had a sea of people practically salivating at the thought of blood, a thick layer of resentment had formed.)

It was disgusting.

All the cultivators there were painting Qishan red. Some did so with their shouts and screams and *resentment*; others, with the blood of the Wens that stained their hands.

(Some of those Wen had deserved to die.)

(Did that make up for the innocent who had been executed just a day ago?)

(Did that make up for the innocents who they were preparing to kill now?)

All the hate there burned red. All their torches burned red. The light left behind by the scattering of Wen Qing's ashes only increased that effect.

The fire that had burned her had been infinitely worse than the heat given off now.

It was red, red, red, red-

Fweeeeeet

Wen Qing had been looking down, having felt like she had seen more than enough of the sects' collective madness. However, at that moment, she looked up. Her heart skipped a beat.

That sound hadn't quite been a flute note. Rather, it was a whistle of wind, the airborne currents twisting unnaturally. At the exact moment, every single fire in the courtyard changed.

Emerald flames cast a green glow across the compound.

A smile stretched across Wen Ruohan's face.

(Both Nie Mingjue and Jiang Cheng were making the exact same expression.)

Crows circled above, the calling card recognizable to every watcher there. The resentment that had formed in the city, building up bit by bit overtime, settled at once. The once thick-cloud seeped into the ground. It was not quite subdued. Rather, it was lying in wait, ready to spring up at Wei Wuxian's next command.

Jin Zixuan's murderer had arrived. His power surrounded the Jin heir's family and friends.

And, upon realizing that, the boy in question let out a sigh of relief.

“It’s… it’s the Yiling Patriarch!”

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli called out.

Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen looked at each other, sharing a grin.

The sects had promised peace, then gone and prepared their armies regardless. If Wei Wuxian had still been paralyzed right now, he and the Wen remnants would have been ambushed in their own homes.

~~A strategy as dishonorable as the worst of Wen Ruohan’s crimes.~~

But that future would not come to pass. At that moment, atop one of the tallest towers in Qishan, a voice rang out.

“You claim to be righteous sects. ‘Kill the demon?’ ‘Make sure he’s dead?’ I thought, as sect leaders, you would know better than to go back on your words.”

He looked down. A full moon shone blindingly behind him, casting his entire body in shadow. However, even without having heard his voice, the watchers would never mistake who it was.

Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian!

Wei Wuxian!

Wei Wuxian!

A substantial, nearly-potent relief had spread throughout the watchers.

“A-Ying,” Wen Ruohan muttered, looking up at the moonlit figure with nearly-crazed eyes.

It had been Wen Ruohan’s war that had brought the Wen Sect to the meager few it was now. It had been his carelessness that had turned Wei Wuxian into a demonic cultivator hated by all. This scene right here was the physical manifestation of all his future self’s mistakes.

And yet…

‘*Kill them,*’ Wen Ruohan thought, his eyes gaining an icy glow. ‘*They said you killed three thousand people in one night. Kill them and* make them *fear you like they once feared me. Show them what it means to lie to us.*’

Bloodlust spread throughout the room.

(Jin Guangshan, who had moved to the back some time ago, looked around himself like a skittish animal preparing to run.)

“Wei Ying,” the simulated Jin Guangshan acknowledged. “You…. How dare you show yourself here?!”

Everyone moved to grab onto the hilts of their swords. Jiang Cheng’s pupils shrunk, blue veins lining the back of his hand.

If his other-self moved at all, the real Jiang Cheng was probably going to try to strangle him on the spot.

“Don’t. Do. *Anything,*” he hissed.

“How dare I?” Wei Wuxian asked back. “Why wouldn’t I dare to? Do the people here even add up to three thousand? Don’t forget that, back in the Sunshot Campaign, I fought against five thousand on my own before.”

Familiar numbers, as far as the simulation went.

‘I heard that he has another evil weapon. The Stygian Tiger Seal!’

‘Yes, don’t forget he has that. Or how he killed three thousand cultivators overnight!’

‘Five thousand if I’m not mistaken.’

It was the silly gossip of civilian townsfolk. It didn’t matter — not really. And yet, upon recalling those words, Madam Yu clenched her hands into fists.

‘You call that being allies? The Jiang raised him like their own, but almost all of them were killed because of him!’

Wrong on both fronts.

~~Because, just like her son, Madam Yu had never cared what the effects of her words might one day become.~~

‘*Wei Wuxian has betrayed the sect and publicly regards all cultivation sects as his enemy. Yunmeng Jiang hereby expels him!*’

It was amazing how easily rumors could spread.

But no one in the simulation cared much about rumors right now. Their eyes were all locked on the figure now eclipsing the moon. As crows circled ‘round and ‘round, the tension in the courtyard continued to rise.

“Jin Guangshan, you said that, so long as they turned themselves in, you would overlook everything that had happened.”

There were no protests from the crowd. Not even a single person gave a shocked gasp. Everyone knew what deal Jin Guangshan had offered them. Everyone had come here nonetheless.

“You should be happy. By appearing here, haven’t I granted your wish? No need for you to come all the way to my home tomorrow to scatter my ashes.”

Jiang Yanli looked down. The Burial Mounds were his ‘home.’ Of course they were; the Jiang Sect was now preparing to scatter his ashes. None of the people there knew what had really gone down on Qiongqi Path!

Except, if they had known, what would it change? They had already shown themselves to be willing to do all this.

Nie Mingjue’s expression went completely blank. If it weren’t for the simulation they were inside, he was certain he would have undergone a qi deviation ten times over.

At that moment, the simulated Nie Mingjue scoffed.

“Arrogant boy,” he muttered.

“A Nie disciple had been killed by Wen Ning as well,” Ouyang Zizhen helpfully piped up.

(So what would it matter how many Wen he planned on killing tomorrow? A dog had killed a human; that was more than enough reason to put them all down.)

In response, Wei Wuxian laughed:

“Haven’t I always been arrogant?” he asked.

(An arrogant person who took one third of a hunt’s prey when they weren’t the kind of person who was supposed to do that.)

“Sect Leader Jin, how does it feel, having to face your own words like this? Who was it that said he’d let this matter go if the Wen siblings went to Koi Tower and-”

“Let’s consider things as they stand!” Jin Guangshan countered. “At Qiongqi path, you slaughtered over a hundred of the LanlingJin Sect’s disciples — that’s one thing. Then, later, you made Wen Ning kill at Koi Tower!”

“Then let me ask you, Sect Leader Jin. At Qiongqi path, who was the one being ambushed? Who was the one ready to kill?”

An almost perplexed expression crossed Jin Zixuan’s face. He looked toward the simulated figure of his father. The man had laid out Wei Wuxian’s crimes clearly: he killed disciples of the Jin and had made Wen Ning attack at Koi Tower.

Not once, in that, did the words ‘you killed my son’ leave Jin Guangshan’s mouth.

Sure, Jin Zixuan was included in the ‘LanlingJin disciples’ category. He was one of the hundred Wei Wuxian had killed.

And yet, to not even bring up his name….

‘*You’re not angry at what happened to me, are you Father?*’ Jin Zixuan thought. ‘*You’re not acting out of a blind rage right now. This war isn’t about me at all. You’re not seeking justice or vengeance. You want…*’

Jin Zixuan’s eyes landed on the flute by Wei Wuxian’s side.

(What would Jin Ling think, if someone told him how insignificant Jin Zixuan’s death was to the world?)

At the very least, no one in the accumulated army found Jin Guangshan’s words strange. The crowd didn’t falter for even a moment, shouting protests and accusations Wei Wuxian’s way. What Wen Ning had just done was brought up again and again. Alongside that, in regards to Qiongqi Path…

“Even if Jin Zixun did scheme to ambush you first, you shouldn’t have been so heartless as to take so many lives!”

“Oh, *of course* they already know about that, too!” Lan Qiren scoffed. His short-lived fantasies of Wei Wuxian turning the tide by revealing that crumbled to dust.

“I see.” Wei Wuxian spoke calmly, but the resentment in the city churned with rage. “So if he wants to attack me, he doesn’t have to worry about whether it’s a fatal blow or not. If I die, it’d be my own bad luck. If I want to protect myself, however, I have to think about this and that and not cause harm, unable to damage even a single strand of his hair? In conclusion, you could all launch a siege against me, but I’m not allowed to fight back, is that right?”

It was. It so, so clearly was.

And, as Lan Wangji looked up at Wei Wuxian’s figure sitting under the moon, all he could focus on was how alone the Yiling Patriarch now seemed.

‘*Hurry up,*’ he begged his future self, his hands shaking just a bit. ‘*Please, hurry up.*’

But the next voice they heard was not Hanguang-jun’s. Instead, Sect Leader Yao stepped forward to speak:

“You call that fighting back? Those over a hundred and thirty people in Koi Tower were all innocent! If you were fighting back, why did you have to involve them?”

“The fifty cultivators in the Burial Mounds are also innocent! Why are you involving them?”

A man in red robes laughed, asking, “Just what great kindness have the Wen-dogs done for you? To have you side with scum like that.”

“In my opinion, there wasn’t any great kindness at all! He just thinks he’s a hero for fighting against the entire world. He just thinks he’s a great person, doing an act of justice that risks everyone’s condemnation!”

Wei Wuxian fell silent at that.

As did Jiang Cheng.

His eyes fell on his other self. The future's Sect Leader Jiang kept his gaze on Wei Wuxian, not even looking out at the crowd. Just like with the last conference, he didn't even seem to consider mentioning what Wen Qing and Wen Ning had done for him. The sound of rain began to play within Jiang Cheng's mind. Drop after drop came down, the noise reaching a deafening crescendo. And yet, despite that, the words his other self had once said remained clear:

'Why?! Why?! Why?!' Jiang Cheng shouted, his eyes going feral as he squeezed Wei Wuxian's neck with all his might. 'Why did you save Lan Wangji? Why did you have to speak up?! How many times have I told you not to stir up trouble?! Not to strike? Did you really want to play the hero that badly? Well, have you seen the result of you playing hero? Are you happy now?!'

Happy doing what was right, even if it seemed impossible?

'*Attempt the impossible — that's our motto, A-Cheng,' Jiang Fengmian had once said.*

And yet, when Wei Wuxian did:

"I've never met a creature as evil as you!"

The crowd continued to roar.

"How dare he come here now? Has he no shame?"

"A monster like him can't be reasoned with."

One man stepped forward, looking directly at Wei Wuxian as he shouted, "When it comes down to it, you were the first to act when you placed a curse on Jin Zixun!"

"Do you have any proof I was the one who placed the curse?"

"I…. Then-then do you have any proof you aren't the one who placed it?!"

"Nonsensical," Wen Qing cursed, the word coming out more harshly than any insult the dirtiest tongues could put together.

Wei Wuxian smiled at the blubbering man, his eyes gaining a sharpness the resentment adored: "Then let me ask you again — why couldn't it have been you? Do you have any evidence to prove you weren't the one who placed the curse?"

"Me? How could I be the same as you?"

Although he wasn't the one who said it, for a moment Nie Mingjue felt like his other self might as well have uttered those very same words.

“Don’t mix black with white! We’re nothing alike,” the man asserted. “You’re obviously the most suspicious. Do you think we don’t know? Everyone’s aware that you and Jin Zixun have held animosity toward each other since a year ago!”

(Except Wei Wuxian hadn’t even recognized him when he’d appeared.)

(Not that anyone here would believe that.)

Lan Wangji’s cold gaze fell upon the gathered crowd. He truly hated conferences. Even his future self apparently refused to participate in them. These were not the debates of the Cloud Recesses, where every statement would be checked and cross-checked before continuation. This was entirely different — it wasn’t a conversation at all.

~~And his other self *still wasn’t here.*~~

Finally standing up, Wei Wuxian turned to look down at the army before him, asking, “Who’s the one mixing black and white now? If I wanted to kill him, I would have done it a year ago. I didn’t have any reason to keep him alive until now. If not, I’ll forget such a person in three days, much less a year.”

True, perhaps. But the way it was phrased…

“He’s… saying Zixun’s too insignificant for him to remember?” Jin Zixuan asked. “Isn’t that just going to make this all worse?!”

“They won’t ever listen to any claims of morality A-Xian makes, will they?” Jiang Yanli muttered, not truly phrasing it as a question. “All he can argue with them about is whether he did this specific act.”

(And even that wasn’t going well.)

Exhaling in a half-laugh, half-sigh, Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes and pointed out, “A-Ying never tried convincing anyone of the Yiling Patriarch’s innocence. After being brought back to life, he simply accepted all the hate the juniors had. Initially, he was going to try to leave the cultivation world altogether. It’s like he’s given up on ever convincing anyone of that.”

And yes, Jin Zixuan was, objectively, dead now, but…

Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, Lan Qiren, Jiang Cheng, and Jin Zixuan himself had to hold back from viciously cursing at their other-selves. Madam Yu, Madam Jin, and Wen Ruohan weren’t far behind. The frustration within them turned to bitterness; the bitterness within them turned to hate. Those were their other-selves, yes. They knew now that everything the simulation showed them was what would have occurred — that every action their other selves did *would have* taken place.

And yet, right now, those people within the simulation seemed like strangers wearing their faces.

(Just a few weeks ago, that had been them. They had judged Wei Wuxian, blaming him for things they hadn’t understood.)

(The hate they felt now made it hard to breathe.)

(And Nie Huaisang, who had been keeping fairly quiet throughout this part of the simulation, hummed in thought.)

However, just as Jin Zixuan had feared, the comment Wei Wuxian made before stirred up the crowd's anger even more. It was nearly impossible to make any one voice out. The only exception to that was when a sect leader spoke, the people around them quieting down in respect at those times.

Among them…

"...Wei Wuxian, Wei Wuxian." Sect Leader Yao shook his head, looking shocked. "Today I've finally come to see… I've never met a villain as unreasonable as you are. Even after killing people, you have to shame your victims with words? Don't you hold any sympathy? Any guilt?"

There were cheers of agreement all around. A bitter sigh then came from one of the cultivators toward the front.

"Wei Ying, you… disappoint me so much," that cultivator said. "There was once a time in which I admired you. 'At least he founded his own sect,' I'd said. But now that I think back on it, it's almost repulsive! A sect of demonic cultivators. From this moment on, I'll forever stand opposing you!"

Upon hearing that, Wei Wuxian nearly exploded with laughter, cackling so hard he wasn't able to breathe.

It wasn't a pleasant sound. Jiang Yanli winced.

"You admired me?" Wei Wuxian asked. "How funny. You say you admired me, but I never once saw you during that time. Yet, as soon as I'm loathed by everyone, you jump out and wave a little flag to cheer in support. Your admiration is a bit too cheap, isn't it?"

Lan Wangji hated politics. He hated these sorts of conferences. He hated the lies and the deception and the flattery. Most of all, he hated *this*.

"Fine then." Wei Wuxian seemed to shrug. "Does the fact that you're standing opposite me affect me at all? Your admiration and your contempt — they're both so insignificant. How are you not embarrassed to parade them around like-"

****THWACK****

Wei Wuxian stopped.

He looked down.

An arrow was sticking out of his chest.

"Who *dares?!*" Madam Yu demanded, her voice coming out more harshly than ever before. Every watcher turned in the direction the attack had come from.

A young cultivator stood, staring up at Wei Wuxian, his arm still extended and his bowstring still vibrating from the force.

"I got him!" the cultivator shouted, his eyes lighting up with glee.

Lan Qiren, Nie Mingjue, and Jiang Cheng went even more pale than before. An entire army was there, but no one was trying to stop that cultivator. No one had even considered it.

Wen Ruohan's spiritual energy gained a level of animosity so intense it could almost be mistaken for pure resentment. Jin Guangshan shuddered at the sight.

The arrow sticking out of Wei Wuxian's chest was right above his heart. A centimeter down could have been fatal.

'*Especially,*' Wen Qing realized, '*To someone without a golden core.*'

Wei Wuxian was not dead, and yet no one would be able to deny that death had been the intention. It was that cultivator's lack of skill, not his mercy, that had thrown that shot off.

Wei Wuxian's skills had never been so dull.

In one smooth motion, he pulled the arrow from his chest and threw it down. The darkness and resentment surrounding him made the air feel thick with hate. The projectile landed with pin-point accuracy.

The young cultivator, whose chest was pierced by the blow, fell to the floor.

"Brother!" another youth to his side shouted, rushing to him. "Brother! Brother!"

Not even Jiang Yanli could look upon this scene with pity.

"He shot him," Madam Jin hissed, fury clear in her brow and voice. "He shot him. He *shot him!*"

The 'he' in this sentence was not Wei Wuxian.

(Wei Wuxian hadn't fired the first shot, after all.)

And yet, at that moment, chaos enveloped the crowd. The youth's sect leader, who had done nothing in response to his disciple's actions, ran forward, pointing a finger up at Wei Wuxian and shouting with a horrified expression.

"You… you… you're so cruel!" he accused.

When Wen Ruohan gave a disbelieving scoff, no one even tried to discourage him.

Reaching down to press at the still-bleeding wound on his chest, Wei Wuxian gave an indifferent tilt of his head, asking, "What does 'cruel' mean? If he dared to shoot an arrow at me while I was off guard, shouldn't he have known what would face him if he failed? You all call me a cultivator of the crooked path anyways, so you can't expect me to be generous and overlook this, can you?"

"No one would overlook this regardless," Lan Qiren said.

The crowd, however, disagreed.

Ignoring all of that, Wen Qing stared intently, not even glancing at the figures who spoke and instead keeping her eyes locked in on the wound at Wei Wuxian's chest. Although his robes covered up most of it, the injury was still clearly there.

(And her future-self, the only one who knew Wei Wuxian had lost his core, was literal ashes in the wind by now.)

Shouts and protests continued without rest.

"You see?" Wen Ruohan spoke up, speaking low enough that only Wen Qing could hear. "These are the people you betrayed us to save."

(Ones who, if Wen Ruohan were in charge, would never dare to speak up in such a way.)

"*I* betrayed the sect to save Wei Wuxian," Wen Qing responded. "Even you can't complain about that."

Wen Ruohan didn't respond to her counter, keeping his eyes firmly on the crowd before them. Wen Qing, meanwhile, kept her gaze on Wei Wuxian and Wei Wuxian alone. Neither said another word.

But the simulation did not stop for them. Finally snapping out of his shock, Jin Guangshan turned to his disciples and gave orders at once.

"Set up the battle arrays! Set up the battle arrays!" he commanded.

The was enough to kick the rest of his sect into gear. They began moving at once, rushing to the edges of the hall. Great beams of light shot into the sky a moment later.

Jin Guangshan's commands were absolute.

"We won't let him leave alive no matter what!"

"Jin Guangshan!" Madam Yu shouted, turning venomously toward him. Though there was plenty they could have said, neither she nor Jin Guangshan had a chance to respond.

A loud roar filled the air. Thousands of people had drawn their swords and were now running toward Wei Wuxian. The Jin were not the only ones who moved. The Nie unsheathed their sabers, lining up. The Lan pulled back, knocking arrows onto bows and beginning to aim. The Jiang rushed forward, ready to attack.

(They all aimed to kill.)

"You *fucking lunatics*!" Jin Zixuan shouted. "Stop it! I'm telling you to stop!"

At Qiongqi path, Wei Wuxian had been ambushed by dozens of individuals. That was a mob that had hunted him down. This, right here, was an army. However, despite the near deafening shouts, all resentful creatures within the region could hear something else loud and clear.

🎵♪♪♪🎵♪

A hand broke out of the dirt, grabbing onto a charging cultivator's foot and sending him tumbling to the ground.

Wen Ruohan's eyes went bloodthirsty with glee.

More hands crawled out. Each one was thin and gangly — not from malnourishment, but from rot. The decay on them did nothing to hold back their strength. With unnatural ease, they pulled themselves out of the ground. Horror immediately formed on the faces of everyone there.

The watchers, on the other hand, didn't even widen their eyes in surprise. They distantly recalled how terrified they had been by demonic cultivation at the start, but, at the current time, not even disgust remained.

The simulated Nie Mingjue ran forward, his saber clashing against the claws of a fierce corpse — of a Wen. Every member of the Wen Sect who had died in the Nightless City rose up once more. Every cultivator from the other great sects who had died in the final battle rose up as well. It didn't matter what side they had been on; all dead obeyed Wei Wuxian just the same.

♪♪♪🎵♪

A Wen corpse pounced, biting straight through the neck of a cultivator who had, only thirty seconds ago, spat at Wei Wuxian's name and drawn his blade. He fell to the ground, dead, a moment later.

"Shixiong!" the cultivator to his side cried out.

That Shixiong in question laid on the floor for several seconds. The younger disciple fought off corpses as quickly as he could, struggling to get close. At long last, he managed to get to his senior brother's side.

🎵

His chest was pierced a moment later. His Shixiong, who he had rushed over to help, had awakened just a moment ago.

This time, as a corpse.

(Wei Wuxian's army had grown.)

Unnerving though this sight was, every cultivator who had taken part in the Sunshot Campaign was more than familiar with it. The more experienced fighters adjusted at once, continuing their assault. The simulated Nie Mingjue swung his saber, decapitating a Wen corpse on the spot.

Nie Mingjue wondered if his future-self would kill A-Yuan the same way.

Disgust filled him once more. At this moment, looking at his future self filled him with even more hate than looking at Wen Ruohan or Jin Guangyao.

"You called him unreasonable," Nie Mingjue recalled, breaking into a mocking laugh. "You really think you're in the right?! You all offered peace while *gathering an army!*"

His roar was loud enough to nearly knock Huaisang over.

(It was an accusation aimed at the wrong person. Technically, 'we' was the correct term to use here.)

(Except that the simulated Sect Leader Nie, looking up at Wei Wuxian with such scornful eyes, felt completely alien to the real him.)

The simulated Nie Mingjue charged forward once more. Fierce corpses were cut down in droves. Within seconds, another corpse's head was chopped off. This corpse did not fall, however, charging forward once more as though its own head was of no concern.

~~A few years from now, Nie Mingjue's own headless corpse would act much the same.~~

Nie Mingjue sliced an arm off the headless corpse. Its leg followed soon after.

~~Nie Mingjue would also become just a torso before long.~~

A Nie disciple nearly lost her arm to a corpse. Nie Mingjue cut it in half. He moved on immediately after, fighting without rest.

"Our disciples are there," Nie Huaisang observed.

"...They are," Nie Mingjue confirmed, his voice sounding dazed and slow.

"Why are they there?"

Nie Mingjue blinked once, caught a bit off guard, and looked over. Nie Huaisang stared back at him, eyes lacking the fear Nie Mingjue had been expecting to find.

"Da-ge, in all our fights about my training, you always got most angry when I ran away, right?"

Nie Mingjue could barely process the question he was being asked. He breathed in heavily, slow to respond. Eventually, he nodded.

“Right. You always wanted me to try. Mostly so I’d be safe-” Nie Mingjue nodded again, “-but also because you wanted to make me a righteous cultivator. A hero, or something like that.”

Nie Mingjue had never wanted Nie Huaisang to go quite that far. Even when they were young, it had been clear Huaisang wasn’t that kind of person. Nie Huaisang knew it as well. He would never be like that.

But-

“Da-ge, Wei-xiong was all that. *He* tried. He tried and tried and tried. He did everything he could to be righteous — to be a hero. He wouldn’t be standing there if all this was right.”

And Nie Mingjue, in this Heavens forsaken future, had brought an army to the Nightless City.

(Nie Huaisang had never been like this — had never *wanted* to be like this. But to watch someone try and try and yet end up this way…)

Countless arrows flew toward Wei Wuxian, pushed back by the wall of resentment that had formed around him. His eyes burned red from atop that tower. Nie Mingjue, standing on the ground, looked up at him with disgust.

“That *is* us. You — *we* — can’t excuse this with just ignorance.”

(Lan Xichen, listening from nearby, flinched.)

Nie disciples fell left and right. They were Nie Mingjue’s responsibility. It was his job to protect them. However, the current situation meant it was impossible for them to all leave alive. Soon, the gaze Nie Mingjue looked up at Wei Wuxian with turned to hate.

And all Nie Mingjue could picture was his other self leading them to Nightless City — to their deaths — without even trying to find out what was really going on.

They numbered in the hundreds, but the section with Nie cultivators was only a small part of the courtyard overall. Dozens of sects had come to this conference. All those sect leaders were now struggling to protect their disciples, fear etched onto their faces.

Which, in Wen Ruohan’s mind, was exactly how it should be.

‘*You feared him all this time, but never enough,*’ the Chief Cultivator thought. ‘*Never in the way you feared me.*’

Because, unlike Wen Ruohan, Wei Wuxian didn’t have an army full of cultivators at his disposal. He was a one-man army, but…

Arrows continuously flew Wei Wuxian’s way.

(If another one hit, if it actually speared his heart, this entire battle would be over at once.)

‘A-Ying….’

For a brief moment, Wen Ruohan’s smile disappeared.

If the Wen had Wei Wuxian, they would have won the war. For quite some time now, Wen Ruohan had been certain of that. In fact, if he’d had Wei Wuxian, he might not have started the war at all.

This thought of his went two ways, though.

(If Wei Wuxian had the full strength of the Wen, he wouldn’t now be fighting alone.)

“Protect the Sect Leader!” Jin Guangyao ordered, cutting down a low ranking corpse that approached. “Defend the sides!”

Disciples rushed to follow that command, swarming around Jin Guangshan protectively.

Wei Wuxian continued to stand at the top of the tower, alone. The notes on his flute were powerful enough to send approaching arrows flying back, but individual cultivators needed to be dealt with by corpses instead. Luckily, given the location of the battle, there were plenty of those to go around.

However:

🎶🎶🎶

A series of notes played rapidly. They were jarring and unnerving, not in themselves but rather for the fact that they cut through Wei Wuxian’s own song. Chenqing paused. Wei Wuxian looked up.

Lan Wangji descended, his zither still in his hands.

Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen both swallowed nervously. Lan Wangji himself marched forward, standing alert.

The simulation had brought them away from the battlefield below. Now, they stood between Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Patriarch. A heavy weight seemed to rest between them. The zither’s notes had disrupted some of the resentment in the air. Despite that, between the two of them, Lan Wangji looked by far the most affected.

At that moment, neither Lan Xichen nor Lan Qiren could bring themselves to look Lan Wangji in the eyes. They lowered their gazes to the floor, finding themselves watching the senseless battle below instead. It wouldn’t matter either way; the real Lan Wangji’s eyes were fixated on his other self at this point in time.

“Ah. Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian greeted.

The coldness of his voice was harsher than steel.

Lan Wangji looked from the battlefield to Chenqing to Wei Wuxian once more. He stepped forward, as though to approach Wei Wuxian, then hesitated again. The hostility directed at his other-self was easy to feel in the surrounding resentment.

A jar of alcohol was knocked out of the fifteen-year-old Wei Wuxian's grasp.

'Lan Zhan! Don't be so harsh! We're friends; if you let me go this time, I'll return the favor next time!'

The battle roared on below. Giving an empty smile, Wei Wuxian raised Chenqing to his lips once more. Hanguang-jun moved his hand toward his zither.

"You should have figured out long ago — the Purification Tone is useless on me!"

With a smooth motion, Lan Wangji flipped the zither onto his back, drawing Bichen from its sheath. His immediate attack was fast and powerful, directed straight at Chenqing as though he wanted to sever the flute in two.

The very first meeting the two of them had was a rooftop fight in the middle of the night.

Guilt pooled in Lan Qiren's core.

With a simple turn, Wei Wuxian dodged the attack. He had always been like that, his fast footwork making him nearly impossible to get ahold of. The mocking laughter that followed was a cruel reflection of how his voice had once been.

"Fine, fine. I always knew there would come a day when we'd have to fight for real like this. You always detested me anyways."

'Hey, Lan Zhan!' Wei Wuxian shouted, jumping up and down. 'Look at me! Look at me!'

"Alright, then. Bring it on!"

"Wei Ying!"

A book on pornography opened up in front of the second jade. His cheeks flushed bright red.

'Wei Ying!' he shouted.

'Here! I'm here!' Wei Wuxian cackled.

'You-!'

The Yiling Patriarch's mocking laughter cut through the real Lan Wangji's memory, tearing it to shreds.

"Wei Ying!" Hanguang-jun repeated.

Someone swallowed then cleared their throat.

“Although he shouted the words, Hanguang-jun’s voice was clearly shaking,” Lan Sizhui read out, speaking slowly. “However, right now, Xian-gege had already lost his judgement. He was half-mad, half-delirious. His mind magnified all ill will people had toward him until he was absolutely certain that everyone in the world loathed him. He, too, loathed everyone in turn.”

Jiang Yanli couldn’t breathe.

The battle continued on and on below.

“It didn’t matter who came at him. He wasn’t afraid. It was all the same. Everyone was the same.”

Jiang Cheng’s eyes fell on his other-self, who whipped Zidian around, bringing corpses down one after another. He hadn’t attacked first. Wei Wuxian had gotten his corpses to attack before the Jiang had done anything. It wasn’t his fault!

‘Our disciples are there,’ Nie Huaisang said.

‘...They are,’ Nie Mingjue confirmed.

‘Why are they there?’ the younger had asked.

That question had gone unanswered. Partly, it could be said, because the answer was so obvious. They had come because Jiang Cheng’s brother in law had been killed.

Which happened because Jin Zixun attacked Wei Wuxian.

Which happened because Wei Wuxian had ‘betrayed the sect and publicly regards all cultivation sects as his enemy,’ right?

In the far future, several children had been enacting this very scene. The battle at the Nightless City would undoubtedly be a popular one to play, given how many people were involved. At one point, the boy playing Wei Wuxian had been shoved to the ground, his ‘Stygian Tiger Seal’ breaking on impact. With teary eyes, he’d glared up at the other boys.

Two dozen arrows were fired at Wei Wuxian simultaneously, held off only by a thin wall of resentment.

‘Hey! Why did you push me?’ the child had asked. ‘It was all of you against just me! That’s not fair!’

A Jiang disciple snuck up from behind, preparing to chop off Wei Wuxian’s head.

Jiang Cheng couldn’t stand it. He suddenly fell to his knees, gagging and coughing on the floor.

“A-Cheng!” Madam Yu hissed, kneeling down next to him. “What happened?! Are you-”

“Shut up!” Jiang Cheng snapped back, speaking before his mind realized what it was doing. “How can you… how can you be worried about *me* when-”

“A-Xian!” a voice shouted.

Everyone froze.

Wei Wuxian looked over. A sudden clarity seemed to come over him.

A look Madam Yu understood at once.

(Even if everyone hated him, even if the whole world wanted him dead, the girl who had continued to peel lotus seeds for him despite her mother’s shouts would never want that.)

But-

“A-Li…” she trailed off. “What… are you doing here?”

Chenqing fell to Wei Wuxian’s side.

“Shijie?” he asked.

Jin Zixuan paled as well.

The simulation brought them down. The battle below was a chaotic whirlwind. Corpses and cultivators fell one after another, dressed in robes of various colors and shades. Every human who died would join Wei Wuxian’s army, making it nearly impossible to tell friend from foe. In that mess, the new Madam of the Jin sect stood alone, looking this way and that.

“A-Xian?” she asked.

“A-Li, you should get out of there,” Jin Zixuan said. “You can’t — it’s not safe!”

(Wei Wuxian had killed her husband. However, just like Wei Wuxian, not a single watcher thought there was any chance of Jiang Yanli wanting him dead.)

The watchers’ positions switched so that they were directly in front of Jiang Cheng. The simulated Sect Leader Jiang threw off a few corpses with a swing of Sandu.

“A-Xian?” Jiang Yanli called out again.

Jiang Cheng went white.

“A-Jie? A-Jie!” He swung again, cutting another corpse to pieces. “Where are you? Where are you?!”

Their view switched back to Jiang Yanli, who was still surrounding by fighting on all sides.

“What are you all *doing?!*” Madam Yu snapped. “Someone get her out of there!”

Wei Wuxian jumped down from the roof of the palace, running through the battlefield with a crazed expression and shouting, "Shijie? Where are you?! I can't see you!"

"Hurry up, Wei Wuxian!" Madam Yu urged.

Madam Jin pressed her hands together, worry filling her whole. Wei Wuxian had been involved in the death of Jin Zixuan, but, of everyone here, he and Jiang Cheng were the only ones who would prioritize keeping Jiang Yanli safe.

"Hurry," she agreed.

Swords and arrows came at Wei Wuxian from all sides. He pushed through with his bare hands, ducking under shots and punching through any swordsmen who got in range.

"Shijie?!" he shouted. "Shijie?!"

"No, no, no, no…" Jin Zixuan mumbled, biting his lip. "Hurry up. Get her out of there."

Either Wei Wuxian or Jiang Cheng. So long as they got to her-

"But what if…" Jiang Yanli paused, swallowed once, then continued, "What if I can help?"

"How would you help *here?!*" Madam Yu demanded. "Be reasonable, A-Li. None of the stray arrows are going to care how well you cook! Don't you ever do this!"

But Jiang Yanli, still filled with an anger she had never experienced before, shook her head.

"A-Niang, I can't just let this happen! I can't *do nothing!* If I can convince them to stop-"

"No one's going to stop now!" Madam Yu snapped. "It became too late for words the moment A-Xuan died!"

Jin Guangshan nodded in agreement, adding, "As sad as it is to say, there will be no reasoning with either side now. We've passed the point of no return."

"*That point* was passed when you let A-Xun try to *ambush* Wei Wuxian!" Madam Jin snapped back, making her husband flinch. "Ambushing an invited Sect Leader — look at what's happened because of all that! If you weren't so-"

"A-Jie?" Jiang Cheng asked.

Everyone looked over.

Wei Wuxian's eyes were wide. Swords, talismans, and other weapons still came at him from all sides. It was like he was wading through a muddy swamp, unable to move more than a few steps at a time.

~~Lacking his sword. Unable to fly.~~

None of that disguised his panic, however. For, at that moment, he had finally laid eyes upon the pure white Jiang Yanli. Her eyes were wide with fear, but her movements were slow and full of exhaustion. Countless people stood between Wei Wuxian and his goal. Their bloodlust was a barely-noticed inconvenience compared to what was in the distance.

Behind Jiang Yanli, a newly-decapitated fierce corpse stood up once more.

"No." Jiang Cheng tensed. "But Wei Wuxian wouldn't-"

The mostly-rotted corpse raised a rusted sword. Jiang Yanli still hadn't turned its way.

"Get lost!" Wei Wuxian ordered. "Get lost right now! Don't touch her!"

A command of resentful energy. One the watchers were now quite used to.

But…

Kill them — stop them — they want to kill the Wen! They killed you, your brothers — kill him in turn! Don't touch her! They want the rest of your family now — hate them, hate them, hate them, hate them — kill him — kill her — kill him — don't touch her! — kill him!

The command could barely be heard. Wei Wuxian's panic mounted. More and more energy was put into his newest command. And yet…

Kill him — kill him — kill her — don't kill her — kill him — kill her — kill him — kill him — don't kill her — kill-

Lan Qiren squinted his eyes shut, the clashing commands grating at his skull. The intention was strong. The power behind that command was immense. However, in this land full of resentment and enemies and threats, asking the legion of corpses to avoid a single girl was nearly impossible.

But, if that was the case-

The simulated Jiang Cheng, upon laying eyes on his sister, felt death come over him.

"Make it go away!" he shouted at Wei Wuxian.

He threw Sandu, but, in the chaos of battle, could only watch as another cultivator's sword obstructed the path of his own. Wei Wuxian reached a hand out, commanding the corpse again:

Don't hurt her!

He ducked down, avoiding a saber that nearly took off his head. He shoved that cultivator down.

"*Stop!*" he commanded.

His voice was lost in the crowd. Three arrows came at him at once.

Stop it.

That went unheard.

Back off!

Nothing responded.

Bit by bit, the resentment became even more chaotic than before. The conflicting commands swirled together, jutting into each other and clashing horribly. Wei Wuxian's panic grew.

***Sto**p **st**op s**to**p **sto**p **st**op s**to**p **sto**p **st**op s**to**p **sto**p **st**op s**to**p-*

With a gasp, Jiang Yanli fell to the ground, her knees giving out from under her. Nie Huaisang was in a similar position, unable to resist the heavy wave of resentment. Lan Qiren wasn't far behind.

Wei Wuxian's panic grew and grew.

As more and more of the commands contradicted, the control Wei Wuxian had over the surrounding creatures lessened. He might have been able to do this if he was calm — he might have been able to do this if the number of corpses he controlled was small — he might have been able to stop this if he wasn't being attacked every second or so. However, the corpse raised its blade.

"Stop it, stop it, right now — *stop it!*"

"A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked.

The corpse struck down, cutting through Jiang Yanli's back.

"*A-Li!*"

"Miss Jiang!"

"Maiden-"

"Miss-"

"A-Jie!"

"Jiang-guniang!" Wen Qing shouted, rushing over to the simulated girl's collapsed form. She knelt down at once, trying to turn Jiang Yanli over to better see the wound.

Her hands only phased through instead.

A sword glare flashed forward, slicing the responsible corpse in two. Bichen flew back to its master a moment later. Neither Wei Wuxian nor Jiang Cheng had a moment to

thank him, however. Both ran forward to Jiang Yanli.

Lan Xichen did the same, not able to spare even a moment to view the expression on his simulated brother's face.

~~He'd brought an army here. He hadn't investigated further before going; he was partly responsible for this. If Jiang Yanli died here-~~

Jiang Cheng made it there first, picking his sister up in his arms. But, right before Wei Wuxian could reach Jiang Yanli, Lan Wangji grabbed him by the collar.

"Wei Ying! Stop the corpses!" he commanded.

Not even seeming to hear the words, Wei Wuxian simply pushed Lan Wangji away, running to Jiang Yanli immediately after.

"A-Li," Madam Yu whispered, her voice shaky and confused. The sight of Jiang Yanli on the battlefield had been terrifying for her, but it had been the stray weapons she had truly feared. The thought that one of *Wei Wuxian's* corpses would hurt Jiang Yanli…

In the moment, it wasn't something she'd even considered.

(The resentment's fear increased tenfold.)

Jiang Yanli's white robes had been dyed red with blood. Jiang Cheng held two fingers to her neck, checking for a pulse. Short breaths were continuing to come out of her. When Wei Wuxian approached, Jiang Cheng threw a sudden punch toward his face.

"What happened?!" he demanded. "Didn't you say you could control it?! Didn't you say it'd be fine?!"

He was right to be angry. He was completely and totally right.

(If he hadn't brought an army to this event, he would even be justified.)

As it was, not a single person could be happy with what was being shown.

'*I should have stopped him,*' Lan Wangji thought. '*If I had given him the help he needed — if I'd made sure he didn't need demonic cultivation to protect everyone…*'

His eyes dropped down to where Wei Wuxian's core should be.

'*…Wei Ying-*'

That thought didn't have a chance to complete, however. Wei Wuxian, thrown back by the punch, stumbled and fell to the ground. His eyes were exhausted and haunted, but his face was frighteningly blank.

"I… don't know either," he admitted. "I can't control it. I just can't control it."

Wen Ruohan's expression darkened. The resentful energy surrounding them was becoming less and less restrained as time went on. It was now a maelstrom, bringing about destruction and death with wild disregard.

(It almost felt like the Burial Mounds had once been.)

It was-

Suddenly, Jiang Yanli twitched.

"A-Jie?" Jiang Cheng called out. "A-Jie, it's fine! It's fine. It's not that bad — just a little gash. It's not that bad. I'll take you away from here right now."

Jiang Yanli's blood continued to pool on the floor.

"A-Li!" Jin Zixuan clenched his teeth together, kneeling by her simulated-self's side. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry I-"

Both Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan's words were cut off by a soft whisper from below.

"...A-Xian."

While Jiang Cheng froze at Jiang Yanli's voice, Wei Wuxian reacted at once:

"Shijie, I… I'm here," he assured.

When facing the gathered troops, Wei Wuxian had displayed anger and disgust. Now, for the first time, he showed visible fear.

(If Jiang Yanli cursed at him, that might be enough to truly send him over the edge.)

"It wasn't his fault, A-Li," Jin Zixuan whispered. "I'm sorry. I invited him but… I didn't see what was going on until it was too late."

Madam Jin frowned and opened her mouth, as though about to object to her son's phrasing, then closed it again. Right now, accepting his words felt like her only option.

But, of course, their words would never be able to reach the woman herself. Jiang Yanli opened her eyes, the simple act almost being more than she could manage. She looked around then, at last, found Wei Wuxian's face.

While blame could be debated, it was by Wen Ning's hand that Jin Zixuan died. If the simulated Jiang Yanli blamed Wei Wuxian, no one would be able to rebuke her for it. Even Wen Ruohan, despite his earlier reactions to accusations against Wei Wuxian, seemed accepting now.

Then, at last, Jiang Yanli spoke:

"A-Xian…. Back then… why did you run away so fast?" she whispered. "I didn't get the chance to look at you… or say anything to you…."

The resentful energy around them fluctuated, pulsing faster and faster in tune with Wei Wuxian's racing heart. He continued to look at the ground, not able to meet her eyes.

An equally dirtied and bloodied face — Jin Zixuan's — overlapped on top of Jiang Yanli's for a moment.

Jiang Cheng's mind whirled in a self-destructive cycle.

'*He killed A-Jie. He killed A-Jie!*'

For days, Jiang Cheng had been sure that was a lie. There had been lies before. His own future self had lied before! This one, among all others, couldn't be true. He hadn't believed it. Wei Wuxian wouldn't. Wei Wuxian would never.

'*He killed A-Jie! He murdered her!*'

It was a complicated situation, sure. It was hard to deal with. Wei Wuxian had tried to make the righteous choice.

~~By choosing the Wen over the two of them!~~

He said he wouldn't lose control. He lost control! How could he possibly think creating something like demonic cultivation was justified?!

~~But they knew exactly why.~~

He shouldn't have used it here! He could have run away! He always chose to play the hero at their expense!

~~He'd only come because they'd killed his friends and promised peace.~~

He *should've should've should've should've-*

Surrendered? Backed off? Run as soon as he saw her? He couldn't — he couldn't even control his own corpses right now!

~~And whose fault was that?~~

A week or two ago, the watchers had repeated an idealistic mantra almost-unknowingly. "At least nothing can be worse than this," they'd said time and time again. No one uttered such words now. They didn't even cross the watchers' minds. After all, the simulation had proven that things could — *would* — always get worse.

And yet…

"You *killed A-Jie,*" Jiang Cheng gasped out, still not-quite believing.

Wei Wuxian trembled where he stood, fearing the words that were going to come next more than any others.

“I’m… I’m here to tell you…”

Jiang Yanli coughed out. Blood left her lips.

Wen Qing frowned deeply at that. However, as she examined and re-examined again, her brows began to furrow. Jiang Yanli was not a strong cultivator. She had not been eating or sleeping well in the past few days and her skin had been pale even before the attack. However, the fact remained…

“The Jin Sect’s doctors are reasonably skilled,” Wen Qing recalled aloud, making a number of tear-stained eyes turn her away. “She has some time left. If… if she gets to them before an hour passes…”

It was hard to tell for sure, but-

The resentment surrounding Wei Wuxian shifted once again. It became as thick as the Burial Mounds’ aura had once been. The crimson glow in his eyes was strong, but the intensity fluctuated up and down, displaying fear instead of power.

“Shijie…” he whispered. “Stop… stop talking. I’ll get you out of here right away!”

And yet, at that moment, he seemed scared to approach. The new Madam Jin looked up at him, still trying to speak.

Jiang Yanli looked down at her ~~always weak, always helpless~~ other self, praying that she would last just a bit longer.

‘*What does she want to say?*’ Wei Wuxian asked himself. ‘*That it’s fine? That she doesn’t hate me? That everything’s okay? That she doesn’t blame me for having killed Jin Zixuan?*’

Wei Wuxian nearly laughed at the thought.

‘*Impossible,*’ he was sure.

But then-

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli continued. “You should… you should stop first. Stop. Stop them.”

“I’ll stop!” Wei Wuxian assured her. “Yes, I’ll stop.”

He took up Chenqing, placed it on his lips, and began to play. Though his thoughts were panicked and confusing at first, the commands gradually began to align with one another. Little by little, his undead army obeyed.

Jin Guangshan nearly gaped in amazement. He kept forgetting, somehow, how much control this weak, fragile woman had over the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation.

He would do his best to ensure that information didn’t leave him again.

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The notes played.

One by one, the corpses stopped.

(One by one, the now unopposed cultivators began to turn their attention to this very scene.)

Lan Wangji glanced over briefly before turning back to the fight, continuing to bring down any corpses that had not fallen yet. Wei Wuxian, meanwhile, walked over and knelt beside Jiang Yanli's resting form. His hands shook with fear that, if he reached forward, he would somehow hurt her.

(Hurt her even more, that is.)

'*He doesn't get to look at her like that!*' some part of Jiang Cheng raged. '*He's the reason she's dead!*'

And if he hadn't come, and Jiang Cheng did as he pledged in this very conference and cut off Wei Wuxian's head, what would Jiang Yanli have said to him then?

'The Yiling Patriarch Wei Wuxian is dead!'

'Really? Who killed him?"

'Who else? His old friend Jiang Cheng, leader of the Jiang Clan.'

Wei Wuxian's hands rested against the ground, slowly becoming stained with Jiang Yanli's blood.

Jiang Cheng could feel Wei Wuxian's blood dripping from his own hands just the same. Nausea rose up in his throat once more.

And yet, at this moment, neither Wei Wuxian nor Jiang Yanli looked at each other with any hate. There was only concern, worry, and love.

(Jin Ling would grow up hating Wei Wuxian.)

"Because he still killed-"

Jiang Cheng's words never finished. At that moment, Jiang Yanli's gaze turned to something behind Wei Wuxian. Her eyes widened. With a level of strength she had never shown before, she abruptly sat up and pushed Wei Wuxian back!

SHING

A moment later, a gleaming silver blade pierced through her throat.

"...A-Li?" Madam Yu asked. Her eyes, despite seeing just fine, couldn't register what had just occurred.

Blood poured from Jiang Yanli's mouth and throat. Her head went lopsided, all light gone from her eyes. She had been talking just a moment ago; she was a corpse now.

"You bastard!" the person holding onto the blade cried out. "This is for my brother!"

It was the person who had cried over that very first archer — who had cried over someone who'd attacked first, attacked unprovoked, and attacked without forethought or plans.

And yet, because of him-

"Huh?" the boy blinked through his tears, finally registering that he hadn't killed the right person after all. Wei Wuxian stared at Jiang Yanli blankly. Jiang Cheng, who still held her in his arms, didn't seem to have registered a single thing.

"An accident?" Lan Wangji muttered, eyes wide. "It wasn't even his mistake. Someone else..."

It was just an accident?

No. This wasn't 'just' anything.

Wei Wuxian's eyes were as wide as they could go. He looked up.

'*A-Xian.*'

Jiang Yanli's voice echoed in his mind.

And yet, right in front of him, her corpse laid still.

His steady, silver eyes turned red once more.

"Ah!" Jiang Yanli cried out, slamming against the ground. The resentment emanating from Wei Wuxian at this moment was thick and overwhelming, crushing her down. She struggled against it, but lacked the strength to push herself up. Even her brother had been forced to take a knee.

As for her other brother…

Wei Wuxian's crimson eyes looked up slowly, the heavy resentment around him shadowing the rest of his form.

"It… it wasn't me…" the boy protested, trembling a little. "I was going to kill Wei Wuxian. I was going to avenge my brother."

The very same brother who had shot Wei Wuxian to begin with.

“She just threw herself over on her own-”

The boy never had a chance to finish what he was saying. At that moment, Wei Wuxian’s hand shot out and snapped the boy’s neck.

Too easy — too fast. Something that couldn’t even *begin* to account for what the boy had done.

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli shouted. “A-Xian!”

Her protests, as always, would never be heard. Resentment spilled out, the feeling carried with it more clear than it had ever been before.

‘*You were born with a smiling face,’ Jiang Yanli had told him once. ‘Always smiling, never minding sorrowful things. No matter what situation you’re in, you can always be happy.’*

And yet, right now, the pure hatered carried in the surrounding resentment was overwhelming.

“Demon! Let him go!” Sect Leader Yao shouted, waving his sword.

Wen Ruohan looked his way, the gleam in his eyes promising death if that simulated figure tried anything right now. Madam Yu, meanwhile, could only stare blankly at the simulation. Even without resentment forcing her to remain in her seat, she wouldn’t be able to even think to move.

“You-! Back then, you caused the deaths of Jiang Fengmian and his wife!” Sect Leader Yao continued. “Now you’ve caused the death of your Shijie!”

“Huh?” Madam Yu asked, turning her blank gaze on Sect Leader Yao at last.

“Your suffering was the result of your own crimes, yet you dared to vent your anger on another!” he continued, gesturing at the corpse of the boy who had stabbed Jiang Yanli. “Instead of learning, you took another life. Wei Wuxian, your crimes will never be forgiven!”

“You *shut up!*” Jiang Cheng shouted. “This is all — how could you all-”

He couldn’t finish those words. The resentment was suffocating now. Wei Wuxian’s rapid heartbeat echoed throughout the simulation. He looked down, his breaths coming out faster and faster. He brought his hands up, burying his face in them. What he said next was not a response to Sect Leader Yao’s words nor an accusation of his own.

It was simply a scream.

“*A-Xian!*” Jiang Yanli called out one last time. The real one, of course; now, the simulated one was gone.

A*n**d*** ***n***ow ***t*****he** wo**r**l***d*** wou***ld p***ay.

Wei **Wux**ia*n* **rea***ched* ***into*** h*is ro***be**s, ta***ki***ng t**wo o**bj***ects* ou**t from w**ithi**n h*is sl***eev***es. *W***ith a re**soun**d**ing cl**ang *the*y s**nap**p**ed t***oget***h*e**r.**

The **Sty**gi**an T**ige**r S**ea***l h**ad be**en*** fo*rme***d.**

Ev***ery****thin*g **w**ent **black.**

…

……

……

……

Wen Ruohan blinked once, breathing in deeply. The resentment at the Burial Mounds had been bad. What occurred just a second ago was *incomparable* as far as spirits could feel.

'*Even during the battle, he was holding back that much resentment?*' Wen Ruohan wondered. '*He wasn't using the Stygian Tiger Seal either.*'

Because, as Wei Wuxian had mentioned, those weapons were far too powerful — involved far too little control.

'*It's no wonder Jin Guangshan was willing to face the ire of the other sects to get access to Xue Yang.*'

And wasn't that exactly why this had all occurred? Wei Wuxian was too dangerous to be so alone.

(Because of that, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan were dead.)

The Chief Cultivator breathed in one more time, finally feeling his headache ease. He looked up.

All around him, there were bodies strewn across the floor.

"What?" someone muttered from behind. Wen Ruohan glanced back to see Nie Mingjue picking himself off the floor. The chair he had been sitting on until a few moments ago appeared crushed.

Wen Ruohan looked down at his own chair, noticing the splinters and cracks that had formed. About half the chairs in the room had been demolished completely.

And yet, at the moment, that felt like a truly trivial concern.

"What was that?" Nie Mingjue asked. "What just-"

“I believe,” Wen Ruohan interrupted, “that we just witnessed the night Three Thousand Cultivators died.”

(Or five thousand, depending on who you asked.)

Nie Mingjue looked back at Wen Ruohan, his eyes wide.

“That’s-” he began, only to stop himself a moment later. Instead of continuing, he looked across the unconscious bodies on the floor for his brother. Huaisang, as expected, had collapsed just a little ways away. Nie Mingjue rushed over.

At the same time, Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji began to stir.

One by one, the watchers began to wake up and pick themselves off the ground. Even after that they breathed heavily, still vividly recalling the feeling of resentment crushing their legs, chests, stomachs, hands, heads — weighing down all the way to the tips of their fingers.

Emotionally speaking, they weren’t any better off.

“A-Li!” Madam Yu cried out, rushing to her daughter’s side. For perhaps the first time in her life, she attempted to hug Jiang Yanli. The rules of the simulation, of course, prevented that from happening. Her arms moved straight through her daughter, never making contact at all.

“A-Niang,” Jiang Yanli said, her eyes watering. “A-Niang, I-”

She stopped, swallowing back a cry.

“A-Niang!”

A little ways behind her, Jin ZIxuan stood still, his breathing becoming harsher and harsher. He swallowed a few times, flinching every time he heard Jiang Yanli speak.

Throughout this entire simulation, no matter what she had seen, Jiang Yanli had never cried like that. Her parents’ deaths had hurt her immensely, but even then this hopeless, desperate cry hadn’t appeared. Despite her lacking cultivation, Jiang Yanli was a woman Jin Zixuan admired. Her response to everything his simulated self had done gave her an air of maturity he could never hope to match.

But now…

“A-Niang!” Jiang Yanli cried again, falling to her knees and burying her head in her hands. She cried out over and over again, trembling like a child scared of a passing storm. Her tears began falling onto the in-between zone’s floor, disappearing a moment later. Nie Mingjue and Lan XIchen looked away from the scene. Nie Huaisang and Wen Qing frowned in pity. Madam Yu’s arms were still extended, trying, pointlessly, to envelop Jiang Yanli in a hug.

(She had never had to do this before. Madam Yu was not someone who gave comfort — *Jiang Yanli* was the one who gave it. In fact, the only times Jiang Yanli had ever really needed comfort…

Well, Wei Wuxian had given it to her then.)

"A-Li…" Madam Yu attempted, her gaze briefly turning toward her son. Jiang Cheng didn't seem to notice her at all, just gazing blankly at the ground between him and his sister for a while.

The red of Jiang Yanli's blood had stood out quite starkly on her mourning robes.

(For the tenth time that hour, Jiang Cheng felt like he was going to throw up.)

(He was far from the only one.)

"Who was that man?!" Madam Yu demanded, looking around desperately. "The one who stabbed A-Li! Did anyone recognize him?! What sect was he-"

"What good will knowing that do, Ziyuan?" Lan Qiren sighed. "He was little more than a single drop of water in a crashing wave. Punishing him won't solve anything at all."

"Then what?! You want to blame Wei Wuxian?"

Wen Ruohan laughed openly at that, pointing out, "You've always been the first one to advocate for that. A-Ying might have lost control in that moment, but, if it hadn't been for-"

"That's enough," Nie Mingjue growled. "We all know that already. By that point, this outcome was… inevitable."

"Was it?" Wen Ruohan asked. "If Jiang Yanli hadn't asked A-Ying to stop his corpses — to let the army attacking him go — she might have lived."

Lan Xichen's mouth dropped open at Wen Ruohan's audacity. Madam Jin looked too torn between anger and shock to do anything. Madam Yu looked a second away from sparking with electricity, having Zidian or not.

Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan both flinched.

(It was almost funny, how well they suited each other. Both of them had run in on Wei Wuxian defending himself from an army dozens to hundreds to *thousands* of times greater than him, and both of them had asked him to stop. Helplessly watching cultivators gather against her brother had made Jiang Yanli furious. Yet, when her other-self did intervene, she only made things worse for Wei Wuxian. Neither she nor her husband had known the full situation at the time, but…)

(Well, it was much easier to get one person to stop than a thousand.)

(The first time, Wei Wuxian hadn't listened. The second time, he had. Neither worked out. Jin Ling was an orphan from infancy because the two of them only ever made things worse.)

A morose air fell over the watchers.

Jin Guangshan was standing in the back, watching the other sect leaders carefully. At this time, no one felt much like speaking. The sequence of events they bore witness to felt meaningless, in hindsight. All the rumors, all the hate, and Wei Wuxian hadn't even been the one to finish her off.

But that was the whole point, wasn't it? In Jin Guangshan's opinion, this segment had shown their grim reality quite frankly.

(Wei Wuxian's power would inevitably bring strife to the land. A power like that, especially one he couldn't fully control, was far too dangerous. A being like him could never live unleashed.)

"The next time Wei Wuxian contacts us, we should probably instruct him to stop his research into demonic cultivation," Jin Guangshan suggested. "Now that we have a way out, he doesn't need to learn more. It will be safest for everyone if he stops."

A few confused gazes turned his way, the suggestion seeming to come out of nowhere. Jin Guangshan gave a friendly smile.

"Just think about it," he continued. "If Wei Wuxian hadn't had demonic cultivation, things would never have gotten this far. Wei Wuxian wouldn't have been vulnerable after stopping his corpses if he wasn't used to having those. He can continue his research into talismen, of course, but it will be safest for everyone if he doesn't-"

"Demonic cultivation is not why this occurred."

The even-toned words left no room for refusal. The source, of course, was Lan Wangji.

Jin Guangshan narrowed his eyes, pointing out, "No one person needs that kind of power. The fear Wei Wuxian and his seal inspired in people is exactly what caused this to occur."

They had just witnessed that seal's power. Most of them had fallen unconscious from the sheer intensity of the resentment. No one could deny its strength. But-

"That same fear would have never happened if I had been the one to create demonic cultivation," Lan Wangji responded, just as evenly as before. Jin Guangshan narrowed his eyes.

'*He was so much more endearing when he couldn't speak back to me,*' Sect Leader Jin thought.

A shiver ran up Lan Xichen's spine for reasons he couldn't explain. A few moments later, he stood in front of Lan Wangji, blocking Jin Guangshan's sight of him. Nie Minjgue stepped forward as well:

"If you're outlawing his cultivation, you would have to outlaw the Nie Sect's cultivation, too," he declared firmly, clenching down to forcefully still his shaking hands. "In that situation, I would have lost control long before Wei Wuxian did. If anything, Nie cultivation should be outlawed before his."

Which would not happen unless Nie Mingjue himself wanted it to. Great Sects or not, the others could not force this. ‘Nothing has happened despite so many years passing. I’m sure it’s fine!’ ‘If Sect Leader Nie says it’s okay, it must be.’ ‘Beast-based cultivation? That’s exactly what I’d expect of them — why are you all surprised?’ It would hurt their reputation, of course. It might even weaken them until they stopped being a Great Sect. It would not be the end, however.

(At the beginning, when their sect was still new, it might’ve been enough to finish them off.)

(Wei Wuxian was new. The Great Sects, at the end of this, would kill him.)

(That didn’t make it *right.*)

“At-at the very least, we should be monitoring him more closely, shouldn’t we?” Jin Guangshan asked. “My sect, at least, needs more before it will feel reassured. We all saw how poorly things can go when Wei Ying loses control.”

An image of Jiang Yanli flashed into the watchers’ minds again. Tensions rose among the adults and the juniors flinched as if slapped. Nie Huaisang swallowed once; Jiang Cheng was shaking; Jin Zixuan eyes burned with tears.

“I-”

“*Shut up!*”

Everyone looked over at once. To Jin Guangshan's surprise, Wen Qing was the person who had just spoken.

“Shut up,” the doctor repeated. “I don’t want to hear another word out of you.”

She had watched herself be burned alive. She had watched Jiang Yanli die, unable to help. She had heard rumors of Wen Ning’s demise knowing full well that *Jin Guangshan* was keeping him locked away at this time. As the segment had gone on, Wen Qing's rage had gradually started to consume her.

“Maiden-”

“No. *Enough.* What you did — what you all did to Wei Wuxian — was never his fault! A-Ning killed Jin Zixuan and Wei Wuxian hurt Jiang Yanli, but *nothing* will make up for what you tried to do to him!” Wen Qing shouted, losing composure completely. “You cannot just *sit here* and pretend like you weren’t trying to-”

“I’m offering this suggestion to prevent that from happening!”

“*If you think-!*”

Click

“Hello!” Wei Wuxian greeted.

And that voice — calm, relaxed, and unafraid — stabbed straight through Jiang Yanli like the blade that had taken her other self's life.

Jiang Cheng couldn't look up. It didn't matter that Wei Wuxian wouldn't visually be there — Jiang Cheng was incapable of looking in the direction of that voice.

'I suppose you didn't have a mother to teach you?' Hitting where it hurts the most, huh?' the future Sect Leader Jiang had asked. 'Have you forgotten who's the reason Jin Ling had to face so many whispers behind his back? You're quite the forgetful old man. You've forgotten the things you've said, the promise you made, but don't you dare forget how his parents died!'

Jiang Yanli sat up suddenly, pushing Wei Wuxian back and taking the hit for herself. She had acted, in her last moments, to save Wei Wuxian.

'Don't you dare forget how his parents died!'

Jiang Cheng wanted to scream.

The complete lack of response the watchers had given seemed to concern Wei Wuxian a little. He attempted once more:

"Hello?" he asked.

There was a pause.

"...Hello, Wei Wuxian," Wen Qing greeted. Her voice still shook a little.

(Jin Guangshan remained silent, hoping she would soon calm and deciding to try to get his point across again once she had stopped being so hysterical about everything involving Wei Wuxian.)

"...Did something happen?" Lan Qiren asked.

(At this moment, not even he could look up in the direction of Wei Wuxian.)

"Ah. I had an update I thought you all might want to know," Wei Wuxian admitted. "We think we found Xue Yang."

Several watchers did a double-take, caught completely off guard. With everything that had been happening recently, the events of Yi City felt like the distant past.

(Distant future?)

Either way, it wasn't something any watcher felt ready to think about.

"...Good work, A-Ying," Wen Ruohan said.

"...Thank you," Wei Wuxian accepted hesitantly.

"Where is he now?" Madam Jin asked.

“He’s probably in town.”

“You let him leave?” Lan Qiren wondered.

(Normally, he would be far angrier about a prospect like that. Xue Yang was dangerous. Even in child form, it was careless to leave him alone. However, right now, Lan Qiren was just tired.)

“He’ll be back,” Wei Wuxian assured. “We’re still offering food to him; there’s no reason for him to stay away. If he goes to another town, he can go to one of our test centers there. Everyone involved knows to report to me if they find him.”

“But how could you just let him go?” Jin Guangshan demanded, pulling back as soon as he noticed Wen Ruohan’s gaze on him. “Xue Yang is a demonic cultivator in the future. Surely Jiang-xiong told you about his crimes.”

“He’s eight,” Wei Wuxian said. “I’m not going to imprison him for something he didn’t yet do.”

And, for all that Wei Wuxian had been happy to follow their instructions thus far, no one doubted his claims now. He had gone against them before; only Jiang Yanli’s request had made him back down.

“I’ll continue to be in contact with Xue Yang. If anything changes about the situation, I’ll let you know.”

Several watchers nodded absently.

That was fine. Probably.

(What happened at Yi City had been horrendous.)

(And yet, after what they had just seen in the simulation, how could any of the watchers put much energy into focusing on *Xue Yang’s* crimes?)

“...Anything you would like me to report back on?”

They could request for people they trusted to be attached to the communication array. There were people there who might even kill Xue Yang, if ordered to. They could make a choice like that. After someone else heard the order, it would be difficult for Wei Wuxian to stop them.

So what? Should they say that Xue Yang was too dangerous to be left free, even as a kid? That it was just in his nature to hurt others? That he was a beast that needed to be chained down?

(Wen Ning was a beast of Wei Wuxian’s. Wen Ning was not killed when he was supposed to be. If Wei Wuxian had not found their armies and the sects’ attack on the Burial Mounds had been successful, what would Jin Guangshan have done after getting his hands on Wei Wuxian?)

(Would he kill him?)

(Or would he-)

“We’re fine,” Wen Ruohan declared.

“Fine?”

“Use your own judgement when it comes to Xue Yang. We’ll leave that to you,” he said.

None of the watchers moved to disagree.

“...Ah. I’ll… take care of it then.”

It seemed as though he wanted to say something else. However, none of the watchers felt much like talking to him.

“Goodbye, A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli said, her voice empty.

“...Right,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “Goodbye.”

With a click, he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Someone made a discord link for this fic!

Also, if anyone knows of Return of the Mount Hua Sect, I took part in a Zine for the series a while back: here

:)

Imagined Endings

Chapter Notes

> Hi everyone! It's been a while. Thank you so much for your patience! This chapter doens't have much plot progression through the novel, but I hope it will be fun regardless. The last chapter gave the watchers a lot to discuss, and I wanted to add my own interpretation to the parts the novel skipped so that's what this chapter is. Hopefully we'll make more progress with the next chapter!
>
> (And hopefully that one won't take me quite so long.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jin Ling opened his eyes, gradually taking in the scene before him. A dark sky; fire-lit roads; crows flying overhead. Sound returned a moment later, marching steps in the distance growing louder as time went on. However, Jin Ling's other senses lagged behind.

There was nothing to smell.

There was nothing to taste.

The robes Jin Ling wore, which he could clearly see with his own two eyes, didn't register as any feeling against his skin. He and his adornments were as weightless as the air around them.

(No, it wasn't air. He wasn't even breathing.)

"...Wei Wuxian?" he called out.

"Over here. Give it a moment."

Then, at long last, Jin Ling managed to feel something hard against his feet. He tapped his toes against the now-apparent ground, taking in the subsequent sound. There was something resembling matter there — something he could push against and walk on top of.

Moving as clumsily as a newborn fawn, Jin Ling turned himself around.

Wei Wuxian looked back at him, giving a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

'...And then what happened?' Jin Ling had asked.

The death of Jin Zixuan had been outlined in full. Inevitably, information on Jiang Yanli's death followed. Many elements had been the same. As a result, this explanation took

significantly less time than the first one had. Wei Wuxian had been scared, facing many people in combat, and been overwhelmed by isolation and betrayal.

He lost control, he'd said.

But-

'Your mother… chose to save me, right at the end.'

(It had not been the cause of her death.)

Jin Ling inhaled, not feeling any air come in but feeling forced into the familiar motion nonetheless. Human reactions couldn't just be turned on and off. According to Wei Wuxian, refusing to breathe here would not knock you out — would, physically, be no different from continuing to breathe. It would be immensely uncomfortable, however.

As seconds went by, Jin Ling relaxed and the flow of the matterless energy surrounding them began to feel more and more like the air of the outside world. By now, it was hard to notice the difference at all.

Good. Jin Ling needed to focus, for now.

Jin Ling had asked as many questions as he could. According to Wei Wuxian, Jiang Yanli had pushed her husband's killer out of the way of an enemy's strike. Wei Wuxian had injured her, but he didn't know how much. At the very least, she had been alive until then.

'Did A-Niang know that you killing A-Die was an accident?' Jin Ling asked.

Wei Wuxian shook his head.

'Why was she at the battlefield?! I thought she wasn't a combatant!'

'She said she had something to tell me.'

'Which was?!'

'...I don't know. She never got to say.'

Could there be a less satisfying response than that?

'You said… you were scared of my dad. What about my mom? Is that why you hurt her?'

*'*No.*'*

Wei Wuxian's answer was absolute.

'But-'

"No, no, A-Ling….' Wei Wuxian shook his head. 'Your mother would never have hurt me. I hurt her because of my own carelessness.'

‘Carelessness?!’ Jin Ling shouted back. ‘I’ve never seen you make a mistake like that! Not even once.’

Wei Wuxian remained silent, simply accepting the rage and skepticism.

‘Then… what happened next? What did you do then?!’

Taking care to not break eye contact, Wei Wuxian answered, ‘I used the Stygian Tiger Seal against the army. I didn’t care who I killed, by that point. Lan Zhan helped me get back to the Burial Mounds.’

It was an answer, but not an answer Jin Ling liked. He stood up, his confusion and apprehension spilling out into rage.

‘You told me you were going to explain,’ he bit out. ‘Why are you talking so vaguely?! You lost consciousness after killing my father and Wen Ning took you away. Fine! That makes sense. No one there was going to listen to you anyway. But what about here? You didn’t kill my mother! Why didn’t you talk to Uncle Jiang?!’

If he’d had time to think, Jin Ling could have answered that question himself. After all, Jiang Wanyin had attended a pledge conference to kill Wei Wuxian even before Jiang Yanli’s demise. Why would he be any more merciful than Jin Zixun now? How could Wei Wuxian possibly try to reason with him when people who wanted him dead were attacking from all sides?

(Talking with Jiang Yanli hadn’t exactly gone well.)

But-

‘Why use the Stygian Tiger Seal if you were just going to run?! What, did you want to make sure no one was able to stop you and Hanguang-jun? Did you want to make sure no one saw you two as you ran off together? To protect his reputation at the cost of your own? You don’t know why my mother was there; you’re telling me everyone is lying when they say you killed her! According to your story, Uncle Jiang saw all of this. He would have told me if that was what happened!’

(Would he really?)

(Would anyone?)

But Jin Zixuan’s death was orchestrated by people who Jin Ling could easily blame. Since the conspirers were the only people there, it was common sense to doubt the explanation those people gave. Jin Guangyao was involved too. He probably played some part in how the story was spread.

But not with this. Not here.

(The Yiling Patriarch was evil. The sects had united to bring him down in the name of justice.)

(The army of heroes had fired the first shot.)

'This doesn't explain anything!' Jin Ling had snapped. 'You can't expect me to be satisfied with this!'

'I'm sorry,' Wei Wuxian said.

There was nothing more he could offer than that.

'At that moment, after… my mom… did you talk to Uncle Jiang at all before you decided to run?' Jin Ling asked.

It had been an irrelevant question. It made no difference either way. All Jin Ling wanted was something — *anything* — to grasp onto.

'I… don't think I did,' Wei Wuxian muttered. 'I don't really know, I'm sorry. It was all… a blur. I don't really remember anything that happened after your mom died. Up through my death it's all just…'

A haze.

He didn't know.

He couldn't recall.

And, at that moment, Jin Ling made his choice:

'Show me the memories,' he requested. 'I need to see for myself what happened.'

Wei Wuxian's gaze softened with disappointment but lacked surprise.

'Okay,' he said. 'Come here. I think they're about to start.'

And now, they were here. It had taken only a minute or so for Wei Wuxian to set the Píngxíng Gateway up. That minute had proved valuable to the young Sect Leader, giving him a chance to calm down a little.

'*I shouted at Wei Wuxian,*' Jin Ling thought. At the beginning of their talk, he had promised himself that he would listen to what Wei Wuxian said with an open mind. If Wei Wuxian admitted to all the terrible crimes attributed to him, Jin Ling would accept that. It would be shocking to know he'd done that, but Wei Wuxian wasn't crazy anymore. Death had 'cured him' of the corruption — that was the story most people accepted now. Jiang Wanyin, who led the siege against Wei Wuxian, had been right to do so. The current Wei Wuxian, who Jin Ling knew now, would have reasons to be regretful.

He hadn't prepared for this, however.

'*I asked him to explain,*' Jin Ling thought. '*He did a fine job with what happened to my dad! It's not my fault he has no answers about my mom!*'

He still probably shouldn't have shouted.

'*If he would just answer fully I wouldn't have to!*'

A thought occurred with a terrifying force.

'*Did my shouts… wake up Hanguang-jun?*'

(The man had been sleeping in an adjacent room, after all.)

Jin Ling really, really, really, really hoped not.

"Let's see…" Wei Wuxian trailed off, inscribing a character onto the ground with resentful energy. "Ah, here we go!"

The resentment glowed.

A moment later, a fire-lit street had surrounded them. In the seconds it took for Jin Ling to adjust to the sensation of going through the Píngxíng Gateway (breathing without breathing and feeling without truly touching), the people there came into focus.

"Wait… is that Uncle Jiang?!" Jin Ling squeaked. "He looks so-"

Perhaps fearing that this Jiang Cheng would somehow be able to hear him, Jin Ling cut off abruptly.

An unrecognizably young Jiang Cheng stood before him. The expression on the teenager's face was even less pleasant than his usual one. This wasn't the glare he often had when scolding Jin Ling nor the near-mad rage he showed when a suspected demonic cultivator was around. It carried a frigid chill that aged the sect heir significantly.

It was hard to believe that this boy, for all the years they had "watched" in the simulation, was still only fifteen.

Jin Ling stared.

Wei Wuxian gave a small, somewhat hollow chuckle.

Jin Ling stared some more.

"...Sorry, Uncle," he said at last.

The figure from the past, of course, did not respond.

Jin Ling looked around, taking the scenery in more fully. Quite a few people were still here. A soft, red glow emerged from the seal drawn onto the floor — the exit Wei Wuxian had instructed his younger self on making. Though Jin Ling couldn't help but gaze at the intricate symbols in awe for a moment, the watchers from the past paid the seal no mind. They all stood or sat tall, their eyes glued to the visions before them.

Below, a large courtyard was filled with so many people it would take a person hours to count them all.

Every last one of them was armed to the teeth.

Jin Ling swallowed once. He looked back.

A few ways behind him, Wei Wuxian was staring at the past's Jiang Yanli with an expression so pained Jin Ling nearly wanted to flee. He, for a moment, became unable to speak. For all that Jin Ling had felt he needed to see this, the impact it would have on Wei Wuxian was not something he could allow himself to forget. Finally-

"...Sorry," the young Sect Leader muttered.

Wei Wuxian didn't look over. For a while, Jin Ling thought he might not have even heard. But:

"Your mother… wouldn't have wanted you to see this," he said.

Jin Ling looked down, feeling a hot flush of shame. Once again, a temptation to give up and go back washed over him.

(But he had to see this. He *had to*.)

The memories moved in closer, bringing all the watchers to the table where Jiang Cheng, Jin Guangshan, Nie Mingjue, and Lan Xichen stood. Everyone's eyes turned toward them.

"This is the Nightless City," Wei Wuxian announced. "Just a few days after… I killed your father."

No excuse. No defense. In going through all this, Wei Wuxian was fully prepared for Jin Ling to blame him and him alone.

(That's what everyone else did, after all.)

In the memories playing out before them, Jin Guangshan stepped forward.

"Tonight, the LanlingJin Clan-"

"-the Qinghe Nie Clan-"

"-the GusuLan Clan-"

"-the Yunmeng Jiang Clan-"

"-and all other clans here stand united!" Jin Guangshan concluded.

Jin Ling turned, looking out at the swarming mass before him. The word 'crowd' wasn't enough to describe this sight. The Qishan Wen Sect's central courtyard was the largest one

Jin Ling had ever seen. A smaller sect's entire compound could fit inside with room to spare. Despite that, only a few bits of ground were visible now. People were packed here so tightly that they resembled a flood or sea.

Jin Zixuan had just died. The Sects had gathered together for a pledge conference to declare their unity against Wei Wuxian. This, Jin Ling already knew.

Jin Guangshan was handed an ornate, glistening box. He held it high.

"Here lie the ashes of the Wen Sect's remnants!"

The crowd cheered.

As a watcher, Jin Ling's father flinched back.

At once, Jin Ling turned to look at the box with newfound intensity.

"Whose-" he began.

"Wen Qing's," Wei Wuxian responded at once, as though not wanting to hear the full question. "And Wen Ning's, according to Jin Guangshan."

"But Wen Ning-"

"Was kept imprisoned instead."

Jin Ling's mouth snapped shut. All the while, Wei Wuxian's eyes remained focused on his former Shijie.

Energy filled the box. Abruptly, it shattered.

"Qing-guniang?" the watching Jiang Yanli asked.

The question was shaky and cut off, nearly a sob. It wasn't meant to be answered.

For a brief moment, Wei Wuxian's eyes left Jiang Yanli. He turned toward a young woman wearing robes with a motif of the sun embroidered on top.

"Tonight, we scattered the ashes of the two leaders of the Wen Sect's remnants," Jin Guangshan announced. "Tomorrow… tomorrow it will be the rest of the Wen dogs and the Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian!"

The cheer that broke out now was even more deafening than the one before.

Thus far, nothing Jin Ling had seen directly contradicted either side's story. No one had lied to him yet.

The watchers from the past looked murderous nonetheless. One, in particular, sent a shiver down Jin Ling's spine.

"Wei Wuxian… who's that?" he asked.

“Hm?” Wei Wuxian glanced over.

A man sat tall in the center of the room, his eyes nearly burning red with rage.

Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes, finding the figure familiar but only distantly so. The robes indicated his sect easily enough, but his age seemed strangely hard to place. It wasn’t Wen Chao. It wasn’t Wen Qing. At first, Wei Wuxian wanted to guess Wen Xu, but he had met the heir just a short while before.

(A-Yuan’s father was already outside of the Gateway’s effects.)

But then-

“Wen Ruohan, I think,” Wei Wuxian said, walking over to get a closer look. “I’ve only ever seen him from a distance, but… I’m almost certain that’s him.”

A chant was occurring in the simulation. The words ‘Kill the demon! Make sure he’s dead!’ were repeated on and on without rest. It seemed to be making at least half the watchers nauseous.

(Jin Ling wasn’t too far behind.)

“So he’s…” Jin Ling paused, cleared his throat, then spoke louder to be heard over all the chanting. “He’s the Chief Cultivator? Sect Leader Wen?”

“The one you all brought here and revealed the future to, yes.”

Jin Ling flinched.

The chanting was getting even louder.

“He looks… furious,” Jin Ling observed.

(Almost every watcher did.)

“Well, the sects that banded together against him are now gathered together in his former home to destroy what remains of his clan,” Wei Wuxian pointed out, satisfied with his analysis and turning back to Jiang Yanli. “Don’t worry. My younger self and I will do everything in our power to keep him from hurting your parents and uncle.”

The allied sects had defeated him once. Hopefully that would make Wen Ruohan hesitate before declaring war on the other great sects this time around.

(It had made Wei Wuxian want to leave the cultivation world altogether when he was first brought back.)

(Then again, Wei Wuxian knew annoying little about Wen Ruohan. The man’s power was undoubtedly great, but the former Chief Cultivator was little more than a symbol to people in Wei Wuxian’s generation.)

(Much like how the Yiling Patriarch once was to Jin Ling.)

At this moment, however, Wei Wuxian no longer had the ability to focus on Wen Ruohan. Jiang Yanli, watching the memory with an expression Wei Wuxian didn't dare interpret, took precedence.

Was she angry?

At who?

She looked like she was about to cry.

Wei Wuxian couldn't bring himself to ask why.

She was alive. Her skin was pink, blood moving thanks to a still-beating heart. The version of her in the playing memories was alive too, right now. Soon, however-

Fweeet!

Wei Wuxian paled.

The Yiling Patriarch had arrived.

Jin Ling looked up along with everyone else gathered in this moment. Wei Wuxian's moonlit figure captured everyone's eyes.

"That's… you?" Jin Ling asked.

Pale. Gaunt.

Was it just the moonlight that made him look that way?

His hair fell down his back, the ponytail Jin Ling was used to nowhere to be found. This body was taller than Wei Wuxian's current one — a fact obvious even at this distance. The back lighting blocked out most of his features. From his position on the roof, he almost resembled a vulture.

Crows circled overhead.

"What's… this feeling?" Jin Ling asked.

(Unlike the watchers, he had not yet had time to grow sensitive to resentment yet. At this quantity, however, even a civillian would notice something was off.)

"It's… it's the Yiling Patriarch!" someone shouted.

The Patriarch's attention was directed toward the crowd.

Jin Ling couldn't breathe.

"A-Xian!" someone shouted.

The sheer relief in the speaker's tone tore through the current atmosphere in a jagged fashion. Both Wei Wuxian and Jin Ling looked back.

The watching Jiang Yanli's eyes were shining with relief.

Some ways behind her, Jin Zixuan was smiling brightly.

Madam Yu was smirking; Madam Jin nodded once; Jiang Cheng had an almost vicious grin; Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen looked at each other, sharing a smile.

"Shijie?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Jin Ling sucked in a breath of air.

Wei Wuxian and Jin Guangshan began to talk. They threw insults back and forth, anger seeming to rise with every word.

Neither of the two visitors were listening, however.

"Shijie, why…" Wei Wuxian trailed off. "She must… she must not have realized what's about to happen."

Jin Ling, meanwhile, couldn't help but look at his father's reaction.

"They've already seen A-Die's death, haven't they?" he asked.

Wei Wuxian hesitated.

"I thought so, but… it is going out of order," he pointed out. "I've been keeping tabs on them so I know they've at least seen brief glimpses. Maybe they've… only seen part of that day?"

It didn't make much sense.

On the other hand, if they really had seen him lose control like he did, then how could any of them be looking at him this way?

The talk between Wei Wuxian and the gathered cultivators continued.

"Even if Jin Zixun did scheme to ambush you first, you shouldn't have been so heartless as to take so many lives!"

'*So, he was telling the truth about that,*' Jin Ling thought.

He hadn't doubted it, but there was a difference between not doubting it and knowing that everyone here had heard those words spoken without raising a complaint.

(Why had no one mentioned who attacked first? Jin Ling had heard retellings of that day nearly countless times. Surely that would have been mentioned once, even if by accident?)

And-

“Wei Ying, you… disappoint me so much,” that cultivator said. “There was once a time in which I admired you. ‘At least he founded his own sect,’ I’d said. But now that I think back on it, it’s almost repulsive! A sect of demonic cultivators. From this moment on, I’ll forever stand opposing you!”

Upon hearing that, Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but laugh.

“How funny. Your admiration is a bit too cheap, don’t you think?”

“A-Ling,” the real Wei Wuxian said. “Look away for a moment.”

Jin Ling refused.

“Fine then.” Wei Wuxian seemed to shrug. “Does the fact that you’re standing opposite me affect me at all? Your admiration and your contempt — they’re both so insignificant. How are you not embarrassed to parade them around like-”

****THWACK****

There was an impact. Wei Wuxian jerked like someone had shoved him back. He looked down.

An arrow was sticking out of his chest.

At a time like this, Jin Ling couldn’t help but recall a different version of Wei Wuxian. The one who, in Koi Tower, had never once intended to hurt Jin Ling. The one who Jin Ling had stabbed a sword into nonetheless.

“I got him!” the young shooter cheered.

Older than Jin Ling, but not by much.

(Once again, Wei Wuxian had told the truth.)

(Once again, it seemed like everyone else around Jin Ling just wanted to lie.)

The memories’ main viewers jerked back in shock at the sudden attack. A few shouts filled the air. The memories then showed Wei Wuxian pull the arrow out of his chest and throw it back to the initial shooter. The boy was dead a moment later.

“Brother!” his companion cried out. “Brother! Brother!”

Meanwhile, the watchers seemed overcome with rage.

“He shot him,” Madam Yu hissed. “He shot him. He *shot him.*”

The condemnation washed over Wei Wuxian easily, not lingering in his mind. He had killed Madam Yu’s son-in-law. It was only natural for her to react this way to seeing him kill another.

Matching Wei Wuxian's own memory of the day, the young archer's sect leader pointed a finger up at Wei Wuxian, accusing "You… you… you're so cruel!"

Wen Ruohan gave a disbelieving scoff.

Disappointed that his own cruelty was so easily forgotten in comparison to Wei Wuxian's?

At this point, the battle had begun. Jin Guangshan shouted orders at his forces and the other sects moved to join in. The corpses raised by Wei Wuxian's flute proved to be worthy opponents for the united force. So many people were shouting and fighting that making out what any one person was saying was nearly impossible.

Jin Ling didn't need to be able to hear them to see, however. And, as the battle began, a look of absolute horror crossed the real Jin Zixuan's face.

"You *fucking lunatics!*" he shouted. "Stop! I'm telling you to stop!"

Jin Ling's eyes widened.

So much of the context behind this moment was unknown to him. It was hard to say definitively who was in the right (even if, emotionally, he wanted it to be Wei Wuxian). The watchers, however, had as much context as they could get. This whole alliance had formed in response to Jin Zixuan's death — the watchers *had* to know what happened.

And yet it was the Jin Sect, not Wei Wuxian, who became the target of Jin Zixuan's rage.

Hands broke out of the dirt. One by one, corpses rose. It was a sight Jin Ling was more than familiar with after everything he'd experienced with Wei Wuxian. However, now, it was on a scale he had never even *fathomed*.

The young sect leader swallowed, commenting, "I thought you said… they'd exaggerated what happened this night."

"They had," Wei Wuxian confirmed. "This definitely isn't five or ten or however many thousand they told you I killed. Barely three thousand people are here. There's four at most."

For the first time, Jin Ling understood the absolute terror in cultivator's voices when they mentioned the Yiling Patriarch. Growing up, Jin Ling had been furious at their cowardice. To people who were there that night, however…

"Why are they there?" Nie Huaisang asked.

Jin Ling, who had been lost in thought for the past few seconds, blinked and refocused.

"You wanted to make me a righteous cultivator," not-yet-Sect-Leader-Nie said. "A hero, or something like that."

Jin Ling nearly squirmed, thrown off by the youthful honesty of a sect ~~leader~~ heir twenty years his senior. It was strange and unnatural, seeing him so young. It was-

“Da-ge, Wei Wuxian was all that,” Nie Huaisang declared. “A hero.”

No one disagreed.

(Instead, they turned to look at the scene before them with unbridled hate.)

(And Jin Ling’s own uncle, a man who had never hesitated to hunt down anyone he suspected of being Wei Wuxian, looked at this time’s Jiang Wanyin with the most hate of all.)

Jin Ling felt his hands start to shake.

(All the while, Wei Wuxian gazed blankly at Jiang Yanli, not seeming to hear a word that was said.)

The battle went on. Lan Wangji arrived, standing opposite Wei Wuxian.

Jin Ling half-expected his 'uncle' to swoon at the sight of his beloved husband.

(He didn’t. He kept staring at Jiang Yanli.)

And Jin Ling’s expectations found themselves subverted once again as Hanguang-jun — the man who fought off all other sects to escape with Wei Wuxian — unsheathed his blade to fight his future husband. Wei Wuxian dodged his attacks, shouting back without a trace of warmth.

“I always knew there’d come a day when we’d have to fight for real like this. You always detested me anyways.”

Both Lan Wangji’s flinched.

And Jin Ling couldn’t help but gape.

“You two…” he began, cutting himself off as he struggled to comprehend. “You and Hanguang-jun are-”

Lan Sizhui’s narration began once more, the words familiar to Jin Ling. He recalled laughing with the others as they recorded these lines, adding their own comments or interpretations in according to their whims.

And yet, as he heard them now, the young sect leader couldn’t keep a shiver from running down his spine.

“Right now, Xian-gege had already lost his judgement,” Lan Sizhui recited calmly. “He was half-mad, half-delirious. His mind magnified all ill will people had toward him until he was absolutely certain that everyone in the world loathed him. He, too, loathed everyone in turn.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes burned red.

“It didn’t matter who came at him. He wasn’t afraid. It was all the same. Everyone was the same.”

Everyone.

Including Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian’s former shidi.

Including Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian’s future husband.

Including-

“A-Xian!”

Despite the shouts all around, that one voice rang out.

“It’s time, A-Ling,” Wei Wuxian said. Jin Ling felt his heart rate speed up. And yet, at that moment, his eyes did not go to where his mother was. Instead, he found himself directing them at his uncle.

The past’s Jiang Cheng had gone white as a ghost.

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli called out again.

‘*That’s… A-Niang’s voice,*’ Jin Ling thought, finally registering the full impact of the sound.

(How many times had he imagined meeting his mother? How many times had he wanted to hear her voice?)

(How many of those times did he imagine Wei Wuxian’s name would be the first thing he heard her say?)

Jin Ling swallowed, a feeling of disgust coming over him.

(He had imagined his mother saying Wei Wuxian’s name many times. Curses, rebukes, cries — assertions that she was wrong to trust him and that she would never make that mistake again. Never like this, though.)

“A-Xian!”

Concern, worry, and fear. Not because of him, but *for* him.

‘*Jiang Yanli always did trust Wei Wuxian too much.’*

Those words, or something to that effect, had been muttered countless times. Poor Jin Zixuan — everyone knew he didn’t deserve to die. Jiang Yanli, however….

‘*Well, that’s what she gets for trusting a dog like Wei Wuxian.’*

No one would dare say as much to Jin Ling’s face, but the consensus was clear.

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli called out again.

That wasn't just trust. The sheer desperation in her voice alluded to much more than that. But-

"A-Li…" Madam Yu trailed off. "What… are you doing here?"

"Shijie?" the memories' Wei Wuxian asked.

The future's Wei Wuxian flinched at the sounds. The horror on his face was almost identical to what had appeared on most of the watchers. No one, at any point in time, wanted Jiang Yanli to be there.

'Deserved it?' Wei Wuxian repeated, snapping out of his thoughts. 'What? No, no — a-Ling, no! They didn't deserve it at all! Your parents were trying to help. Both of them were. It's just that… I-'

Wei Wuxian had been attacked on all sides and had made a mistake.

Jin Ling's parents *hadn't* deserved what happened to them.

It was all just-

"Shijie!" the memories' Wei Wuxian shouted.

Jin Ling jerked up.

Wei Wuxian was in the center of the battlefield, now. People were attacking him on all sides, too fast for Jin Ling to follow. In the dark of night, it was nearly impossible to tell who anyone was. Arrows, talismans, and cultivation swords kept coming his way, but Wei Wuxian pushed through.

"Shijie?! Where are you? I can't see you!"

The watchers from the past began arguing with each other, all shouting over one another.

Both Wei Wuxian and Jin Ling kept their eyes firmly on Jiang Yanli instead.

Wei Wuxian ducked, dodging a sword. His right hand snapped out to catch an arrow that had gotten through the resentment surrounding him. He shoved an attacking cultivator to the side, not having time to deal with them fully. Instead, he continued to press forward.

At that moment, a headless corpse stood up behind Jiang Yanli.

Jin Ling had gone on night hunts with Wei Wuxian dozens to hundreds of times since the other came back to life. Demonic cultivation wasn't usually necessary, but Wei Wuxian's comfort with the techniques (and still-forming core) meant Jin Ling had long since grown familiar with the art. Never once, in all that time, had Wei Wuxian ever lost control of a corpse.

The decaying corpse raised a rusty sword.

“Get lost!” Wei Wuxian ordered. “Get lost right now! Don’t touch her!”

The watchers all flinched or winced as though Wei Wuxian’s words were physically assaulting their minds. The intensity of the demonic cultivation rose, brushing against Jin Ling’s skin like sandpaper.

(He was still not as sensitive to the resentment’s influence as the watchers were. The command was too powerful to ignore, however. Jin Ling’s desire to flee multiplied tenfold.)

The boy swallowed, calling out, “Wei Wuxian?”

“Stop!” the memories continued. “Stop it, stop it, right now — *stop it!*”

The corpse didn’t respond.

Neither did the real Wei Wuxian.

“Wei Wuxian?” Jin Ling tried again.

But the Yiling Patriarch was just gazing blankly at the air before him, unable to respond.

“A-Xian?” the real Jiang Yanli asked.

“Wei Wuxian, why can’t you-!”

Jin Ling’s question was never finished. For, at that moment, the corpse struck down. Jiang Yanli screamed. The shouts of the watchers filled Jin Ling’s ears.

A twenty-two-year-old Jiang Wanyin, formed from the memories, ran towards Wei Wuxian. He threw a punch, sending the Yiling Patriarch stumbling back.

“What happened?!” he demanded. “Didn’t you say you could control it?! Didn’t you say it’d be fine?!”

The intensity of the rage Jin Ling saw there was familiar. He wondered, now, if an image of that corpse attacking Jiang Yanli formed in Jiang Wanyin’s mind every time he caught a suspected Wei Wuxian.

And, in response, Wei Wuxian had no excuse he could give:

“I… don’t know either,” he said. “I can’t control it. I just can’t control it.”

An unsatisfying explanation.

It was the truth, nonetheless.

Jin Ling had never once seen Wei Wuxian lose control. He had never seen Wei Wuxian trapped like this either.

Suddenly, Jiang Yanli twitched.

“A-Jie?”

“A-Niang?!” Jin Ling asked, kneeling down beside her.

(Wei Wuxian had told him he hurt Jiang Yanli. They were here to watch her death. That didn’t make the sight any easier.)

(Jin Ling felt like he was going to throw up.)

To Jin Ling’s side, the living Jin Zixuan was also kneeling. He shook, tears forming in his eyes.

“A-Li!” he cried out. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry-”

The sight of a living Jin Zixuan kneeling by Jiang Yanli’s side was too much for Wei Wuxian. He stumbled back, his hands starting to shake. Jin Zixuan’s apologies — too vague for Wei Wuxian to determine their cause — only made the shaking worse.

“A-Xian.”

Jiang Yanli’s voice, soft and weakened, cut through the conflict.

“Shijie, I… I’m here,” Wei Wuxian assured.

Wei Wuxian could taste bile in his mouth. The red bleeding through Jiang Yanli’s white robes was impossibly vibrant. The pain the injury must have been causing her was unquestionable, yet none of that showed on her face.

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath.

(The last time he had entered the Píngxíng Gateway, the sight of the Burial Mounds had been enough to send him into a panic. Jin Ling had asked to see the entirety of this. He couldn’t afford to lose control now.)

Then, too quietly for Wei Wuxian to hear, the past’s Jin Zixuan whispered something out loud.

“It wasn’t his fault, A-Li,” he assured. “I’m sorry. I invited him but… I didn’t see what was going on until it was too late.”

Jin Ling, kneeling next to his father, turned to look at him with wide eyes.

Then, at last, Jiang Yanli spoke:

“A-Xian…. Back then… why did you run away so fast? I didn’t get the chance to look at you… or say anything to you.”

The memories of Jiang Yanli did not look at Wei Wuxian with hate. The real Jin Zixuan didn't either. The real Jiang Yanli had tears in her eyes, but the reason for her cries was impossible to determine.

Jin Ling's 'Uncle Jiang,' on the other hand…

The real version of Jiang Cheng — the fifteen-year-old version of Jin Ling's own uncle — was staring, wide-eyed, at the scene before them. The memories had shown the corpse's attack quite clearly. As blood pooled around the illusion of Jiang Yanli, terror was clear in Jiang Wanyin's face. The memory version of him made an expression almost identical to the real one's.

'*...So that's it,*' Jin Ling thought. '*Wei Wuxian was telling the truth: he lost control and now Uncle Jiang hates him. Like Wei Wuxian said, he genuinely messed up by doing that.*'

Just an accident. But-

"You *killed A-Jie*," the real Jiang Cheng gasped out.

Wei Wuxian flinched, feeling the words as a physical blow.

Jiang Cheng's hate, in this moment, made perfect sense.

'*But….*' Jin Ling furrowed his brows. '*Didn't Wei Wuxian say that… something else killed mom?*'

That was hard to believe, considering what was being shown. Jiang Yanli coughed, blood falling from her mouth.

"I'm…." She breathed heavily. "I'm here to tell you…"

Jiang Yanli coughed again, more blood falling out.

The red overwhelmed Wei Wuxian's gaze. His own heart rate picked up, his breaths coming out faster and faster-

"*Wei Wuxian!*"

The Yiling Patriarch flinched, turning to Jin Ling. The boy's legs shook a little as though he was carrying a heavy weight on his back. His brows were furrowed with strain.

"Your eyes…" he said. "They're red."

Wei Wuxian blinked, confused.

"It's… heavy," Jin Ling gasped, resentment pouring down on him.

Because Wei Wuxian had lost control.

Again.

The resentment vanished at once, pulled back according to the will of its master. Said master stepped back, pale as a ghost from horror at himself. He couldn't even verbalize an apology right now. Shakily, he sat down.

He had promised to show this to Jin Ling. He could last for a little while longer.

~~Even if Jin Ling came to hate him after this, he would see it through.~~

However, at that moment:

"The Jin Sect's doctors are reasonably skilled," someone declared.

Jin Ling looked over, not recognizing the speaker at first. The woman was dressed in the robes of the Wen Sect, her eyes the same shade of gray as Wen Ning's.

"Oh." Jin Ling realized at once.

(It was the woman whose ashes had been scattered just a month after he'd been born.)

(The famed doctor of the Wen.)

"She still has some time left," the doctor continued, looking Jiang Yanli over. "If… if she gets to them before an hour passes…"

But the battle within the memories was continuing without rest.

"Shijie," the Wei Wuxian-from-memories spoke. "Stop… stop talking. I'll get you out of here right away."

Both versions of Jiang Cheng tensed at that, glaring up at Wei Wuxian with untrusting eyes.

Luckily, in that moment, Wei Wuxian didn't try to approach.

'*What does she want to say?*' the Wei Wuxian of the past wondered. '*That it's fine? That she doesn't hate me? That everything's okay? That she doesn't blame me for having killed Jin Zixuan?*'

Wei Wuian nearly laughed.

'*Impossible.*'

Guilt. Sorrow.

Their faces were different, so this version of Wei Wuxian was a little hard for Jin Ling to superimpose onto the version he knew. It was easy, from a distance, to imagine this was someone else entirely.

The expression that Wei Wuxian was making now was one very familiar to Jin Ling, however.

(It was identical to the one showing up on the real Wei Wuxian right now.)

Whatever had happened to Jin Ling's parents, Wei Wuxian had not wanted it. Jin Ling's mother and father didn't deserve to die.

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli managed, still using that nickname despite everything that had happened. "You should… you should stop first. Stop. Stop them."

"I'll stop!" Wei Wuxian promised. "Yes, I'll stop!"

A few flute notes were played. Gradually, the army's movement came to a halt.

The undead army, that is. The cultivators were left unaffected by the sound.

Jin Ling straightened up. He had heard stories of this battle countless times, spoken by drunkards and warriors alike. Not a single one of them had ever mentioned Wei Wuxian stopping at his mother's command.

'*Does A-Niang… want him to surrender?*' Jin Ling thought. '*Okay, so she doesn't disagree with what the army is doing. She just also… doesn't hate Wei Wuxian?*'

Yet Jin Ling's uncle, regardless of which version one looked at, was far less forgiving. Hurt, fear, anger, and frustration were all apparent on Jiang Cheng's face. The two versions looked down at Jiang Yanli, emotions building up within them.

For all that Jiang Cheng had told Jin Ling about demonic cultivators, he had never mentioned this day in detail. Jin Ling's mother had died in Jiang Cheng's arms. Something like that would be impossible to forget.

With conflicted eyes, both Jiang Chengs watched Wei Wuxian kneel by Jiang Yanli's side. His hands became stained with her blood. Neither Wei Wuxian nor Jiang Yanli looked angry at this moment. Sect Leader Jiang's rage made up for their comparative lack.

Jiang Yanli was dying in Jiang Wanyin's arms.

The real Jiang Cheng couldn't stand it.

"But he still killed-"

Jiang Cheng's sentence never finished. A series of events occurred too quickly for Jin Ling to react to. There was a flash of silver. Wei Wuxian fell back, pushed by someone. More red sprayed into the air.

A sword was sticking out of Jiang Yanli's throat.

Jin Ling screamed, jumping back. Despite his experience with night hunts, he had never seen such a brutal attack occur so suddenly. He nearly gagged, the sight of the blade in his mother's neck almost too much for him to bear.

“A-Li?” Madam Yu asked.

Jiang Yanli’s head went lopsided. The attacker, a man Jin Ling had never met before, finally seemed to realize his attack had hit someone else. He backed up, throwing out excuses.

“She just threw herself over on her own-”

Wei Wuxian killed the man, not letting him finish.

For a moment, there was a pause. A fresh corpse was on the ground. Jiang Yanli’s corpse was in Jiang Cheng’s arms. Neither could move.

‘*What just… that happened so fast I couldn’t-*’ Jin Ling gaped.

Jiang Wanyin looked shocked and confused, not even seeming to register what was before his eyes. The same was true of Wei Wuxian.

‘It was all… a blur,’ Wei Wuxian confessed, explaining to Jin Ling. ‘I don’t really remember anything that happened after your mom died. Up through my death it’s all just…’

Both versions of Wei Wuxian looked dazed.

No one was thinking clearly.

Jin Ling had been made to hate Wei Wuxian based on stories of this night. Countless people had rallied behind that cause.

Sect Leader Yao cursed at Wei Wuxian, shouting, “Instead of learning, you took another life. Wei Wuxian, your crimes will never be forgiven!”

Wei Wuxian had killed the person who killed Jin Ling’s mother.

Funny, how Sect Leader Yao had never mentioned that.

Was Wei Wuxian involved in this tragedy? Yes.

Had he injured Jiang Yanli? Apparently.

Was it his fault?

Jiang Wanyin seemed to think so. But-

“You *shut up!*” the real Jiang Cheng screamed. His shout, at this moment, was directed at Sect Leader Yao.

Jin Ling looked up.

The real Jiang Cheng had changed position. He had been standing on the sidelines a little while ago. Now, however, he had moved between the memory forms of Wei Wuxian and Sect Leader Yao.

Protecting Wei Wuxian.

This version of Jin Ling's uncle, who had seen everything leading up to this point, wanted to protect Wei Wuxian.

Behind him, the memory version of Wei Wuxian seemed to snap. Demonic energy surged from him, painting the world black. He pulled the Stygian Tiger Seal from his robes, assembling it and calling forth its power.

The world went black.

Jin Ling blinked, opening his eyes. When he inhaled, he felt real air enter his lungs. He looked over.

Wei Wuxian — the real Wei Wuxian, with the face of Jin Ling's cousin — sat to the side. He said nothing for a while, his gaze hanging low. His silver eyes, usually shimmering with light, looked dull and faded.

"...Wei Wuxian?" Jin Ling called out.

Those eyes glanced toward him. Jin Ling swallowed once.

"Are…" he trailed off. "Are you okay?"

After pausing for a while longer, Wei Wuxian nodded once. He stood up, did a casual stretch of his arms, then looked back at Jin Ling with a warm smile.

"Looks like that was the end of that segment," he observed. "Did you want to see more? Or does that satisfy your curiosity?"

Jin Ling paused, then nodded his head.

"I'm… okay, now," he said. "I get what you meant. About it being a confusing time and things."

When Wei Wuxian had first explained the night to him, the accidental nature of what happened had seemed hard to believe. It felt cheap and false — a non-answer given to keep Jin Ling from finding out anything of substance. However, after seeing it himself…

What other way was there to describe that?

That had been the largest army Jin Ling had ever seen. Even the sect's alliance during his lifetime paled in comparison.

(Wei Wuxian had killed enough of them to make a visible difference in size.)

Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation, let loose under ideal conditions, was far stronger than Jin Ling had realized. He understood, now, how so many fantastical stories could be attributed to the Yiling Patriarch.

And now?

Jin Ling sat up fully.

Sect Leader Yao had seen how Jiang Yanli died. Sect Leader Yao had never told Jin Ling the truth.

Jiang Wanyin had seen how Jiang Yanli died. Jin Ling's uncle had always kept details from him.

The past's Jiang Wanyin had seen everything leading up to that. The past's Jiang Wanyin had moved in front of Wei Wuxian protectively. Accident or not, it could be argued that Wei Wuxian's actions caused Jiang Yanli's death. The fact that the youngest Jiang Cheng hadn't directed anger at him…

Jin Ling breathed in.

"Wei Wuxian," he called out. "When… when the past sect leaders are out of the simulation… I want to speak to my uncle."

"The younger Jiang Cheng?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Jin Ling nodded once.

"...Alright," Wei Wuxian agreed. "I'll try to arrange that."

Jin Ling nodded once more. He blinked twice.

~~Every time he did, an image flashed in his mind. Jiang Yanli, lying dead, a sword spearing through her neck. Nausea welled up in Jin Lings stomach and he swallowed, feeling like he was about to throw up.~~

He blinked again.

~~Jiang Yanli's neck had been cut wide open, the gaping wound gushing with blood as her head rolled back onto Jiang Cheng's lap.~~

Jin Ling swallowed.

~~Wei Wuxian had wanted to keep him from the memories for exactly this reason.~~

But…

"Thank you," Jin Ling said. "Thank you."

Wei Wuxian paused, tensing in apprehension, then reached forward to pat Jin Ling's head.

"...You're welcome," he said. "We… have a spare bed I can set up. Why don't you spend the night? If you have any trouble sleeping you can come to me, alright?"

It was an embarrassing request. Jin Ling was almost sixteen now. He was far from a child. At his age, Wei Wuxian had fought the Xuanwu of Slaughter! He could return to Lanling and sleep by himself just fine.

Jin Ling blinked.

~~Jiang Yanli's mouth had been slightly open. A pool of blood had formed there. Jin Ling's uncle had felt her body grow cold. Her blood had poured onto his legs.~~

~~The sword had cut right through bone. Her head had fallen back at an angle no living human could ever attempt.~~

"A-Ling?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"I'd… like that," he accepted, ducking his head.

Wei Wuxian got to work at once, moving around with a spring in his step. Another bedspread was laid out on the floor. Next to it, Wei Wuxian placed a dim lamp with enough fuel to last until morning. He laid on his side, counting the number of blankets he'd put in.

~~Jiang Yanli had ended up in a similar position. The main difference between the two sights was the lack of a sword sticking out of Wei Wuxian's throat.~~

~~Jin Ling had stabbed him in the stomach once. The smell of blood that had covered his hands at the time was still a vivid memory to him.~~

"Hm! Nice and soft!" Wei Wuxian confirmed, pressing down a few times. "This might surprise you, but the Lan Sect has some of the nicest blankets I've ever seen. I'm sure even Young Master Jin will be comfortable tonight."

Jin Ling nodded, trying desperately to not blink, and laid himself down on the fabric.

"Will you want anything else?" Wei Wuxian checked.

Jin Ling opened his mouth, momentarily wanting to ask Wei Wuxian to stay, then closed it a moment later and shook his head. Wei Wuxian paused for a bit, watching him thoughtfully, then nodded in agreement and got up.

(Jin Ling hadn't seen the real Wei Wuxian's face the moment the memories' Jiang Yanli died. He had glanced over a moment later, then did a double take, unable to find him. Eventually, he had noticed Wei Wuxian in the far end of the field. The man had sat back, brought his knees up, and buried his head in them, unwilling to see even a bit of it. His hands had been covering his ears, but that wouldn't keep the surrounding screams from being heard. Resentful energy had swirled around him in a tightly wound mess, moving less than a centimeter away from his skin. Thanks to that, Jin Ling had been able to watch that segment in full.)

(Right now, the serene smile on Wei Wuxian's face was more than he could bear.)

A hand fell on Jin Ling's head. He tensed, looking up, and felt Wei Wuxian give his head a soothing scratch. The light brush of his hand was warm with life. Jin Ling breathed out, settling into the fabric around him.

(The Yiling Patriarch's glowing red eyes had startled Jin Ling the first time he saw them. Those same eyes had widened in shock when a corpse approached Jiang Yanli. When she was hit, the Yiling Patriarch had shouted in fear. When she pushed him out of the way to take a killing blow, Wei Wuxian had screamed in despair.)

Wei Wuxian's hand continued to brush through Jin Ling's hair. The ribbon he had been using to pull it back was now set to the side. With Wei Wuxian's free hand he sent forth some wind, causing the light from the lamp to dim.

(Wei Wuxian hadn't killed Jiang Yanli; Jiang Yanli had given her life to save him. In exchange, Wei Wuxian had saved Jin Ling a dozen times over. If he was here, things were safe.)

Jin Ling closed his eyes. Exhaustion from stress and emotional distress sapped away his energy. Soon, his breathing became even and slow. Wei Wuxian pulled his hand away, standing up. For a few seconds, he continued to stare at Jin Ling.

'*I wasn't sure if touching him would just make him more stressed,*' Wei Wuxian thought. '*After what he just saw, I wouldn't be surprised.*'

The corpse that hit Jiang Yanli had been controlled by Wei Wuxian. Jin Ling could have recoiled away in fear and disgust and no one would blame him.

Instead, he had relaxed.

Wei Wuxian began to walk, quietly returning to the room he shared with Lan Wangji. He slipped off his temporary outer robe, using the moonlight to guide his path. When he returned to the bed, Lan Wangji shifted, cracking his eyes open.

"Wei Ying?" he asked.

"Shh. Go back to sleep," Wei Wuxian requested. "A-Ling's sleeping in the other room."

As he slipped under the blankets, a hand reached out and covered his own. It pulled with immense strength, dragging Wei Wuxian down. As soon as he was lying on the bed, Lan Wangji's other arm reached out to wrap around him. He pulled Wei Wuxian against his chest.

"You're so cuddly," Wei Wuxian laughed. "It's hours past bedtime for Little Lans. Shouldn't you be trying to sleep?"

"I am," Lan Wangji confirmed. "We'll sleep like this."

"Will we?" Wei Wuxian asked, nuzzling in closer. "Are you sure you don't have any other intentions, pulling me in here?"

"Ridiculous."

Wei Wuxian laughed at that as well, agreeing fully. After a few moments longer, he finally began to close his eyes. Neither he nor Jin Ling were done talking about what happened. It was late now, however. As a Lan-by-marriage, it was arguably long past time for Wei Wuxian to sleep, too.

They would talk tomorrow. They would have to talk tomorrow, but-

Wei Wuxian shut his eyes fully. It didn't take long for sleep to claim him.

Nie Huaisang was about 80% sure that they were all going crazy. For one, none of the watchers had slept in the past month and a half — all the while taking in more information than they ever had before. The other watchers were pretty sure the magic of the simulation made it so they didn't need sleep, but crazy people should never be the judges of what's acceptable. Besides, even putting the sleep matter aside…

There was a haunted look in Jiang Cheng's eyes. His gaze was directed at the ground, unseeing yet alert all at once. There was no doubt in Nie Huaisang's mind that everything they had learned over the past few days was replaying in the Jiang heir's head without end. Not even his sister would be able to snap him out of his thoughts now.

Irrelevant; she wasn't exactly in the mood to try. A lost look had appeared on Jiang Yanli. Every now and then she would bring her hand up to her neck, hovering just over where that careless sword had speared through her other-self. She would mutter things every once in a while, speaking to the effect of 'how could you?' and 'what about A-Xian' and 'how could you think running into a *battlefield* would go well?'

~~She and Jin Zixuan were truly meant for each other, weren't they?~~

Jin Zixuan and Madam Jin seemed unable to decide whether to look at the in-between zone's roof, the floor, or at Jiang Yanli's all-too-quiet form. No, perhaps that wasn't a fair description. No one felt like talking right now.

As for Madam Yu…

"Stupid idiot!" she cursed, rubbing her temples with her right hand. "How could you — of all the things…"

Her foot tapped impatiently against the floor, tension and pressure boiling over within her.

"You should've — it all just — if it wasn't so fast, I-"

She cut off, growing frustrated enough to nearly pull out her own hair. Nie Huaisang wasn't sure who, exactly, she meant when she said 'you.' He wasn't even sure she knew.

'You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look at what our sect has turned into because of you!'

'You call that being allies? The Jiang raised him like their own, but almost all of them were killed because of him!'

It wasn't confirmed that Madam Yu's final words caused that rumor to be spread around. They hadn't seen it happen directly. Nevertheless, the thought was there. And-

THWACK

Wei Wuxian stopped. He looked down.

An arrow was sticking out of his chest.

'I got him!' a young archer cried out, proud and exhilarated and not exhibiting even the slightest trace of remorse.

(That archer's younger brother was the person who would kill Jiang Yanli.)

(Was it unreasonable to assume the person Madam Yu was speaking to right now was herself?)

"Stupid," Madam Yu hissed again. "Stupid, stupid, stupid-"

Click

Everyone froze. Wei Wuxian had spoken to them just a few minutes ago. For him to return so soon might mean something had happened.

(And, more than anything else, it felt like a second slap in the face after what they had just seen.)

However:

"San-niang?" Jiang Fengmian asked. "A-Li? A-Cheng?"

"...A-Die?" Jiang Cheng asked back.

Jiang Fengmian seemed to breathe out a sigh of relief at his son's voice. He then cleared his throat.

"Are you all okay?" he asked.

There was a pause.

For several seconds, it stretched on.

"...We're fine, Fengmian," Madam Yu declared. "Is something wrong?"

"Not… in particular," the Sect Leader confessed. "A-Xian mentioned that you all seemed a little upset about something. I thought I… should check in. Are you sure you're all feeling alright?"

The ensuing silence was answer enough.

“Did… something like the Burial Mounds happen again?” Jiang Fengmian inquired. “I’m the only one in this building right now. No one will overhear.”

Because Jiang Fengmian had been on the other side of things just a few days ago. He had been quiet and subdued, unwilling to face Wei Wuxian’s positivity after the massacre of Lotus Pier and the boy’s descent into the Burial Mounds.

(His own involvement in what occurred weighed on his mind to this day.)

‘*But even that…*’ Lan Xichen thought, ‘*Isn’t on the same level as assembling an* army *against Wei Wuxian and the refugees he chose to protect.*’

Jiang Fengmian’s lack of aggression had resulted in him not stopping Madam Yu and Wen Ruohan. Lan Xichen’s lack of confrontation had brought the Lan Sect onto the wrong side of a war. Understanding one did not mean understanding the other. The first jade pursed his lips together, unable to speak.

“We’re fine,” Wen Ruohan answered at last, seeing that no one else was going to. “We witnessed your daughter’s death today.”

Jiang Fengmian sucked a breath of air, caught off guard. They heard him swallow then clear his throat.

“I… I see,” he said.

They’d all known it was coming. This wasn’t something that could truly be prepared for, however.

“What… happened?” Jiang Fengmian asked. “Was… was A-Xian in-”

“Following Jin Zixuan’s death, the Four Great Sects of the Sunshot Campaign offered A-Ying peace in exchange for Wen Qing and Wen Ning,” Wen Ruohan interrupted, not interested in prolonging the discussion. “The exchange was made. When A-Ying went to collect their bodies, he realized the sects had gone back on their offer and were already planning an invasion.”

The other watchers flinched at his words, hating to hear them directly but unable to object. No one could offer so much as a protest — not now, at least. Jin Guangshan, the only one who emotionally could have, was not interested in angering Wen Qing or Wen Ruohan at this time.

“A fight began,” the Chief Cultivator continued. “Your daughter ran out to tell A-Ying something. He injured her by accident, overwhelmed and losing control.”

Jiang Fengmian sucked in a breath of air.

“A-Ying ran over to her side. While he was distracted, a member of the united sects approached from behind, preparing to strike. Your daughter pushed him out of the way.”

“...What?” Jiang Fengmian asked. “Wait, you mean-”

Jiang Cheng laughed, sounding hopeless and mocking and yet relieved all at once. The sound made Jiang Fengmian pause, torn between tentative hope and fear.

Sensing the man's hesitancy (and Wen Ruohan's willingness to let the Sect Leader stew), Lan Wangji spoke up to confirm: "Maiden Jiang gave her life to save Wei Ying's. Neither ever wanted the other to die."

Something Jin Ling couldn't know.

Jiang Yanli asking Wei Wuxian to stop fighting had also been lost to time. His compliance with her request was something no one from this battle would believe. It was no wonder Jin Ling had stabbed Wei Wuxian.

(The terrible future they had once doubted seemed so inevitable, now.)

"...Ah," Jiang Fengmian muttered back. It was hard to specify how he felt at the moment.

(His daughter was dead. Even knowing that it would happen couldn't take the pain of the idea away. His daughter was fine in this timeline, but the potential was still there.)

It wasn't Wei Wuxian's fault. Jiang Fengmian's trust wasn't misplaced.

Though, while no one had wanted Jiang Yanli dead, it seemed like *everyone* had been trying to kill Wei Wuxian.

(Was that really a surprise? He had seen the way his ward was described in the far-future timeline. Most of those people would say referring to him as a demon was far too kind.)

No, more importantly than that-

"Are you… okay, A-Li?"

"Eh?" Jiang Yanli asked.

"I'm… sorry you had to watch that," Jiang Fengmian continued. "Are you alright? Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Ah… yes. I'm fine," the young maiden confirmed, responding automatically and without thought. It wasn't the truth *or* a lie; she simply lacked the mental strength to consider that question right now. She was neither happy nor devastated. At the moment, all she could be was 'fine.'

"Jin-gongzi… has passed as well?" Jiang Fengmian inquired. "You said A-Xian was involved?"

"Don't — don't worry about that," Jin Zixuan cut in. "It wasn't his fault."

It was a stronger statement than most would have made. Nonetheless, no one disagreed.

“A-Li, A-Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian called again. “You two-”

“They’re fine, Fengmian!” Madam Yu snapped. Everyone paused, turning her way.

Even Jiang Fengmian seemed taken aback, hesitating before he said, “My Lady, I was only-”

“I’m with them, aren’t I?” she shouted, her voice burning with venom. “You didn’t see any of what happened — you’re not even able to see us now! How exactly do you think you’ll be able to help?!”

Her anger was spilling out wildly, falling on Jiang Fengmian as it usually did. Madam Jin inhaled heavily but said nothing to stop it. As such, Madam Yu continued on:

“Ha. Though, of course, that wouldn’t matter to you. You left to look after Wei Wuxian *just like always!*”

Jiang Cheng flinched at her words, the protest he had been about to give dying before it began. Jiang Yanli kept her gaze to the ground, too tired to listen anymore.

“Sanniang, you know that’s not what it is!” Jiang Fengmian protested. “If I hadn’t left-”

“If you hadn’t left, someone else would have! They would have looked over the boy just as well as you. All anyone here cares about is the crimes committed against Wei Wuxian anyway!”

A short, amused laugh escaped from Wen Ruohan.

Lan Qiren took in a calming breath. It was true: Jiang Yanli’s death had just been shown, and yet almost none of their discussion since the segment had been about that. Questions on how to avoid it inevitably became ‘how do we keep Wei Wuxian from being in that situation.’ That was only to be expected; when the incident was an accident on all sides, what else could one do? Still, Madam Yu’s anger at their disregard was understandable. Nonetheless…

“A-Niang,” Jiang Yanli called out. “Please stop.”

Her voice was calm and steady. She had experienced a torrent of emotion over the past hour or so. Now, exhaustion seemed to be all that was left. The words made Madam Yu’s anger fluctuate for a moment, a thousand emotions flashing through her eyes, before that same anger returned.

“Of course. My mistake.” She laughed. “How dare I speak against Wei Wuxian in this household? How dare I blame him for anything?! I should have *known*-”

“San-niang, it-”

“Shut your mouth, Jiang Fengmian! You think I don’t know what I’ve done?!” she asked, then, spinning on her heel, cast her gaze over the other watchers. “Do you all think I don’t know? Do you think I can’t see what’s right in front of me?!”

No one spoke.

“You think I don’t know how you all look at me?! I’m not even alive at this point in the simulation, but you all still blame *me* for what’s happening, don’t you?!”

‘You damn brat! I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!'

Jin Guangshan turned an understanding gaze on Jiang Cheng, adding, ‘He’s been plotting to go to the Burial Mounds for a while, hasn’t he? With his skills, it would be child’s play to set up a sect of his own.”

It had taken almost nothing for her son to believe that snake.

He already believed her. Why would Jin Guangshan’s words sound strange?

“A-Niang,” Jiang Yanli said again. “I know you don’t mean that. Please stop.”

For years, Jiang Yanli had been the Jiang Clan’s intermediary, serving as a soothing force whenever arguments occurred. However, even in all that time, she had never spoken to her mother in quite this manner.

“He hurt you, A-Li.”

“I know.”

“He might have *killed you!* We don’t know that doctors could have saved you. That’s all just speculation!”

“I know.”

“You…” Madam Yu choked, her anger and grief spilling out. “You’ve always been far too forgiving. All of you have! No matter what Wei Wuxian takes from the Jiang, you always just accept it.”

First, Jiang Cheng’s dogs.

Now, Jiang Yanli’s life.

Distantly, Jiang Cheng recalled the anger he had felt at losing his pets all those years ago. They were living creatures, not possessions. It had hurt to lose them. While it didn’t affect him much anymore, in the moment it had felt crushing. They hadn’t been killed, just taken away. His sister’s death hurt far more.

A sister’s death was an incomparable kind of pain.

“...Wen Qing was burned alive,” Jiang Cheng suddenly said. “By the great sects. I think we forgot to mention that earlier.”

An image of Wen Qing, tied to a post for execution, suddenly flashed through Jiang Cheng's mind.

Many people looked over, momentarily perplexed by the sudden change in topic. Even Wen Qing herself looked confused by the mention. This had nothing to do with Wei Wuxian nearly killing Jiang Yanli.

(Except it had *everything* to do with that.)

Jiang Cheng would freely admit that empathy had never been his strong suit. A few weeks ago he would never have conceded to that, but, after witnessing his future-self, it was impossible to ignore.

Just like Jiang Yanli, Wen Qing had never hurt anyone.

Just like Jiang Yanli, Wen Qing had saved Wei Wuxian's life.

(And Jiang Cheng's, too.)

She stood across the room from him, directly in his line of sight. Her death, both within the simulation and among them, had barely been commented on. It was unimportant, relatively speaking.

~~Had Wei Wuxian viewed her as his sister too? Had he lost two older sisters that day? Had the future's Jiang Cheng mentioned to anyone what Wen Qing had done for him?~~

~~No, probably not.~~

"I… see," Jiang Fengmian recovered. "Would you like me to get your brother for you, Qing-guniang?"

"No, it's alright," the doctor assured. "Thank you for the offer."

And that was that.

Madam Yu stood silently now, the topic change throwing off her anger too. Her gaze, slowly, fell upon Wen Qing. The proud woman was standing as well, both their chairs destroyed when the energy of the Stygian Tiger Seal activated in the last segment.

"Should we move the pieces of destroyed chairs to the side?" Nie Huaisang suddenly suggested. "Wouldn't want anyone to get a splinter."

"A splinter?" Nie Mingjue repeated with a laugh. It wasn't a happy sound.

A *splinter.*

Right now, that was the concern.

A silver blade pierced through Jiang Yanli's neck.

Ridiculous.

And yet, Nie Huaisang's suggestion seemed to be all it took to make the room unfreeze. The Lans moved first, using the ends of their long robes to sweep bits of wood to the side. Wen Ruohan's chair, farther back than some of the others, was still mostly intact. Nonetheless, the man used a blast of energy to send the seat to the edge of the in-between zone, not wanting to sit on something cracked. Jin Zixuan took the pieces of his and his mother's chairs, sitting on the ground beside her shortly after.

Jiang Fengmian, despite not having the context for this flurry of motion, said nothing. He waited until the shuffling sounds stopped, assuming people had found their places again.

"We're almost out of time," he revealed, voice soft. "San-niang, I…"

Madam Yu exhaled softly.

"Don't, Fengmian," she requested. "I know."

She wondered what sort of expression she would make if she could see Wei Wuxian in front of her now.

She wondered if she'd even be able to look at him.

"San-niang…" Jiang Fengmian began again, but seemed to give up a moment later. "Right. I understand. Once A-Xian gets back we'll… get in contact again."

He swallowed once.

"A-Li, A-Cheng… I love you very much. I'm… proud of you, for making it through that."

His children's eyes widened in surprise. They looked up in the direction of their father's voice, trembling slightly. Then, before they could respond, there was a click marking the end of the connection.

Click.

Jin Guangshan tensed slightly.

Red.

Lan Qiren jumped.

Vibrant enough to blot out everything else in sight, dark enough to send a chill up the watchers' spines; the once-white mourning robes Jiang Yanli wore were now drenched in the color of war. As the simulation continued to move out, allowing the watchers to see more and more of the scene before them, that fact remained. Red fabric shifted around them, encompassing them like a cocoon. Jiang Yanli's ~~corpse~~ body was flat on the ground, crimson fabric draping over her and spreading out across the floor.

‘*What is this?*’ Wen Ruohan furrowed his brows as he scanned their surroundings. The mystifying imagery before them was difficult to understand. Jiang Yanli’s robes didn’t contain enough fabric to create this sight. Every drop of blood could have been squeezed from her body and there still wouldn’t have been enough to dye this much of the ground red.

“Shijie?!”

Wei Wuxian’s voice, though recognizable as his, was faded and distorted as though they were only hearing its echo. Wei Wuxian called out to Jiang Yanli again and again. The source of the voice — Wei Wuxian himself — was nowhere to be seen.

“Stop,” Jiang Yanli requested. “Stop them.”

The real Jiang Yanli flinched upon hearing her own voice, Wen Ruohan’s words coming back to her at once.

‘If Jiang Yanli hadn’t asked A-Ying to stop his corpses — to let the army attacking him go — she might have lived.’

Jiang Yanli glanced back at her mother. Madam Yu looked distraught — nearly pained. It was an expression Jiang Yanli had never seen on the prideful Yu Ziyuan before. She wondered if Madam Yu was recalling the same thing as her.

“A-Xian!”

“Wei Wuxian!”

SHING

A white blade pierced through the red. Its presence was all-encompassing, the white gleam enhanced by the surrounding red. The blade itself was impossibly large, looking as wide as a carriage and as long as a boat.

It had cut between Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng, obstructing their views of each other. Jin Zixuan had reacted at once, quickly moving to push Jiang Yanli back and stand between her and the blade. However, impossible to physically push, Jiang Yanli remained right where she was, staring up at the blade that had caused her doom.

(That had pierced through her neck. How much had it hurt?)

“A-Jie!” Jiang Cheng shouted, running around the blade to see her. It had implanted itself into the floor between them, preventing Jiang Cheng from seeing his sister until he came around. The sight stopped him in his tracks.

“A-Li?” Jin Zixuan ask. “A-Li, you’re not breathing!”

Jiang Yanli stared.

The watchers were not physically part of the simulation. The blade could not reflect her gaze. Nonetheless, its presence seemed to bear down upon her.

"You bastard! This is for my brother!"

The red around them splashed, flying into the air as though it had been disturbed from underneath.

"Huh?"

The voice of the boy in question — the confused, lost tone of the person who had skewered Jiang Yanli — rang out.

"You-! Back then, you caused the deaths of Jiang Fengmian and his wife!" Sect Leader Yao's disembodied voice accused. "Now you've caused the death of your Shijie!"

What they heard next was not another accusation or even a protest. No words were spoken anymore. The red in their surroundings turned even darker than before.

Wei Wuxian screamed.

SNAP

With a gasp, Wei Wuxian woke up.

The watchers jumped as well, unprepared for the sudden change. The few still possessing chairs knocked them over as they stood, their hands falling to their sides to grab onto the swords that had once been there.

(After the last segment, it was no surprise they were a little tense.)

The place they were now was no brighter than before. Dim moonlight was the only thing illuminating the area, not even candlelight around to provide aid. However, thanks to the previous scene, the watchers had mostly adjusted to dim light. Now, the gray, rocky cave they were inside of shone clear.

Wei Wuxian sat up.

"Is he… in a prison?" Madam Yu asked. Both Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan pursed their lips. They last time they had seen Wei Wuxian, he was being attacked on all sides by the 'righteous' sects. After Jiang Yanli's death, Wei Wuxian had brought the Stygian Tiger Seal out. Had he lost and been captured?

(Would those people really imprison Wei Wuxian? They had tried to kill him before he'd even attacked! *Surely* they would want him dead.)

And yet, as Jin Zixuan glanced back at his father, he couldn't help but feel some doubt sink in.

Wen Qing scoffed at Jin Guangshan, laughing: 'Yes, you only spoke about Wei Wuxian. Because my family *didn't have any Stygian Tiger Seals for you to acquire."*

However-

“Those are the scrolls he was working on,” Lan Wangji observed. Everyone’s eyes followed his gaze.

And, indeed, several scrolls sat to Wei Wuxian’s right. They were hastily marked and lacking in real structure, most of the thoughts added on spur-of-the-moment. The scrolls were the notes Wei Wuxian had made.

Brought to his cell?

No. Not with the prototypes there, too. Giving unknown tools to a prisoner would be the height of stupidity.

This was the Burial Mounds: Wei Wuxian’s home.

But…

“How… did he get here?” Lan Wangji asked.

Enemies all around. No allies left alive. People he needed to protect.

How exactly had Wei Wuxian gotten out of that?

“Maybe… maybe his corpses carried him out?”

“What are you talking about?!” Jiang Cheng snapped, nearly growling at the First Jade’s suggestion. “Last time we saw him, he was ordering his corpse army to attack everyone! You don’t think the Stygian Tiger Seal exists for retreating, do you? If he could use it to get out he should have done that sooner. If he had left, A-Jie would-”

The Jiang heir cut himself off, unable to finish that sentence. A truly sickened expression crossed his face.

“Sorry. I just meant…”

He paused again, looking down.

He had been rambling without thinking. After all, if Wei Wuxian had ‘just left’ from the beginning, then the sect’s armies would have arrived by nightfall of the next day. No one pointed that out, however. Even the most obtuse could tell it didn’t need to be said.

(Well, Wen Chao might have said it if he was there. Luckily, he had been sent off ages ago.)

Nonetheless, Lan Xichen did have to concede that their last memories didn’t line up with a retreat. If the simulation had jumped forward in time (as it often did) wouldn’t there at least be a hint of what had happened before?

“Maybe… it did occur.”

“What do you mean?”

The question was both harsh and fast, containing an edge of desperation Nie Mingjue had never heard from Wen Ruohan before. The Chief Cultivator's gaze was zeroed in on Nie Huaisang, waiting for him to continue. Sect Leader Nie moved between them at once.

"Ah, well…" Nie Huaisang stuttered, stumbling over his words as he took a step back. "I-I just mean… we saw Wei-xiong lose control and use the Stygian Tiger Seal, but we didn't have a chance to see anything after. The resentment became too intense. I know I fell unconscious as soon as he pulled the seal out, but… are you sure you didn't fall asleep too? Maybe the simulation showed us how Wei-xiong got out of there and we were all just… unconscious."

The watchers stared back, the implications settling in. They had been stuck in the simulation for several weeks so far. Not once in that time had they all collectively missed something before. Lan Wangji paled even further with concern.

"I don't… think… I fell asleep," Wen Ruohan mused aloud, rubbing at his temples again.

The Seal had formed.

It snapped together.

Wen Ruohan had seen some of the others fall unconscious before everything went black. He'd heard a few chairs break, too. He didn't think he'd fallen asleep.

"How would you know if we all did?" Nie Huaisang asked, cutting through the protests and suggestions being made by the other watchers. "There aren't any sundials in here. There isn't even a sun! No one's able to come in and check on us if we take too long. For all we know, there was a whole segment between now and what we last remember."

The protesters paused, not sure how to respond.

"Out of everyone here, I'm the most used to falling unconscious because of resentment," Nie Huaisang declared. "Most of you have felt hurt or weighed on or heavy before, but this was the first time we all got knocked out! Maybe. It happens fast! You're awake one moment and feel like you're waking up the next. You don't get a few seconds of feeling sleepy or anything — it all happens at once."

Several eyes turned to Jiang Yanli. As the other frequent-victim of the resentment, she nodded in agreement with Nie Huaisang's words.

Lan Qiren frowned, commenting, "It seems unlikely we would have skipped exactly one segment. We fell asleep in one and woke up in before another? The in-between period is much shorter than the time over which the simulation is playing."

"Don't forget who we are, either," Madam Yu insisted. "We're not *all* going to spend an hour knocked out after a bit of resentment from that brat! Or do you think we're that weak?!"

Jin Guangshan nodded, adding, "We all woke up at about the same time. If we did fall asleep, it probably wasn't for long."

(Unless, of course, there had been a continuous stream of resentment affecting them during the scenes they missed.)

"I-I don't know, I don't know, I don't know!" Nie Huaisang cried out. "It's just an idea I had. I don't know, maybe it did skip forward and we'll see how Wei-xiong got out later. I-I just think we shouldn't worry about all this right now and that we should focus on the simulation. That's all I'm saying!"

Genuine tears looked seconds away from falling out of his eyes. Nie Mingjue scowled at the other Sect Leaders, trying to shift to block them while not giving Wen Ruohan access either.

(The Chief Cultivator was still staring at Nie Mingjue's younger brother. A chill ran down Sect Leader Nie's back.)

And, all this while, Wei Wuxian had been sitting still. He was no longer lying down on the stone floor but he had not moved to stand yet either. He simply sat up, staring at the dark cave before him.

'*It truly does look like a prison.*'

Madam Yu's first, initial thought had proven accurate. No one in their right mind would see this as a home. What if the past Madam Yu, from half a year ago, were to find out that the future-Wei Wuxian was living in a place like this? Well, she would probably feel hope surface anew.

'So, he left the Jiang Sect for good then?'

By choice and yet not by choice — forced by circumstance and a world that turned their back on the Wen.

(On two specific Wen who had recovered Madam Yu's ashes and saved her son from a painful death.)

'Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, Jin Clan of Lanling, Lan Clan of Gusu, and Nie Clan of Qinghe have all taken the lead and burned the Burial Mounds to the ground.'

Was it time for that?

Now?

Now, when Wei Wuxian might not even try to fight back?

'*Maybe that's best for everyone,*' Madam Yu thought, avoiding looking at Wei Wuxian's uniquely soulless eyes. '*We already know he's going to die. That's the first thing they told us. If he doesn't fight back, at least no one else will get caught up in it.*'

Wei Wuxian gazed blankly, hopelessly, at the cave wall before him.

Wouldn't it be a mercy for him to die now? They had seen him wake up. He wasn't perfect — he wasn't unaffected — but he was better, at least. Maybe some time away from the world

of the living would help him. Maybe, if ~~her son~~ the sects attacked now, it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe-

"Xian-gege?"

Madam Yu was far from the only watcher to pale.

A small, chubby, dirt-caked hand was pressed against the wall of the cave, the child walking along side it for fear of falling in the dark. The small figure stepped forward, his tiny head finally in Wei Wuxian's line of sight.

"A-Yuan," Wen Qing whispered.

They hadn't forgotten him, per se. They knew Wei Wuxian was doing this for the Wen remnants. They knew A-Yuan was included in that group. They knew how unfair the whole situation was.

'Jiang Clan of Yunmeng, Jin Clan of Lanling, Lan Clan of Gusu, and Nie Clan of Qinghe have all taken the lead, and burned the Burial Mounds to the ground.'

A-Yuan stepped forward, now old enough to walk instead of toddling toward Wei Wuxian. He reached his hands out, extending them so he could be swept up in a hug.

Wei Wuxian stared back, unable to move.

Jiang Cheng stood equally frozen, watching the scene play out.

'Da-shixiong!' the children at Lotus Pier had shouted. Often, they wouldn't even be able to finish calling out to Wei Wuxian before being swept up and thrown into the air, giggling as he caught them over and over again. Jiang Cheng had rolled his eyes at the sight countless times, wondering where Wei Wuxian got so much energy from.

The current Jiang Cheng was struggling to remember why he had reacted that way.

"Xian-gege?" the child asked again.

Wei Wuxian didn't blink nor react. It was clear now that he had not been staring at A-Yuan but rather blankly into space, lost in another time.

Jiang Yanli looked up at him.

A gleaming silver blade pierced through her throat.

Jin Zixuan flinched back at the sight. Jiang Yanli bit her lip, resisting the urge to look away.

A similar expression covered Wei Wuxian's face, his eyes bloodshot and wide. Wei Wuxian's hands were shaking. A-Yuan, thinking he was about to be picked up, reached out once more.

The Yiling Patriarch remained where he was, neither reaching back nor moving to stand.

In moments like this, Madam Yu couldn't help but recall the clammoring that had occurred when they first heard of Jiang Yanli's demise. The simulation's revelation, given without context and yet believed wholeheartedly, had been enough to convince the past's Yu Ziyuan:

'I told *you!' she had shrieked. 'I told you he'd bring nothing but trouble to our sect. And look — look what he's-and now he's-'*

She had been shocked, then. She hadn't fully doubted it, however. Instead, she had gone right to threatening Wei Wuxian, promising she'd get dogs to eat his corpse.

(As though he hadn't experienced enough of that in his youth.)

~~(Was that fair to say? Was the Yiling Patriarch now, barely into his twenties, not also a youth? Was the teenager who had been thrown into the Burial Mounds not also far too young to pay for Madam Yu's mistake?)~~

In front of Madam Yu, the real Jiang Yanli stood still, watching the simulation with tears forming in her eyes. There was nothing Madam Yu could say to comfort her. She had no right.

Clouds passed over the moon, further darkening the cave. After a few moments, an elderly woman, Granny Wen, walked in.

"A-Yuan! That's enough!" she whispered harshly, picking the boy up. "Don't disturb the Young Master right now."

"Xian-ge?" A-Yuan asked, looking over the woman's shoulder.

Wei Wuxian's gaze remained unchanged, focused at the ground.

Night passed by. Eventually, morning came. Wei Wuxian was lying down once more, but had otherwise not moved from where he was.

Jiang Cheng glanced at the cave opening. When they'd heard footsteps approach, it was from Granny Wen looking for A-Yuan. At the time, Jiang Cheng had half-expected their source to be his future self. It would make sense, he had thought. The alliance's invasion was the next event they knew of. Maybe, just maybe, the future Jiang Cheng had arrived to warn Wei Wuxian. Maybe the Patriarch had been too dazed to respond in time. Maybe Jiang Cheng hadn't wanted Wei Wuxian to die.

Jiang Yanli's white robes had been dyed red with blood. Jiang Cheng held two finger to her neck, checking for a pulse. Short breaths were continuing to come out of her. When Wei Wuxian approached, Jiang Cheng threw a sudden punch toward his face.

'What happened?!' he demanded. 'Didn't you say you could control it?! Didn't you say that it'd be fine?!'

A more than understandable reaction. You would have to be delusional to expect anything else.

~~And what about burning down the Burial Mounds? Killing Wei Wuxian? Massacering the Wen remnants? In the end, it wasn't by Wei Wuxian that Jiang Yanli had met her end.~~

Footsteps were appraoching. Jiang Cheng stared at the entrance again, waiting for his other self to arrive.

Once again, A-Yuan peaked his head in instead.

Relief instantly came over Jiang Cheng.

(Relief he wouldn't be feeling if he genuinely believed his other self could be trying to save them.)

"Xian-gege!" A-Yuan whisper-shouted, wanting to be heard but not found by his elders. "Xian-gege, come play?"

He held out one of the sad, worn-down dolls his grandmother had made him. Wei Wuxian was unmatched when it came to acting out the radish-eating monster that doll was meant to be.

Usually, at least.

"Xian-gege?"

A-Yuan was right before him again, holding the doll out once more. A determined look formed on his face.

"Xian-gege, let's play."

No response was given.

Wen Ruohan took several steps closer to Wei Wuxian, analyzing him closely. It was almost comical, how different he and Wen Ruohan were in their respective final moments. Even after losing countless cultivators to an ultimately meaningless battle, Wen Ruohan had been nothing but gleeful about his capture of Nie Mingjue. Wei Wuxian, who had killed far more at a much smaller manpower cost, looked about as far from that as one could be.

'*His body is full of resentment,*' Wen Ruohan observed. '*After having to use the seal like he did, I suppose that makes sense.*'

Was his dispondance right now partly because of that? It was hard to say. The lingering effects of overfilling a demonic cultivator's body with resentment were entirely unknown.

Wei Wuxian was the first demonic cultivator.

The great sects had destroyed him for that.

The Wen child continued trying to get Wei Wuxian's attention, making numerous requests to play. Concern was clear in the child's gaze but a lack of understanding prevented him from stopping his attempts. The world seemed coated with a red haze.

A scream was heard in the distance.

Wei Wuxian blinked once.

"What was that?!" Nie Mingjue demanded, marching to the entrance of the cave. "What just-"

He froze, his eyes widening in horror. The other watchers rushed over as well.

In the distance, at the edge of the Burial Mounds, the orange glow of a fire surrounded a meager settlement there.

More screams followed.

At last, Wei Wuxian stood. He marched to the same entrance as the watchers, moving through them seamlessly like they weren't even there.

And they indeed weren't.

They could not interfere. They could not help.

Lan Wangji could *taste* his powerlessness. It was a familiar sensation, now.

That sensation only intensified with every scream they heard. Wei Wuxian left the cave fully, beginning to stumble down the hill toward the light. A-Yuan followed close behind.

The screams got louder. Wei Wuxian began to run.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, they found someone running in the opposite direction.

"Granny Wen!" Wei Wuxian shouted. "What's going-"

"We're under attack!" the woman shouted. "They got through! The sects! It's the sects! I saw the flag of the Jiang Sect down there!"

As if ice water had been dunked over their heads, the watchers collectively froze.

The small bit of hope Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng had clung to about their future selves vanished in an instant.

'*No.*' Jiang Cheng shook his head, swallowing once. '*No, maybe she just… maybe it's somehow-*'

“What? But the barrier — no, it doesn’t matter,” Wei Wuxian shook his head, picking the child by his legs up and handing him over. “Take A-Yuan and hide in the demon-slaughtering cave!”

The old woman struggled to grab hold of the child, bearing his weight through sheer adrenaline even as the young boy struggled in her arms. Looking at this sight, anyone who tried to describe her as a *threat* would almost certainly be laughed out of the room.

And yet, at this time, their future selves would surely disagree.

“A barrier?” Lan Qiren repeated, not wanting to speculate about his own future self quite yet. “When did he set that up?”

It was hard to tell. Wei Wuxian had been in the burial mounds for quite some time. The instinctive fear people had of the land had decreased the longer people were shown to live there. Hadn’t they already seen many aspiring disciples of the Patriarch come far closer to the mounds than anyone would have before this decade? Those disciples hadn’t made it past the corpses, of course, but their attempts had seemed comedic rather than asinine. With the rising tensions between Wei Wuxian and the sects, perhaps a barrier wasn’t a surprise.

But, if that was the case, how had the sects gotten by?

The first option — and the one most watchers immediately came to — was Wei Wuxian. Just a few moments before they had seen the state he was in. Expecting someone, no matter how brilliant they usually were, to maintain a barrier under the stress and sleeplessness Wei Wuxian was experiencing was foolish at best.

The second option was that the sects had simply broken it open. Exhausted as he was, Wei Wuxian may not have noticed until too late.

The third option, which no one present wanted to speak out loud, had to do one of the only guests the Burial Mounds had previously allowed in without question.

A group of cultivators flew across the sky. When one approached the entrance to the Burial Mounds, the corpses surrounding the site roared. It was possible that the corpses themselves were the barrier Wei Wuxian had mentioned a short while before. Either way, they served as a clear no-entry point.

However, when Jiang Wanyin stepped forward, the corpses stepped aside. They came back to prevent the Jiang disciples from following him, but not a single one moved to touch Jiang Cheng.

‘Wait at the bottom of the mountain,’ Sect Leader Jiang had instructed. ‘I’ll go alone.’

He had been let in once before.

Surely, after the Pledge Confrence, Wei Wuxian would have told the corpses to keep him out?

‘Huh? It’s you,’ Jin Ling commented, meeting Wei Wuxian as Mo Xuanyu for the first time. ‘What? You lost your memory after you were driven away? You don’t even recognize our coat

of arms?'

Wei Wuxian had made a soft noise of realization, finally understanding what sect Mo Xuanyu had been a part of.

'Hey, what are you muttering about over there?!'

Ignoring him, Wei Wuxian had continued, 'At the first siege of the Burial Mounds, Jiang Cheng ranked first, and Jin Guangshan must have been second. How hilarious that I've got his bastard son's body now. What a mess.'

'Jiang Cheng had ranked first.' That wasn't a rumor Wei Wuxian heard; just *experiencing* the battle was enough to tell him that.

(Of course he would rank first. Jiang Yanli was *dead.* Wei Wuxian had-

But he han't.

But he still-

But this couldn't-)

"*NO!*"

The two adults looked down at once, panic and exhaustion nearly making Wei Wuxian slap A-Yuan's grabbing hand off his robes. Luckily, he managed to stop himself just in time. He panted heavily, still barely in a state to stand, much less fight.

"A-Yuan, let go."

"No! I'm not! I'm not! Xian-gege, come with us," he shouted, grabbing on tighter and resisting the adult's pulls with all his might. He might not understand all the details of what was happening, but the child was far from stupid. He had lived through the Jin Sect's internment camps. He knew what Wei Wuxian separating would mean.

"A-Yuan, *let go.*"

Through tears, the child continued to shake his head.

"Come with us!" the boy bawled. "Please! Please, Xian-gege. Don't go! Don't-"

With a quick flick of his hand, Wei Wuxian threw a talisman onto the boy's chest. Before a second had passed, A-Yuan went limp and closed his eyes.

"Take him and go!" Wei Wuxian ordered, breaking into a run. Granny Wen nodded once, holding the boy closer to her chest as she began making her way up the hill. However, far from being a deadly cultivator, her progress was agonizingly slow.

Wen Qing, watching her mother's aunt flee, was filled with a sense of crushing, agonizing despair.

‘*Please make it out,*’ she begged. ‘*Please, don’t let them be noticed.*’

And yet, with every stumble the elderly woman took on her way up the hill, the meager hope Wen Qing had faded bit by bit.

The simulation moved along, following after Wei Wuxian as he raced toward the houses down the hill. They burned orange now, setting the dry field aglow much like the setting sun had a few segments ago.

If one had to pinpoint the biggest difference between now and then, it would be the screams currently filling the air.

Jiang Yanli winced when the cries began and flinched every time one was cut off abruptly. Jin Zixuan moved close, trying to wrap his arms around her in a mimicry of a hug. Jiang Cheng remained distant.

A voice that was vaguely recognizable was crying out in pain.

Both the attackers and attacked were likely to have voices the watchers could recognize. Right now, however, only one side had a chance of making those sounds.

A few weeks ago, Nie Mingjue would have been delighted to know the last of the Wens would sound like that. He was sure his other self was ecstatic to be a cause.

In fact, his other self had probably leapt at the chance to take part.

~~And to think he had once thought of himself as someone who spared civillians. Turned out that only counted for innocents not named ‘Wen.’~~

Bile rose up in his throat.

Wei Wuxian didn’t hesitate for a moment longer. Finally close enough to take part, he raised his flute to his lips and sent out an urgent call.

🎵♪

Short and simple, yet filled with power.

Stop the intruders.

The original citizens of the Burial Mounds had spent years with their patriarch’s guests. While their brains no longer functioned like a human’s, recognition was still possible.

Nie Mingjue himself was a perfect example of that:

When the headless body of the former Sect Leader had heard Lan Xichen’s song, it had frozen and turned to face him. That had been the final piece of evidence needed for the future’s Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji to confirm that it was Nie Mingjue they had been collecting bit by bit.

At the time, Nie Mingjue had been disgusted by what had happened to his body. It had been a grave violation of his corpse and a signal of just how terribly the far future had gone.

The brief thought that he might be committing fewer injustices right now if this version was already a fierce corpse was hard to ignore.

Low, inhuman growls indicative of the dead rang out as the corpses began to move. Now, the screams of the invading cultivators joined the fray. At least a dozen cultivators who were caught off guard fell before they could react. Corpses bit into their necks, ripping off heads in a violent manner. Hands shot out of the ground, grabbing onto the legs of fleeing young masters and pulling them to the ground. They would be torn limb from limb shortly after.

Every cultivator had come here knowing the danger, however. Orders were swiftly called out, the combatants regrouping into a more defensive formation. Standard form, swiftly executed; there were no complaints to give.

Lan Qiren wondered where the strange sense of numbness he was feeling came from. These cultivators screaming out now included the Lan. He could see white robes becoming stained with blood. That wasn't a surprise. They had known from the beginning that this would be the case.

What was a surprise was the use of Lan tactics by those not in the clan.

In hindsight, however, it probably shouldn't have been a shock. Most of the older generation had died in the war. The leaders of this battle were primarily people who had, for a time, studied at Gusu — who had been Lan Qiren's students at some point or another.

In the very first segment, the watchers had been blissfully, insurmountably ignorant of what had transpired in the previous twenty years. They, unsurprisingly, had reacted with prejudice.

'That man is no longer the boy you once knew,' Lan Qiren declared, sending the Yiling Patriarch a look of absolute disgust. 'If he was willing to turn to — to create *demonic cultivation, there's no telling what his limits are.'*

The army had recovered quickly. The cultivators stood grouped into circles, prioritizing safety over effectiveness. Any soldier lost was a fierce corpse the Patriarch gained. And yet, despite that, one would break formation every once in a while. Each time, it was with the express purpose of skewering a hiding, elderly Wen.

Students of Lan Qiren — disciples who, in the current time, were predominantly children — were dying in droves. Lan Qiren should be mourning them. If all was well, 'Teacher Lan' would be filled with rage at the demonic cultivator responsible for these deaths.

Instead, throughout it all, all he felt was numb.

Wei Wuxian rushed forward, joining the fray. He sought out all the hiding Wen he could, seeking to bring those too weak to run to shelter. The glow of the fire cast a red light upon the field, making it difficult to distinguish what sect each cultivator was

from. It wasn't impossible, however. There was a distinctive gleam of gold embroidered on the dark uniforms of the Nie sect that those familiar with the robes could not miss.

There, holding the decapitated head of a Wen in his hand, was Nie Mingjue.

The Sect Leader shut his eyes, but that image remained seared into his mind. His other-self had not been smiling, but there was no regret or hesitation in his gaze either. That Nie Mingjue had seen the elderly, sickly, malnourished Wen and still chose to-

"Open your eyes."

Upon registering the command, Nie Mingjue did. He flinched at the vibrant sea of blood growing before him, not having fully realized he'd closed his eyes, and look over at the person who had just spoken to him.

"What?! You-!"

Nie Mingjue cut off.

Wen Ruohan calmly gazed back.

Sect Leader Nie continued on, not needing to take part in a defensive formation and thus striking down any corpse in his path with a deadly grace. The cultivation he used was tinged with resentment and corruption, a tell-tale sign of the Nie Sect's unconventional cultivation style.

The resentful corpses of freshly-slain Wen stood up to face him.

"Keep looking," Wen Ruohan recommended. "It's the least you can do. *I* certainly never looked away."

Nie Mingjue nearly scoffed, biting back, "Because *you* never regretted anything shown!"

The unpoken admission about his own feelings froze Lan Xichen in place. Despite keeping his eyes on the fight, he couldn't help listening to their words.

(It was against the rules to eavesdrop.)

(Look where their rules had gotten them.)

Wei Wuxian paused, looking down at the decapitated body of one of the people he had given up everything to protect. Numerous arrows were implanted into the woman's chest, a slash from a sword or saber having cut through her clothes and inadvertently exposed her chest. This was a reoccuring trend now. Every hiding space he looked had a distinct lack of living Wen. Thus far, he hadn't managed to save even a single one.

He knelt, guarded by numerous corpses behind him, and tied pieces of the Wen woman's shirt together, covering her again. It was a futile attempt — the beheaded woman had no capacity for shame — but the task was dutifully completed nonetheless.

🎵🎵🎵♪

The corpse tensed, then jerked. As Wei Wuxian stepped back, the Wen woman rose to her feet once more. The empty stump where her neck had been continued to bleed, but the woman's nails could function as weapons in place of her teeth.

Though Wen were still being made into corpses, they were not Wei Wuxian's enemies at the current time.

'*If only I had…*'

Instead of finishing that thought, Wen Ruohan spoke aloud:

"It's not that I have no regrets."

Nie Mingjue jerked, having been too absorbed in the battle around them to remember the conversation being had.

"You… What?"

"Many of my choices in this future were… impulsive," Wen Ruohan continued. "A result of impatience. If I had planned better, someone as capable as A-Ying would never have been thrown into the Burial Mounds alone."

Both Madam Yu and Jiang Cheng bristled at the comment, feeling revolution at the affectionate address. However-

"Don't look away from this."

At that conclusion, no one present could speak up. Wen Ruohan had turned back toward the simulation, effectively ending the conversation. After a moment, Nie Mingjue did the same.

Nie, Jiang, Jin, and Lan disciples were falling steadily, brought down by the corpse's fierce attacks even with their careful strategies. It was a sight that would inspire feelings of revulsion and hatred against demonic cultivation in any normal cultivator.

In fact, remembering their reaction to the very first scene the simulation had shown them, it was no exaggeration to say that plans to enact revenge against him would have immediately been made.

And yet-

'The Sunshot Campaign was a battlefield,' Luo Qingyang argued, frowning at the hypocrisy of the sects. 'Under that logic, everyone who participated in battle would be 'killing indiscriminately."

Nie Mingjue's future self had been impressed by her words, commending her bravery.

The current Nie Mingjue cut down the revived corpses of Wen without a trace of doubt.

It was a grusome sight. Not particularly exhilerating either, given the context behind it. Despite that, everyone from Wen Ruohan and Wen Qing to Jiang Yanli and Nie Huaisang kept their eyes on the scene before them.

(Jin Guangshan watched the Jin soldiers carefully, wondering if he had any plans to capture Wei Wuxian. While it could be argued the Yiling Patriarch was too dangerous to risk leaving alive, it was far from an easy choice to make.)

Wei Wuxian fought and fought. Though he never once called upon his blade, no one in or outside of the simulation would underestimate the danger of his music. As notes continued to flurry by, the battle wore on and on.

Lan Wangji gazed over the battlefield for the tenth time, taking count of all the Lan present. With every glance, he found himself furrowing his brow further at the lack of his own presence in the battle. Not even his brother — physically identical to him in all ways except expression — was anywhere to be found.

(It should be reassuring that he wasn't joining this atrocity.)

(Instead, all it left him with was more questions.)

(If his other-self truly did nothing, simply believing that not participating in the battle was enough to keep his hands clean, then Lan Wangji knew that nothing he did in the far future would be enough to warrant forgiveness.)

'*Why aren't you here?*' he asked himself. '*You saw A-Yuan. You met the residence of the Burial Mounds. How could you let this happen? How could you not even try to save them?!*'

Morally speaking, he was in a far better place than all the soldiers actively in combat.

It didn't feel that way, however.

A flash of purple lightning was emitted from the side.

The three Jiangs present paled at once. They did not whisper desperate denials as they had at the start of the simulation, when Wei Wuxian's death was first revealed. Instead, a horrified acceptance seemed to settle over them.

Zidian snapped forth, tearing a fierce corpse to shreds.

The sight of a teenage Wei Wuxian being beaten by that very same whip at the Wen's behest filled the minds of more than one watcher here. Madam Yu tensed even further.

Though they could not see Jiang Cheng yet, the purple light given off every time the whip made contact with someone was getting closer and closer to where the Patriarch was.

'*Yiling Patriarch Wei Wuxian is dead!'*

'Really? Who killed him?'

‘Who else? His old friend Jiang Cheng, leader of the Jiang Clan.’

Wei Wuxian had denied this. Rumors weren’t always accurate.

(They weren’t always inaccurate either, though.)

Even with the loud battle all around, the distinctive crackling sound given off by the legendary whip was easy to pinpoint as it approached. Purple flashed from Wei Wuxian’s right.

“Damn it! Where is your future-self?!” Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but snap, glaring at Lan Wangji. “Wei Wuxian needs help! And-”

(And…)

(And Jiang Cheng’s future-self clearly wasn’t offering any.)

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli whispered. Said heir pulled back, looking up and meeting Lan Wangji’s wide eyes.

(He knew it wasn’t fair to say that. He *knew* it made no sense to blame him. And yet-)

“We found them!” a loud voice shouted from the distance. While normally that wouldn’t be enough to make anyone mid-fight pause, the unusual nature of the words had Wei Wuxian looking back.

Granny Wen’s head had been mounted atop a rogue cultivator’s spear.

Wen Qing felt the world slow down. All sound seemed to disappear. All color left her line of sight.

First, her parents.

Then, her clan.

Then, her brother — murdered by his captors and then turned into a fierce corpse.

And now, Granny Wen.

But then…

“If… she’s there….” Wen Qing forced herself to swallow, her hands starting to tremble. “...Where’s A-Yuan?”

No one could respond.

In the next few seconds, several eternaties seemed to transpire. Answers to that question formed in everyone’s minds. Jiang Yanli blinked rapidly, feeling her tears at last start to fall. At the same time, bile rose in Lan Xichen’s mouth. They felt sick beyond compare.

They were sure everyone who could see their future selves there felt far worse.

(Lan Qiren, who appeared to be leading the Lan Sect's charge in the future Lan Xichen's unexplained absence, was so pale he seemed nearly translucent.)

And Wei Wuxian, upon laying his eyes on that same sight, had the same thought run through his mind.

'*Granny Wen?*' he wondered.

Though the battle continued around him, the world seemed to slow around Wei Wuxian.

'*But then… what about A-Yuan?*'

A brief image of A-Yuan — of that sweet, sweet, thoughtful child sitting in a pile of mud — flashed through Wei Wuxian's mind.

Wen Ruohan briefly wondered if Wei Wuxian would be the last person in that world to think kindly of a Wen.

(He didn't have to wonder whether he was to blame.)

'*But if A-Yuan…. But then-*'

Wei Wuxian had stopped playing his flute entirely. His already rapid breaths started coming out faster and faster. Resentful energy flooded the surrounding space as the famed Yiling Patriarch started to — for lack of a better description — hyperventalate.

If Granny Wen was dead, then A-Yuan had almost certainly been found.

The inhuman growls of resentful corpses filled the air. The Wen who had been farming these very lands were no more. Fire blazed in the distance.

If this was the Burial Mounds now, then any chance of A-Yuan's future was gone.

Countless screams resounded as more cultivators fell.

If A-Yuan was gone, then-

Then-

Everything Wei Wuxian had sacrificed — everything Wei Wuxian had *done* — flashed across the screen. Jiang Yanli's pale corpse stood out prominantly in the display. The cries of her infant son sounded out as well.

If A-Yuan was dead….

'*Then what was the point?*'

…

……

…….

……..

……..

Something had snapped.

No watcher would be able to explain why, but they all unquestionably knew this to be true.

A strange calm abruptly settled over the watchers. As though ~~he~~ they had come to a new understanding of the situation, all the hatred and guilt in their hearts simply disappeared.

Wei Wuxian looked up at the battle before him. Within his robes, directly over his heart, a small object began emitting a red glow.

As though one with the thoughts of their Patriarch, the watchers all knew his intentions even before he moved. As such, it came as no surprise when he reached into his robe and removed the Tiger Seal so coveted by the world.

"It's the Stygian Tiger Seal!" someone shouted. The man's words were muffled and distorted by the ringing of the surrounding resentment, but the desire within them was clear nonetheless.

Jin Zixuan nearly laughed when he saw all the members of his own sect perk up at the weapon, not displaying any of the fear he had expected. In fact, if it weren't for the wave of serenity they were all feeling right now, he probably would have cried.

Power flowed into the seal, but the instructions imbued within were not what any of the watchers present had expected.

In hindsight, perhaps they should have known that this would come.

The resentment rose and rose. With it, the ringing became louder.

Piiiiiiiiinnnnnggggg.

A strange lightheadedness filled the watchers now. Though slightly different in flavor, it was a familiar feeling. In the last segment, an intensity like this had appeared shortly before they

were knocked out. Some of the weaker members could feel that transition happening already.

And yet…

‘*I can’t fall asleep now.*’

‘*I can’t let myself look away from this.*’

It was the least they owed.

Logically, they should raise their own power to fight back as strongly as possible. Logically, spiritual cultivation would be the best way to strike back.

'Spiritual energy is energy, but resentment and wrath can become types of energy too. Why can't we make good use of them? When Yu the great tamed the flood, obstruction was the inferior method and redirection was superior.'

For some reason, at that moment, fighting back against Wei Wuxian's energy felt wrong. And so, instead of resisting it, they now allowed the energy to flow through them. Despite being resentment, this energy had none of the aggressiveness they had come to expect. As if by unspoken agreement, the watchers silently and yet collectively begged the resentment to allow them to stay.

(Right now, the only thing here they were not scared of was Wei Wuxian. The instinctive resistance of resentment they had all been born and raised to accept seemed so trivial, now.)

‘*Let me see.’*

‘Let me see it.’

‘Please, let me see.’

And this unusual resentment, carrying no hostility to the people all around, was happy to oblige.

After all, what was filling the Stygian Tiger Seal now was not a command to attack.

The gossiping tavern guests, serving as their introduction to the simulation, had disagreed on nearly every detail here. Whether it was three of five thousand people in the Nightless City; who, exactly, had dealt the finishing blow against Wei Wuxian. There was one thing they had all agreed on, however:

‘He destroyed the seal before he died. At least he did one good thing.’

And now, that very seal was filling itself with more energy than they had ever seen before. Countless cultivators were reaching toward it, trying to pry the near-mythic weapon from Wei Wuxian’s hands. However, right as the closest man seemed to brush the tips of his fingers against Wei Wuxian’s sleeve, blinding red light filled the peak and everyone within a thousand meter radius was sent flying back.

As was Jin Guangshan, the only watcher who still felt fear when resentful energy approached. Flung several feet back and crashing onto the floor, the sect leader of the Jin sect fell unconscious a moment later.

Not even Jin Zixuan glanced back at him.

How could they? The blinding red light of the Stygian Tiger Seal had the invading sects flinching away, but what reason would the watchers have to do the same?

While they did feel some fear, it was not, in this moment, for themselves.

“Wei Wuxian, run!” Jiang Cheng shouted.

The blinding light faded. The Yiling Patriarch stood still. The dirt around him was reddish-brown with blood. However, compared to the intoxicating scarlet of a moment before, the world now seemed almost completely devoid of color.

From Wei Wuxian’s hands, the shattered remains of the Stygian Tiger Seal fell to the floor.

And, in the absence of its power — in the sudden lack of instructions or guidance or intent — the corpses turned their hunger on the greatest source of energy on the mounds instead.

“...Hey, what are the corpses-”

“Huh?!”

“Hey! They’re all-!”

“Oh, Heavens,” the Lan Qiren gasped.

The commander of this attack, standing proudly as the lightning-shouded leader of the Jiang Sect, froze. For the first time this night, uncertainty seemed to flash in his eyes.

“Wei Wuxian?” he asked.

Jiang Yanli stared, unable to move.

Lan Wangji could not breathe.

All the while, fierce corpses piled on, biting into Wei Wuxian in a viscious mockery of his first excursion into the mounds. Countless hands tore into his fragile robes, tearing flesh from his limbs and opening their mouths wide to eat their fill.

The watchers had become quite sensitive to resentful energy throughout this experience. Now that they had willingly allowed resentful energy into their souls, they were probably nearly identical to resentful spirits — in terms of physcial make-up, if nothing else. At this moment, they would have heard without question any command the Yiling Patriarch gave.

A request for the corpses to stop never came.

'*I heard, since he cultivated the dark path, his powers backfired during battle and he was torn to a fine powder by his own ghost soldiers. If so, serves him right. The ghost soldiers he had were like mad dogs, biting everyone they came across! In the end, they turned their fangs on him!*'

It had seemed strangely fitting at the time. A classic case of one man's hubris being his own downfall. 'Of course he lost control. He was a fool for thinking he could master resentment in the first place.'

Wei Wuxian's screams filled the air, yet the resentment remained steady.

He had 'done it to himself?'

Not even Madam Yu would be able to say that now.

Lan Qiren stood still, trying to not envision what every crunch and chew referred to in the pile of bodies that now covered Wei Wuxian, blocking out any sight of him. With every second that passed, that became a harder and harder task.

(The simulated cultivators were *cheering*. This *was* justice to them.)

"...What have we done?" Lan Qiren murmured, not seeing the way Madam Yu flinched at his words.

The cheering was now so loud that the corpses could no longer be heard. It was hard to call the sound that replaced it pleasant, however. The near-feral shouts of the surrounding cultivators displayed no aversion to this series of events. Of the few who did not show happiness, their gazes were not directed at Wei Wuxian. Rather, it was the broken remains of the Stygian Tiger Seal that caused the dissatisfaction they displayed.

While the simulation was loud, the watchers were dead silent. Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang were frozen still, unwilling to look away and yet having to fight with every instinct in their body to remain. The sight before them was gruesome and disturbing beyond anything they had experienced on a night hunt before.

And it was happening *to Wei Wuxian.*

Nie Mingjue couldn't help but recall his own body, mutilated and desecrated in a future not too far away. Looking upon his future-self, he wondered if it was deserved.

Lan Xichen briefly turned to look at Lan Wangji. The young Lan stood beside their Uncle, his hands clenched together. Neither of them knew where their future selves were.

(In some ways, that was almost worse.)

The carnage continued.

Jiang Cheng glanced back, his eyes landing on his future-self.

Neither the other cultivators' joy nor deep despair could be seen. In fact, even the anger the future Jiang Wanyin constantly spit out was nowhere to be found now. The future Sect Leader Jiang gazed at the scraps of blood-soaked fabric that used to be Wei Wuxian with a chillingly blank gaze.

'*It's like he's become one of the Twin Jades,*' Jiang Cheng scoffed. '*Some 'Two Prides of Yunmeng' we ended up being.*'

It was truly laughable.

(Especially since, right now, the real versions of both of the Twin Jades were showing far more on their faces than the future Jiang Cheng. The current version couldn't read his future self at all — didn't even want to try. Whether he was feeling guilt or relief or vindication or regret didn't matter. It wouldn't change what was happening to Wei Wuxian now.)

A finger flew into the air. Wei Wuxian's — dropped by a clumsy corpse. Someone in the crowd shouted at the others to invade the Demon Slaughtering Cave. Whether they were looking for survivors or treasure was unclear, but many surged to follow regardless. A moment later, the displaced finger was gabbed by a new corpse, swallowed a moment later.

For the first time since the simulation began, Wen Ruohan looked away.

The simulation began moving away from this outcome, the fires growing dimmer as they faded into the distance.

Lan Wangji bit his tongue, tasting blood as he forced himself to remain seated. Attacking the simulation would do nothing. He would simply phase through if he tried.

And yet-

(How dare the great sects calls themselves 'righteous?' How, when Wei Ying had done so much good and ended up like this? How dare any of them say his name?)

"The Yiling Patriarch has fallen!" one cultivator shouted. The cheers turned into a chant, each cultivator reveling in their victory.

'*Why? Why? Why?*'

Even Lan Wangji didn't truly know what he was asking.

The screen darkened, then lit once more. Now, they were in a tavern. Though it was a different location, it appeared nearly identical to the first scene the simulation had shown. With every word that was said, that feeling became increasingly clear.

"The Yiling Patriarch has died? Who could have killed him?"

"Who other than his shidi, Jiang Cheng, putting an end to his own shixiong for the greater good. Jiang Cheng led the four clans of Yunmeng, LanlingJin, GusuLan, and QinghеNie to destroy his 'den,' the Burial Mounds."

They had seen it themselves. Jiang Cheng had not done that.

~~He might as well have.~~

Although it mader sense the moment he thought about it, the last thing Jiang Cheng expected to hear after those words was cheers. And yet-

“I must say, good riddance!”

“Good riddance, indeed! We’ve finally eliminated this scourge?”

“‘We?’” Wen Ruohan repeated mockingly, raising a brow. However, while the pronoun wasn’t accurate in any literal sense, it was still a telling indication of the general consensus among the public:

The whole world was against Wei Wuxian. If something happened to him, it was a victory for the world.

Jin Zixuan shut his eyes, but couldn’t get the image of Wei Wuxian being torn apart out of his head.

“If not for the YungmengJiang Clan adopting and teaching him, he would have been a beggar living on the streets! Forget causing mayhem like he had these days — he wouldn’t even be able to lift a sword!”

Madam Yu wondered how many times she had shouted something to that effect before.

“The head of the Jiang Clan raised him like his own child, yet he defected and became the enemy of the cultivation world, bringing shame upon the Jiang Clan and even leading to its near extermination! He is the prime example of biting the hand that feeds him!”

This time, neither Madam Yu nor Jiang Cheng could withhold a flinch.

‘You damn brat!’ the prideful Madam shouted. ‘I hate you! I hate you more than anything else! Look what our sect has turned into because of you!’

Then, fresh off a staged fight, Jiang Cheng turned to the world and said, ‘Wei Wuxian had betrayed the sect and publicly regards all cultivation sects as his enemy! Yunmeng Jiang hereby expells him, breaking all ties and drawing a clear line between us! From now on, no matter what he does, it will have nothing to do with Yunmeng Jiang!’

They had wondered, right at the beginning, how Wei Wuxian had gotten such a terrible reputation.

(They should have known that only the words of the gentry would hold this much weight.)

One bar patron scoffed, swirling his drink in his cup as he commented, “Jiang Cheng allowed this fellow to live for far too long. If I were him, at the time of his defection I

wouldn't have just stabbed him. In fact, I would have thoroughly examined my clan's disciples so he couldn't do the crazy things they did later on!"

(Sandu had impaled Wei Wuxian. The point was to prove to everyone that they were no longer allies. It was annoying to a cultivator. It could be deadly to someone without a core.)

Wen Qing couldn't help but send a sharp glare Jiang Wanyin's way. The boy simply shrank down further at her gaze, a deep shame coloring his cheeks. The anger Wen Qing had half-expected him to send her way never came.

(Why? This all started the moment she asked Wei Wuxian for help. Why wouldn't he blame her? Was he accepting her glare because he knew he was the most to blame?)

But…

(She had asked for help. Jiang Cheng had led the siege ~~using Wei Wuxian's own core~~ and didn't help when asked to. Lan Wangji was nowhere to be found, simply allowing his sect to launch this attack. Nie Huaisang had stayed back, not lifting his voice to intervene. Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan had not understood their own sects, inviting Wei Wuxian straight into a trap. Lan Xichen, Nie Mingjue, and Lan Qiren had not investigated the Wens themselves, 'ignoring justice and morality' for the sake of their own prejudices. Madam Yu and Madam Jin had contributed through the manner in which they had raised their children. Both Wen Ruohan and Jin Guangshan had contributed in ways that were unquestionable.)

When the Wen had attacked the Jiang, blame had been thrown around liberally. Accusations had flown left and right, no one truly coming out unscathed. Now, with the Jiang, Jin, Lan, and Nie attacking the remaining Wen, the watchers seemed too exhausted to even attempt that.

Wen Qing's thoughts kept her from focusing on the simulation, but it was hard to say anything of value was being missed.

"That's all hearsay. Although Jiang Cheng was one of the main forces, he did not give Wei Wuxian the final blow. He was a cultivator of the Demonic Path. They say his powers backfired on him and he was ripped to pieces."

Laughter broke out throughout the simulation.

Not a single watcher joined in.

"Ha! That's karma," the bartender announced. "The ghost soldiers he created were like wild dogs, biting everyone they came across! It serves him right to be chewed to death."

Jiang Yanli gazed at the floor, her expression empty. A cold, resentful anger she was unused to was filling her mind. Even then, she knew her own powerlessness was what hurt the most.

"But, if not for Jiang Cheng making a plan that aimed at Wei Wuxian's weakness, the siege might not have succeeded!" an elderly man pointed out. "Should I remind you folks of the item Wei Wuxian possesses?"

Noises of agreement were heard all around.

Jiang Cheng was now paler than a ghost.

Most of what the travelers had said so far was misguided or distorted half-truths. In the initial scene, the gossipers hadn't been sure whether it was three or five thousand people Wei Wuxian had killed. None of the civillians really knew what was going on. Putting too much trust in the nonsense they said would be setting yourself up for failure.

(But there was a chance it *was* true. Hadn't Jiang Cheng himself been wondering why the Burial Mound's defenses were so weak?)

It probably wasn't true.

(But he couldn't be sure.)

"He's most certainly out of his mind."

"It's a good thing he destroyed that evil weapon before he died. If it was left behind in this world and continued to harm humankind, his sins would have been even worse."

Wen Qing, Nie Mingjue, and Nie Huaisang glanced over at the Jin Clan members sitting to the side. Upon doing that, they noticed Jin Zixuan staring at his father with a heavy look in his eyes.

"But, you know, if his soul is summoned back-"

"And unleash a vengeful spirit upon this land? Who would be crazy enough to do that?"

They all knew the answer already.

And yet, despite everything else lining up, Wei Wuxian had not been a vengeful spirit when summoned. Despite the way he died and the suffering he faced, he had been playful and unconcerned when returned to life.

'A-Xian, you were born with a smiling face,' Jiang Yanli said. 'Always smiling, never minding sorrowful things. No matter what situation you're in, you can always be happy.'

Years later, freshly brought back to life, Wei Wuxian would observe the summoning circle and binding scars on his arm with an expression that could be best described as playful.

'He was summoning a heinous spirit? But it couldn't have been me…. It must have been some lunatic!"

As if the great sects hadn't done far worse than him with far less cause.

"Oh, well…. You know, back then, Wei Wuxian was one of the most promising cultivators. Coming from a highly distinguished clan and finding success at a young age. How on earth did he end up where he is now?"

While every watcher answered that question in their heads, not one said it outloud.

If Jin Guangshan were awake and not knocked unconscious by the resentment from earlier, he might have flinched at the gazes others sent him.

“This proves that one can only cultivate by following the righteous path. Using dishonest practices will only seem helpful at first glance. Look at what happened in the end! Not even a whole corpse was left of him.”

“Not everything was because of his cultivation path,” the elderly patron pointed out. “Wei Wuxian’s personality is quite immoral. One’s deeds will be paid one way or another; what goes around always comes around.”

‘*And yet the majority of the gentry walked away from this matter unscathed,*’ Lan Wangji thought, his hands clenched into fists. ‘*Including myself. I did nothing to help him, and yet get spoken of with reverence thirteen years later.*’

~~Why hadn’t he helped?~~

The world darkened, then lit again. It was a bit misleading to say it had ‘lit up,’ however. A cloudy night sky hung over the quiet peaks of Gusu — instantly recognizable due to the foliage and architecture. The surroundings were lit by only a single lantern held in Lan Xichen’s hand. He walked nearly-silently, his face grave.

Cicadas hummed in the distance.

The real Lan Xichen frowned deeply. Far from looking forward to their appearances — as they had at the beginning of the segments — the watchers now seemed to dread making an appearance.

Stopping in front of the door to an isolated building, Lan Xichen tapped lightly.

“Wangji?”

No sound was heard from within.

If Lan Qiren had been ashamed before, it was nothing compared to the sickening feeling that filled him now.

‘*Is he going to-*’

Despite not having received an answer, Lan Xichen opened the door and entered. It was dark inside, no candle light to be found. Lan Xichen’s lamp continued to glow, casting a soft light on the large mass in the center of the room.

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes and approached, desperate for a clearer view. However, as soon as the figure looked back, he froze.

(The Lans had not been the only ones wondered where Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen had been during the attack. Last they had seen the younger jade, he had been trying to stop Wei

Wuxian from attacking the clans in the Nightless City. And yet somehow, in this short span of time…)

Lan Xichen stepped closer, allowing his brother to become visible to the watchers. The light, white underrobe he wore did nothing to hide the bandages covering his chest and arms.

Nor the still-bleeding wounds below.

Jiang Yanli gasped, pale. Nie Huaisang looked nauseous and even Nie Mingjue seemed taken aback. That was nothing compared to the reactions of the three Lans, however. While their reactions were muted compared to the rest of the watchers, the sheer horror in their gazes was unquestionable.

“Wangji,” Lan Xichen said again.

The second jade looked over, his eyes blinking tiredly with a vulnerability he had never allowed himself to show before. Barely able to stay conscious, he forced himself into a sitting position.

“No, Wangji, you don’t have to-”

“What is it?” Lan Wangji asked, interrupting Lan Xichen and pushing away the hands trying to set him back down. “Xiongzhang, what happened?”

The sheer desperation in Lan Wangji’s voice made it impossible for Lan Qiren to critisize his manners.

And yet, for several long, agonizing seconds, Lan Xichen remained quiet.

“Xiongzhang?” Lan Wangji asked again.

“...”

Lan Xichen pursed his lips together and then, at last, opened his mouth to speak:

“I’m sorry.”

The phrase said nothing and everything all at once. It only took a moment for it to be understood. In an instant, Hanguang-jun’s face became consumed by grief.

Lan Xichen looked away.

Someone seemed to be shouting the word 'no' in the distance, though Lan Wangji wasn’t sure who. For all he knew, it was his other-self. He couldn’t tell; he had never raised his voice quite like that before. It was impossible to confirm visually. At the moment, Lan Wangji couldn’t tear his eyes away from Lan Xichen's future-self.

‘*What do you mean by that? Is... is 'I'm sorry' all you can say? How could we let this happen?*’ he thought, unwilling to ask aloud. ‘*How could you? How could I?*’

His gaze fell on the injuries lining his other-self's back.

'*What happened?*'

The two jades of Lan were still speaking to each other, but the words were getting harder and harder to parse. They faded into the distance. At first, many watchers thought they were simply struggling to process the sound. However, it gradually became clear that this was also the doing of the simulation itself.

The sounds attached to this memory faded into the distance.

In that space, a few notes began to play.

Pale and shaking, Jin Zixuan found himself focusing on the music being played. It was a far more appealing option than continuing to watch the indomitable Hanguang-jun re-opening the wounds on his back as he screamed in grief.

(Even the Wen had never managed to bring him to his knees like this. At this moment, there was no trace of the prideful jade of Lan.)

Even without the musical talent of the Twin Jades or Wei Wuxian, the song slowly picking up in volume gradually became clear to Jin Zixuan. It was a soft melody played on a guqin — one of longing and hope.

(The one Lan Wangji sang for Wei Wuxian in the Xuanwu of Slaughter's cave.)

(The music could no longer be a comforting distraction now that Jin Zixuan had realized that.)

The music grew louder and louder, drowning out the words being said. It was a small mercy of privacy in a world that had completely destroyed all semblance of secrets among them.

More than one watcher was looking away.

(Even Wen Ruohan had closed his eyes.)

Somehow, watching this was harder than watching the violence that had been inflicted upon Wei Wuxian. Or perhaps it was that violence — that context — that made what they were seeing now so hard.

♪🎵♪♪

Red soaked the bandages along Lan Wangji's back as the song kept playing. It was only now, with the countless wounds torn open from Lan Wangji's shaking, that the watchers could clearly see just how extensive the damage was.

Lan Qiren couldn't breathe.

He remembered, now, that they had seen the scars of a discipline whip on Wangji's future-self's back. He remembered, now, being angered by the sight and wondering what his nephew could have done to warrant such a thing. They still didn't have a specific answer to that.

They didn't need one.

Regardless of what Lan Wangji had done, Wei Wuxian and the Wens had still died in the end.

(And to think that Hanguang-jun's forwardness with Wei Wuxian had once seemed like the biggest problem the simulation had to offer.)

Lan Qiren closed his eyes.

Lan Wangji tried to stand, but Lan Xichen pushed him down. Neither of them could be heard by the watchers now. However, as the music continued to play, Lan Wangji could be seen shaking his head once more.

If Nie Huaisang had to take a guess, he would bet the words 'Don't lie to me' were what Lan Wangji was saying right now.

A resolution was never shown. Instead, as tears began to fall from Lan Wangji's eyes, the simulation drew to a close.

♪

With one final note, the song came to an end.

The world darkened shortly after.

Jiang Yanli blinked.

Light had returned. The in-between zone was the same boring white as always.

The watchers had not spoken much during this segment. They wanted to speak even less now.

For a brief moment, Nie Huaisang wondered if he should say something to prompt conversation. It didn't take long for him to decide against that, however. While they had all known this was coming, the actual moment of Wei Wuxian's death would be difficult to accept at the current point in time.

As such, Nie Huaisang simply scooted himself closer to her brother, internally lamenting his poor, destroyed chair.

~~Nie Mingjue had been part of the attack. He had led a large portion of the warriors who came to exterminate the Wen. While the number of Jiang and Jin was higher, his contribution could not be ignored.~~

‘*Maybe painting fans instead training the ‘righteous, warrior way’ doesn’t seem so bad now, huh?*’ Nie Huaisang thought.

~~Wei Wuxiang’s body being torn apart flashed in Nie Huaisang’s mind every time he closed his eyes.~~

Well, no point in dwelling on that. Nie Huaisang hated gore and violence on principle. Knowing the people involved in that sight did not help matters. Instead, he attempted to focus on the storytelling the spirits had arranged.

The melody of the song Lan Wangji had sung was the most direct interference the spirits had conducted so far. While they had jumped around in the order of events shown previously, this was the first combination of scenes they had enacted. The exact sound was not something they had heard before either. Neither Lan Wangji’s singing nor Wei Wuxian’s flute could be heard there; there was only a guqin.

Something Lan Wangji played after Wei Wuxian’s death? But even then, why insert it here? Had the spirits really grown a conscience and decided to care about their privacy now of all times? Or was it done at the suggestion of one of the juniors, lacking any manipulations at all?

Sizhui might have suggested it for privacy’s sake. Did the spirits go along with it just for that? To emphasize how personally one of them would be affected? To tell the watchers that, if they learned from this, things would work out better? Was it blaming them? Or was it a sign that, for all the love that had been there for Wei Wuxian, none of their actions had been enough?

(Lan Wangji certainly seemed to be interpreting it that way.)

(How funny, that he had once seemed to carry all the emotions of a jade statue. After the final scene of this segment, no one would be able to accuse him of that. The real version of the Second Jade had not lost composure to the same extent his future self had, but a faint tremble could be seen in his shoulders nonetheless.)

(Jiang Yanli’s open sobs seemed to cut deeper and deeper into him with every breath.)

Although Jin Zixuan sat near Jiang Yanli, he made no effort to speak. Both he and Jiang Cheng were sitting slouched over, lacking all the poise their mothers had raised them to present.

(Unbeknownst to Nie Huaisang, both were recalling the same scene right now.)

A group of civilian children were playing in the streets. Based on the items they held and the words being said, it quickly became clear that they were re-enacting the sunshot campaign.

The child playing Jin Guangyao volunteered himself as leader.

‘But I’m Nie Mingjue! I won the most battles and captured the most people. I should be the leader!’

And-

'You short-lived idiot.'

'Jin Zixuan, you died even before I did! You're even more short-lived!'

And then-

'Okay, okay. Let's stop fighting. I'm the Yiling Patriarch, so I'm the strongest. If you guys insist so much, I can be the leader.'

'No, no. I'm Sandu Shengshou. I'm the most powerful.'

'Jiang Cheng, how is it possible for you to be better than me? Is there even one time you didn't lose to me? How dare you say you're more powerful? Aren't you embarrassed?'

It had been embarrassing to watch at the time. However, embarrassing was not all it had been.

'Hmph. Why can't I be better than you? Don't you remember how you died?'

They certainly did, now. None of them would ever be able to forget. Even if Jiang Cheng's involvement was exaggerated somewhat, he had still-

The boy playing Wei Wuxian was shoved to the ground, his 'Stygian Tiger Seal' shattering on impact.

'Hey, why did you guys push me?' he asked. 'It was all of you against just me! That's not fair!'

A shudder went through Jiang Cheng's spiritual form.

In the segment they had just watched, a bleeding, exhausted Wei Wuxian had looked out over a seemingly endless battlefield with a pained expression. All around, the corpses of those he had lost everything to protect rose up again to fight.

Jiang Cheng's whip shot purple lightning into the air, decimating a corpse.

The decapetated head of Granny Wen was held into the air. A-Yuan was nowhere to be found.

'It was all of you against just me! That's not fair!'

(It was a war; this was battle. It was not meant to be fair.)

They had invited Wei Wuxian to Jin Ling's 100-day ceremony and ambushed him on the way.

(Not all of them were involved in that.)

They had all promised peace if Wen Qing and Wen Ning surrendered themselves. They all knew the two had. Even if there had been lies mixed in, no one would believe the two had

surrendered themselves for no reason. They *had* to have known of the promise that was made.

They had shown up to the Nightless City regardless.

(Liars and crooks. But they were the gentry, so no one bat an eye.)

'It was all of you against just me! That's not fair!'

In this moment, Jiang Cheng curled in on himself. He sat with his knees up and buried his head in them, wrapping his arms around his body to block out any additional light that might enter.

Once, he had found Wei Wuxian's relationship with Lan Wangji disgusting. Beyond his own relationship with Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun's initially forceful methods, everything about their interactions had felt off in a way Jiang Cheng couldn't describe. Jin Ling had felt the same way at first, though changed his mind as the simulation went on.

It was just strange seeing two men behave the way they had.

(Wei Wuxian being literally dragged to the Cloud Recesses hadn't helped matters.)

And yet-

When Zewu-jun shook his head, they had seen the last bit of hope Lan Wangji had crumble before their eyes. The prideful Jade of Lan shook his head in denial, trying to stand and leave as though the wounds on his back couldn't even be felt. The sheer devastation in his screams had been haunting.

And, in contrast, Jiang Cheng had-

The little boy playing Sandu Shengshou raised a brow, firing back, 'Why can't I be better than you? Don't you remember how you died?'

Corpses tore Wei Wuxian's flesh from his bones. As they continued to eat, purple lightning continued flashing to the side.

"Disgusting."

In a voice too quiet to be heard, Jiang Cheng whispered a single word to himself.

"Disgusting. Disgusting. *Disgusting.*"

With his body curled up as it was, even those who could hear him could never hope to identify the word. Nonetheless, Jiang Cheng continued.

"Disgusting. Disgusting. Disgusting. Disgusting. Disgusting-"

This time, he saw neither the Yiling Patriarch nor Hanguang-jun in his mind's eye.

The only person he could picture at his point in time was his future-self, leading the Jiang Sect against Wei Wuxian.

(Powerful. Dangerous. Respected. Everything he had longed to be.)

"*Disgusting.*"

He was nearly choking the words out now, feeling bile rise in his throat.

It was-

Click

"A-Cheng, A-Li. Everyone. How have you… all been doing?" Jiang Fengmian's voice asked.

Jiang Cheng couldn't look.

He couldn't breathe.

"Hi, everyone!" Wei Wuxian called out cheerfully. "Anything interesting happen since we last spoke?"

Not a single person present seemed to have any blood left in their face at all. Unable to stop himself, Jiang Cheng ended up dropping his gaze to see Lan Wangji.

The look of sheer devastation the Lan now showed said far more than any words could ever hope to.

'*Oh, boy,*' Wei Wuxian thought, giving a mental sigh as the silence stretched on. '*What's got them stunned silent this time?*'

Really, the main clans could be so difficult to deal with sometimes. It was like they were hearing a ghost!

Chapter End Notes

In hindsight, I ended up wishing I'd stuck closer to the novel dialogue for the original bar/tavern gossipers scene (I copied the donghua's instead). This seemed like a reasonable place to slip that part back in!
:)

Works inspired by this one

Teen Project to Change the world (PODFIC) by animeloverhomura, sandradaffodils

Μοῖραι κρατοῦσι πάντων – The Moiras rule all by Kokoiko

[Restricted Work] by HungryFujoshii_jacs2203

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